

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is Seeking Public Input on Proposal for Minor Expansion of Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge Boundary

Proposal designed to enable voluntary actions to protect hydrological integrity, conserve wetlands and key wildlife habitat, and create fuel reduction zone to help protect neighboring properties.

The Southeast Region of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is considering a proposal that would expand the boundary of the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge, adding approximately 22,000 acres adjacent to the existing refuge. The Service is seeking public input on the proposal.

If adopted, the proposed minor boundary expansion would enable the Service to work with willing landowners to explore voluntary conservation actions, including potential acquisition, that would further protect the refuge's globally significant freshwater wetland system and wildlife habitat.

The proposed expansion includes lands currently held by Twin Pines Minerals, LLC as well as a one-mile fuel reduction zone adjacent to the refuge. Conservation actions on the lands within the proposed boundary expansion would strengthen protection of the hydrological integrity of the swamp, help provide habitat for the gopher tortoise, mitigate impacts of wildfires and more severe and longer-lasting droughts and provide opportunities for longleaf pine restoration to benefit the red-cockaded woodpecker. The creation of a one-mile fuel reduction zone adjacent to the refuge is supported by state and federal partners.

The Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge is the headwaters of the Suwannee and St. Marys rivers. The refuge provides habitat for threatened and endangered species. It is world renowned for its amphibian populations, which are bio-indicators of global health. The refuge has 353,981 acres of National Wilderness Area within the refuge boundaries. Additionally, it is a Wetland of International Importance (RAMSAR Convention – 1971) due to the Okefenokee Swamp's global significance, receiving over 400,000 annual visits, with 10% from international guests from over 46 different countries.

The public may submit input by Nov. 18, 2024 via email to Okefenokee@fws.gov. Additionally, a public meeting will be held Oct. 29, 2024, from 6:30 – 8 p.m. at the Charlton County Annex Auditorium, 68 Kingsland Drive, Folkston, Georgia.

For more information on the possible expansion and the effort to gather public interest, go to <https://www.fws.gov/refuge/okefenokee>.