

- **Question 4:** If the 2.7 miles number is correct, does Fish and Wildlife have any available research that shows that the Twin Pines mining project will have an impact on the water levels of the Okefenokee Swamp?

**Response:** Research is not available at this time. It is the responsibility of the permit applicant to demonstrate what the extent of impacts of the project will be to surrounding natural resources.

At this time, the Service cannot fully evaluate the hydrologic, hydrogeologic, and geologic characterization information and data because Twin Pines has not fully released its findings. The Service received two of three draft reports on November 1, 2019, and the third report is forthcoming. At this time, we can only evaluate what the Twin Pines geologist has presented at various meetings. He has stated that there will be an impact but to what extent is unknown. At one presentation, he indicated that impacts would not be felt for 38 years, which indicates that there would be an effect.

- **Question 5:** It was our office’s understanding that backfilling would occur within 5 to 10 days of excavation, not 30 days. Can you confirm this?

**Response:** The Joint Public Notice states, “Each phase will be mined at approximately 25-40 acres per month and backfilled and graded within approximately 30 days following excavation.”

## **Gopher Tortoise**

*The letter states that “While not listed as threatened or endangered under the ESA in Georgia, the gopher tortoise is a candidate species.”*

- **Question 6:** Does being designated a candidate species require the same protections as being listed as threatened or endangered under the ESA?

**Response:** No. The Service, its federal and state agency partners, and private landowners are actively working to enhance and preserve habitat such that listing under the Endangered Species Act is not necessary in this portion of the range. The Service has been asking action agencies and applicants to voluntarily provide conservation for the species, particularly in areas with viable populations and/or the potential to support viable populations.

## **Eastern Indigo Snake**

- **Question 7:** If no indigo snakes have been observed on the proposed mining site, is there a certain standard or confidence level the FWS utilizes to assess the possibility of occurrence of a particular species?

**Response:** The threatened eastern indigo snake has extensive home ranges that are generally in excess of 1,000 acres. The large snake commonly moves through areas 1-3 miles from known locations. The eastern indigo snake has not been reported from the parcel currently proposed for mining but is known to occur in nearby locations, including