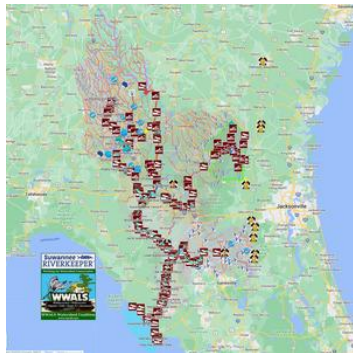
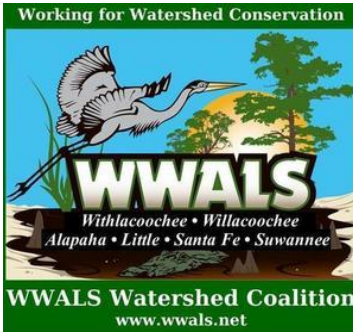


December 13, 2024



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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

Hebard Cypress Company ran railroads throughout the Swamp and cut down most of the cypress and pine trees in the Swamp between about 1909 and 1926. My distant cousin Harry Quarterman was the manager of the logging boom town on Billys Island. Until the timber was gone and the town went bust.

More recently Dupont's attempt at mining next to the Swamp a couple of decades ago and the current application by coal miners from Alabama to strip mine for titanium dioxide show that the swamp still needs protecting.

The proposed expansion will not prevent that mining application from being granted, nor stop the mining. But at least it will provide a mechanism by which the Refuge can buy the miners' land should they choose to sell, either before or after mining.

Suwannee Riverkeeper also supports the expansion especially because it protects the entire Swamp, not just one side. Last year Canadian company Nutrien said during its update to its Hamilton County, Florida, mining permit that it expected to shut down its huge phosphate mine within ten years. But it did not say it would not continue mining. The same phosphate deposits continue east across the Suwannee River into Columbia County, Florida, and north across the state line into Lowndes, Echols, and Clinch Counties, Georgia. A 1966 report¹ showed two almost economically viable test wells near the Suwannee River near Fargo, Georgia. Given advances in mining technology, those sites are probably even more economically viable now.

What all the counties around the Swamp in Georgia and Florida need, like many others in south Georgia and north Florida, is jobs. The ONWR is an economic engine, but not everybody can work for the Refuge or for immediately-related businesses.

Fortunately, there are efforts underway to bring economic opportunities to the area, including a Culture History & Community Center in Charlton County, a Natural History & Ecological Interpretive Center in Ware County, and a Dark Sky Observatory in Clinch County. <https://wwals.net/?p=63428>

WWALS is promoting the idea of more boat ramps on the Suwannee River in Georgia. <https://wwals.net/?p=62814> That is now in the hands of Clinch and Echols Counties and the local landowners.

We hear the concerns of people who live around the ONWR, we sympathise with them, and we are doing what we can to help.

Suwannee Riverkeeper considers the proposed ONWR expansion also to be good for local economies and lifestyles. We support the proposed expansion. After all, if we are not going to protect the Okefenokee Swamp, what will we protect?

For the rivers and the aquifer,

John S. Quarterman
Suwannee Riverkeeper
229-560-4317

¹ PHOSPHORITE EXPLORATION IN PORTIONS OF LOWNDES, ECHOLS, CLINCH AND CHARLTON COUNTIES, GEORGIA, By Norman K. Olson, Industrial Development Department, Southern Railway System, October 1966, Project Report No. 4, South Georgia Minerals Program, Georgia State Division of Conservation, Department of Mines, Mining and Geology.