

U. S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

ENVIRONMENTAL ACTION STATEMENT FOR CATEGORICAL EXCLUSION

Within the spirit and intent of the Council on Environmental Quality's regulations for implementing the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), and other statutes, orders, and policies that protect fish and wildlife resources, I have established the following administrative record and determined that the following Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge (NWR or refuge) Minor Expansion in Charlton, Ware, and Clinch Counties, Georgia and Baker County, Florida is categorically excluded from NEPA documentation requirements consistent with 40 CFR §1508.4, 43 CFR §46.205, 43 CFR §46.210, 43 CFR §46.215, and 516 DM 8.

Proposed Action and Alternatives.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Southeast Region, proposes to expand the approved acquisition boundary through a minor expansion of approximately 22,000 acres of lands. The expansion will allow the Service to work with willing landowners to acquire lands through fee-title or conservation easements. This expansion includes a one-mile fuel reduction zone around the refuge boundary and lands located along Trail Ridge outside of the approved acquisition boundary (Figure 1). Trail Ridge is higher and drier than the surrounding topography and therefore supports an unusually high level of biodiversity in a relatively small area. These lands have some of the highest densities of gopher tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*) in the area and if properly managed, could greatly increase their numbers and help prevent the species from being listed as a Threatened species. These higher lands are ideal for planting longleaf pine and supporting the Longleaf Pine Initiative for the Southeast. Planting longleaf would also enable the refuge to establish a fuel reduction zone around the refuge to prevent the spread of wildfire outside of the swamp's boundary. As the longleaf pine grow older, they will provide foraging and breeding habitat for the threatened red-cockaded woodpecker (*Dryobates borealis*) and contribute to its recovery and eventual delisting. The addition of these tracts will be value added to Okefenokee NWR. The proposed action meets objectives identified in the Okefenokee Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP; USFWS 2006).

The Service's goals and objectives for this land acquisition are to:

- Protect and maintain the populations of threatened and endangered species, expanding their populations where possible, and enhancing the refuge's habitats by working with adjacent landowners.
- Encourage other land managers in the area to promote appropriate habitats for threatened and endangered species to increase genetic diversity, increase opportunities for survival within the ecosystem, and restore a piece of the area's natural heritage.
- Restore, maintain, protect, and promote native habitats and healthy natural systems where possible to imitate the historical distribution, frequency, and quality of natural resources on and off the refuge and preserve the associated cultural sites and wilderness