The Okefenokee Swamp, the largest blackwater wetland in North America and the headwaters to the Suwannee and St. Marys rivers, is home to a rich diversity of plants, birds, fish and wildlife. A popular recreation destination, the area generates millions of dollars each year for the local economy. However, this natural wonder is threatened by titanium mining, which government agencies predict would result in “permanent” and “unacceptable” damage. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers must deny the permit application for this ill-advised project.

**THE RIVER**

Forming the headwaters of the St. Marys River and flowing past the cities of St. Marys, Georgia, and Fernandina Beach, Florida, the Okefenokee Swamp is designated as a National Natural Landmark, a Wetland of International Importance and a potential UNESCO World Heritage Site. Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge is the largest national wildlife refuge in the eastern United States.

The Okefenokee Swamp is an unparalleled wetland system made up of peat beds, island prairies, open lakes, creek channels and cypress forests. It is home to alligators, carnivorous plants, an abundance of bird species and the Florida black bear. Several state- and federally listed species depend upon the refuge, including the eastern indigo snake, wood stork and red-cockaded woodpecker. Small populations of endangered shortnose and Atlantic sturgeon also call the St. Marys River home.

The Okefenokee Swamp is a unique international treasure. Unlike Florida’s Everglades, the swamp’s health remains essentially unchanged. Uncompromised by agriculture or industrial development, the swamp is one of the world’s healthiest large-scale freshwater ecosystems. And whereas other large wetland ecosystems have suffered ditching, draining and channelization, the Okefenokee retains its original hydrologic function, storing immense volumes of water through both flood and drought years and feeding the rivers that drain from it.

The Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge receives an average of 600,000 visitors annually, who come for canoeing, fishing, hunting and wildlife viewing. In addition to the $64.7 million in local economic output this generates for the four counties surrounding the refuge, tourism supports over 700 local jobs.

**THE THREAT**

Trail Ridge, the geologic formation that forms the eastern boundary of the swamp, has long been a target of the titanium mining industry. In the 1990s, the DuPont corporation attempted to mine a vast swath of land along the refuge boundary — a proposal that faced near-universal opposition.
opposition. Because the project threatened to impair the function of the swamp, as well as its famed wildlife habitat, then Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt declared that mining “should never happen,” and has no place next to what he called a “very uncommon swamp.” Extensive public outcry and government opposition led DuPont to abandon the project and donate much of the property for permanent protection.

Yet, the threat of mining persists. In 2019, Twin Pines Minerals submitted an initial application to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to operate on 2,414 acres, located 1.7 miles from the refuge boundary. Though Twin Pines submitted a revised application in 2020, in which it slightly reduced the size of the first project area, government agencies expect operations to eventually grow to 12,000 acres, potentially coming within 400 feet of the swamp itself. This multiphase project would first impact nearly 500 acres of wetlands along the Trail Ridge. However, the full project is expected to hold additional impacts over a 30-year timeframe.

The Twin Pines mine site is situated in an area of Trail Ridge that is arranged in distinct layers of semi-permeable soils that allow for water storage and circulation within the swamp. Should mining damage these soils, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency anticipate that “permanent” and “unacceptable” damage could befall the Okefenokee Swamp.

The destruction of wetlands and tributaries would not only diminish the value of the swamp but also degrade the St. Marys River, which is renowned for its excellent water quality and habitat for endangered Atlantic and shortnose sturgeon.

The nature of mineral mining requires freshwater sources, and the most reliable source of many millions of gallons of water in Southeast Georgia is the Floridan aquifer. Withdrawals required for titanium mining operations could lower the Okefenokee Swamp’s water table and reduce the natural flows of the Suwannee and St. Marys rivers. Groundwater drawdowns could also exacerbate fire frequency and intensity and contribute to droughts, thus compounding the impacts of climate change.

WHAT MUST BE DONE

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and other permitting agencies must reject any proposals that risk the long-term protection of the treasured swamp and the rivers it births. In addition, Gov. Brian Kemp of Georgia and other public officials should ensure that this resource remains protected and prevent any future mining projects that have the potential to impair the Okefenokee. Permanent protection of the Trail Ridge lands around the swamp is of utmost importance to the quality of the natural and historic resources of the area. Until the public has undeniable evidence that the Okefenokee Swamp and the St. Marys River are protected from harm, the public must continue to advocate for the Okefenokee and the permanent protection of this national treasure.