

CLIMATE

Georgia lawmakers weigh a 3-year pause on expansion permits for planned Okefenokee mine



FILE - The sun sets over water lilies and cypress trees along the remote Red Trail wilderness water trail of Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge, Wednesday, April 6, 2022, in Fargo, Ga. The Georgia Environmental Protection Division on Friday, Feb. 9, 2024, released drafts of three permits that would allow Alabama-based Twin Pines Minerals to mine outside the swamp. (AP Photo/Stephen B. Morton, File)

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BY RUSS BYNUM

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SAVANNAH, Ga. (AP) — As a proposed mine on the edge of the Okefenokee Swamp and its vast wildlife refuge [nears final approval](#), Georgia lawmakers are considering a three-year pause on future permits to allow expansion of the mining project. Critics fear any such mining could irreparably harm a national treasure.

The sponsor of [House Bill 1338](#), approved by a House committee Thursday at the state Capitol in Atlanta, calls the measure a compromise between conservationists who oppose the mine and supporters living near the swamp who say the project would bring needed jobs.

The bill by Rep. John Corbett, a Republican from Lake Park whose district includes the swamp, would prohibit until July 1, 2027, any new permit applications in Georgia for the type of mining Alabama-based Twin Pines Minerals plans to use to extract titanium dioxide just outside the federally protected swamp.

Corbett's measure would not affect the draft permits Twin Pines received earlier this month from the Georgia Environmental Protection Division to mine on 773 acres less than 3 miles (4.8 kilometers) from the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge, the largest refuge east of the Mississippi River. The agency will collect public comments and could make adjustments before issuing final permits.

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Several conservation groups dismissed the proposed moratorium as ineffective. They had backed a different bill that would outright [ban future mining](#) near the Okefenokee, including any expansion by Twin Pines. That measure stalled in the same committee that moved swiftly on Corbett's permitting pause.

"This is a meaningless moratorium as written and it doesn't take a rocket scientist to see that this bill accomplishes nothing," Army Sharma, executive director of the group Science for Georgia, said during a House subcommittee hearing on the bill Wednesday.

Bill Sapp, an attorney for the Southern Environmental Law Center, applauded lawmakers for seeking to protect the Okefenokee, but added: "It's just not this approach." Alice Keyes of the coastal Georgia group One Hundred Miles called the proposed permitting pause "hollow." And Rena Ann Peck of the Georgia River Network said it "accomplishes nothing to protect Trail Ridge or the Okefenokee."

Conservationists said they're also concerned by a provision that would place deadlines of 180 days or less on legal appeals of some mining permits. Challenged permits would be automatically upheld if those deadlines aren't met.

Ari Gordin, an attorney for Twin Pines, called the proposed moratorium “unnecessary” and said he’s confident the company will prove it can mine without harming the swamp. Gordin told lawmakers Twin Pines’ plans to eventually expand its mining operation could face costly delays if there was a longer moratorium.

“Any moratorium beyond the proposed three-year period would directly interfere with Twin Pines’ investment-backed expectations and property rights,” Gordin said.

Corbett says the moratorium would allow state regulators to evaluate data Twin Pines must collect as a condition of its permits and then determine how the mine is affecting the swamp. His bill doesn’t name Twin Pines, but would pause any permits for “dragline mining for heavy mineral sands.” Corbett said only Twin Pines is pursuing that type of mining in Georgia.

“It looks like we’ve got a good bill because both sides oppose it,” Corbett told fellow lawmakers. “Nobody’s happy here.”

The bill advances to the full House after passing the Natural Resources and Environment Committee on Thursday.

University of Georgia hydrologist C. Rhett Jackson has said the project could siphon off enough groundwater to triple the frequency and duration of severe droughts in the swamp’s southeast corner.

Interior Secretary Deb Haaland in 2022 declared the proposed mine poses an [“unacceptable risk”](#) to the fragile ecosystem at the Georgia-Florida line after [federal scientists](#) warned that mining near the swamp’s bowl-like rim could damage its ability to hold water.

But Georgia regulators have the final say on permitting the mine, and they’ve sided with Twin Pines. In issuing draft permits for the project earlier this month, the Environmental Protection Division concluded the mine “should have a minimal impact.”

Such a decision would typically be made in tandem with federal government regulators, but the Army Corps of Engineers declared it no longer had jurisdiction in 2020 because of [regulatory rollbacks](#) under President Donald Trump.

