

Okefenokee Natl. Wildlife Refuge to be nominated as World Heritage Site

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Georgia's Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge, the largest intact blackwater swamp in North America and a critical home to thousands of plant and animal species, will be proposed for listing as a World Heritage

Site, the federal government announced Friday.

The National Park Service said it would direct agency staff to prepare a draft nomination for the Okefenokee, which will be submitted to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's World Heritage Committee for consideration. The World Heritage Committee has final say over whether locations are included on the prestigious list, which recognizes sites with natural and cultural assets of global significance.

There are currently 1,157 World Heritage Sites in 167 countries, including 24 in the U.S. If chosen, the Okefenokee would join globally-recognized sites like the Great Barrier Reef, Machu Picchu and Yellowstone National Park on the list.

In its decision to nominate the Okefenokee, the Park Service noted the swamp's ecological riches and important contributions to limiting climate change. The refuge provides a [critical habitat](#) for hundreds of species—including some that are endangered—and stores millions of tons of peat deposits, preventing huge amounts of heat-trapping carbon dioxide from escaping into the atmosphere.

The refuge draws more than 700,000 tourists a year and is a major driver in Southeast Georgia's rural economy. The landscape also holds cultural and historical significance for the Muscogee Creek Nation, which has endorsed the push to name the Okefenokee a World Heritage Site.

The pending nomination comes after a bipartisan effort led by U.S. Sen. Jon Ossoff, U.S. Rep. Buddy Carter and other members of Georgia's congressional delegation, who urged the Park Service to propose the site for listing.

Environmentalists cheered the announcement.

"It's thrilling that Okefenokee is finally taking this momentous step toward World Heritage inscription," Elise Bennett, the Florida and Caribbean director at the nonprofit Center for Biological Diversity, said in a statement. "From the towering old-growth cypress to the tea-colored wetlands teeming with amphibians and reptiles, every last inch of Okefenokee deserves our recognition and protection."

Kim Bednarek, the executive director of the Okefenokee Swamp Park, called the refuge's nomination an opportunity "... to bring international recognition to one of the world's great natural wonders, the Okefenokee."

The nomination news comes as a controversial plan to mine within three miles of the swamp's edge continues to advance.

Alabama-based Twin Pines Minerals is seeking to extract titanium on a 580-acre tract of Trail Ridge, an ancient inland sand dune complex that forms the eastern boundary of the swamp. The company's draft mining plans were released this year, but state environmental regulators at the Georgia Environmental Protection Division (EPD) have not issued final permits for the project.

Twin Pines has said repeatedly its analyses show that the 50-foot deep pit it plans to dig and the thousands of gallons of groundwater it will pump from the underlying aquifer will not harm the fragile swamp ecosystem.

In a statement, Twin Pines' president Steve Ingle called the Okefenokee a "natural resource that is protected, and will continue to be protected, given the distance of our proposed mine site from the refuge and the nature of our activities." Ingle said the company appreciates the efforts to list the swamp as a World Heritage Site, but added that "It will not impact our permit applications, just as our work will not impact the

swamp."

But environmentalists and prominent hydrologists say otherwise, arguing the mine will lower water levels in the [swamp](#) and increase the risk for intense wildfires. Some Park Service scientists have also questioned the company's claims, writing in a sharply worded critique earlier this year that the company's hydrology modeling "obfuscates the true impacts from mining on the refuge."

Opponents of the mine have called on EPD and Gov. Brian Kemp to deny Twin Pines the permits it needs. In a letter sent last year, U.S. Interior Secretary Deb Haaland also urged Kemp to reject the company's permits, citing the "unacceptable risk" she said the mine poses to the Okefenokee.

Neither Kemp nor EPD immediately responded to a request for comment.

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