

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-1011

December 11, 2024

Mike Oetker  
Regional Director, Southeast Region  
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
1875 Century Boulevard  
Atlanta, GA 30345

Dear Regional Director Oetker:

As a Georgia resident, a strong supporter of our State's economic growth, and a lifelong admirer of its beloved and beautiful natural resources, I write to express my support for the proposed boundary expansion of the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge ("Refuge"). According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), the proposed expansion would strengthen the Refuge's role in protecting hydrological integrity, conserve wetlands and key wildlife habitat, and help reduce the risk of wildfire for communities and homes that neighbor the Refuge.<sup>1</sup>

The Okefenokee is the largest blackwater swamp in North America. It contains a National Wildlife Refuge and U.S. Wilderness Area and is one of Georgia's top sites for outdoor recreation and tourism, drawing more than 600,000 visitors per year. The Okefenokee Swamp is also a National Park Service-designated National Natural Landmark, a designation awarded to "the best examples of biological and geological features" in the country. Internationally, the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge is a "Wetland of International Importance" under the United Nations Ramsar Convention and a candidate for designation as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Public support for protecting the Okefenokee has been overwhelming.<sup>2</sup> Scientific experts and Federal officials charged with protecting the Okefenokee — such as U.S. Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland and Dr. Rhett Jackson, a leading hydrologist at the University of Georgia — have issued clear warnings about the dangers of threatening the Refuge, including through proposed mining operations that could affect water levels in the swamp.<sup>3,4</sup>

It is vitally important that we continue to protect the Okefenokee Swamp and its irreplaceable ecosystem that is an economic driver for our state and a cherished treasure for millions of Georgians. Importantly, this proposed expansion would preserve private property rights by enabling FWS to "work with willing landowners to explore voluntary conservation, including

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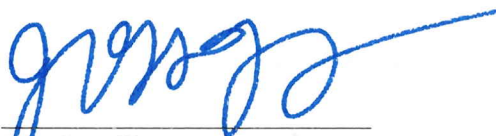
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potential acquisition, that would further protect the refuge's globally significant freshwater wetland system and wildlife habitat."<sup>5</sup> Given the importance of protecting the Okefenokee to my State, our Nation, and future generations, I strongly support the FWS proposed boundary expansion.

Sincerely,



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Jon Ossoff  
United States Senator

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.fws.gov/question-answer/frequently-asked-questions-okfenokee-proposed-minor-expansion-plan>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p8eg5l5mJTA&t=6s>

<sup>3</sup> <https://georgiarecorder.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/HaalandLetter.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://protectokefenokee.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/MLUP-comments-CRJ-submitted-to-EPD.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.fws.gov/press-release/2024-10/okfenokee-proposed-expansion>