

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

April 28, 2021

Martha Williams
Principal Deputy Director
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
1849 C Street NW,
Washington, DC 20240

Dear Principal Deputy Director Williams,

We write to you regarding the proposed heavy mineral sands mine near Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge in Georgia and the ongoing permit review process. Due to the potential impact nearby mining activity could have on native species, basin hydrology, and the overall integrity of the refuge, we ask the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) to provide the Georgia Environmental Protection Division (EPD) with added resources and support in reviewing all relevant permit applications. These decisions deserve careful environmental review and robust public participation because of the tremendous ecological and cultural value of the Okefenokee Refuge.

The Okefenokee Refuge is a crown jewel of the National Wildlife Refuge System. As the largest refuge east of the Mississippi, the ecosystem is unparalleled in beauty and wildlife biodiversity, including several federally listed species like the wood stork, eastern indigo snake, and red-cockaded woodpecker. It is among the nation's most visited refuges, providing an economic foundation for surrounding communities by attracting hundreds of thousands of tourists annually.

We understand the original environmental review process was significantly encumbered due to a change in the interpretation of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' jurisdiction. By removing jurisdiction from this Federal agency, months of detailed review, interagency coordination, and public commenting were disrupted. It also undermined public transparency into the permitting decision. This late jurisdictional change places an onerous burden on the State of Georgia and threatens to bypass a typically robust review and stakeholder engagement process.

Considering your agency's long history of supporting Okefenokee Refuge, its scientific expertise in measuring ecological and hydrologic effects, and existing analyses about this mining proposal, we urge FWS to proactively support and engage with EPD in its review of this project and the cumulative impacts of long-term mining near the refuge. We ask FWS to specifically analyze whether the applicant is able to prove that operations will not harm the refuge.

We appreciate your consideration of this request and respectfully ask that you provide periodic updates about the review process over the next several months.