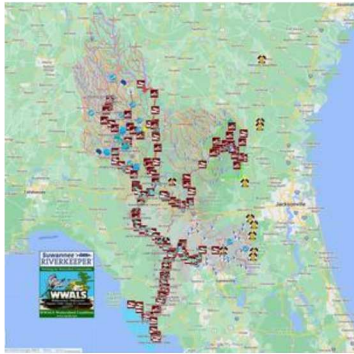
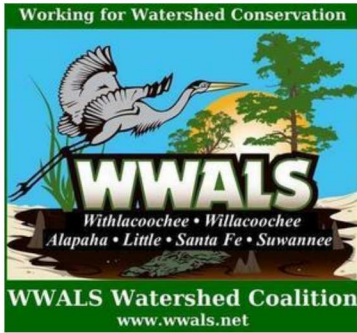


December 13, 2024



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WWALS is an IRS 501(c)(3)
nonprofit charity est. June 2012.

WWALS advocates for conservation and stewardship of the surface waters and groundwater of the Suwannee River Basin and Estuary, in south Georgia and north Florida, among them the Withlacoochee, Willacoochee, Alapaha, Little, Santa Fe, and Suwannee River watersheds, through education, awareness, environmental monitoring, and citizen activities.



To: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Okefenokee@fws.gov

Re: WWALS comment on Okefenokee NWR Expansion

Dear Fish and Wildlife Service,

Suwannee Riverkeeper for WWALS Watershed Coalition, Inc. (WWALS) files these comments in support of the proposed minor expansion of the acquisition boundary for the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge (ONWR).

I further recommend that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, or the Department of Interior, or Congress, provide sufficient funds to make competitive offers to buy land.

I sympathize with concerns I have heard expressed by people living near the ONWR, perhaps most basically they do not want to change their generational lifestyles, which include hunting, fishing, recreational use, and for many of them logging. They do not want increases in property taxes or erosion of the tax base through private property selling to the refuge. And they do not want government regulations too much affecting private landowners, nor any foreign power involved.

My grandfather bought the land I live on in 1921, with its cypress swamp and a creek that runs through our longleaf pine forest to the Withlacoochee River, in Lowndes County, Georgia. I sell timber and my neighboring niece lets a hunting lease. More than once I've had to help fight off rezonings that would have brought too many houses onto my road. We failed to stop our road being paved, which did bring many houses.

But I do not see this proposed ONWR expansion as producing many of those sorts of problems. The wider the ONWR, the fewer new houses nearby.

I've also heard a concern that people outside the counties next to the Swamp are involved. Well, I live within three miles of Moody Air Force Base, which gets people from the entire country and world involved. We are all interconnected.

Valdosta, Georgia, has learned through a Consent Order from the Georgia Environmental Protection Division that their sewage spills affect the dozen downstream Florida Counties on the Withlacoochee and Suwannee Rivers.

Similarly, smoke from the 2007 Okefenokee Swamp fire spreading 90 miles west to Quitman, Georgia, put my cousin in the hospital. The 2017 West Mims Fire drew firefighters from as far as Mississippi. Charlton County wrote a thank-you resolution to Lowndes County for their assistance. "There's nobody that can tackle something like that alone," said Emergency Management Director Ashley Tye, 2017-08-08

Our paddles in the Okefenokee Swamp regularly draw people from Miami, Alabama, and North Carolina. People from all over the world come to the ONWR for birding, fishing, paddling, and motor tours of a place that preserves a unique ecology.

History shows the Okefenokee Swamp cannot protect itself. First the Suwannee Canal Company tried to drain it. Then the Hebard Lumber Company and its subsidiary the