

Proposed titanium surface mine near Okefenokee hits home

HOLLY DORMAN
News-Leader

Local experts have shared how they believe a titanium surface mine near the Okefenokee Swamp would impact the St. Marys River, a staple of Nassau County.

Emily Floore, executive director of St. Marys Riverkeeper, came before the Nassau County Board of County Commissioners recently to share the research she's done into the project and why it is a point of concern for her organization.

"The southeast corner of the swamp – about 20% – feeds the St. Marys River," she said, "which means the river can have zero flow at times and flood at others.

▼ WHAT DO YOU THINK?

What do you think about the fight over a potential titanium mine near the Okefenokee Swamp? Send Letters to the Editor to tdishman@fbnews-leader.com. Letters must include the writer's name, address and daytime phone number.



From swamp to sea, the St. Marys River is pristine."

Floore pointed out that, while the potential mine is a hot topic in Georgia right now, 41% of the St. Marys River borders Florida. Any mining activity

impacting the swamp could have potential negative consequences for the river, Floore said.

Permits for the mine were applied for by Twin Pines Minerals, LLC nearly four years ago, and a lengthy legal battle has since ensued as environmentalists and outdoorsmen alike have fought against the project. The surface mine would stretch along Trail Ridge, a barrier island of the Okefenokee Swamp. The soil there is rich with titanium dioxide. According to the U.S. Geological Survey, titanium dioxide is used in white paint, toothpaste, sunscreen and various papers and plastics to give it a brilliant white color.

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PHOTO COURTESY OF USFWS/LARRY WOODWARD AND OKEFENOKEE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

The Okefenokee Swamp has long served as a home to thousands of animals and a popular tourist spot for people. Leaders of the Muskogee Creek Nation, whose ancestors populated the swamp, have called it "the most blissful spot of the earth."

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Floore told the BOCC St. Marys Riverkeeper had submitted public comment regarding a bill in the Georgia legislature.

Georgia House Bill 71 (called the "Okefenokee Protection Act") would prevent Georgia's director of Environmental Protection Division of the Natural Resources Department from issuing or renewing any permits for mining on Trail Ridge.

In response to the bill, Twin Pines attorney Lewis Jones hinted at a lawsuit should it be passed. It would not be the first lawsuit filed in the nearly four years it has been since the company started the process of applying for permits and building the mine.

Georgia House Natural Resources and Environment Committee Chair Rep. Lynn Smith said she has no plans to "rush something that's controversial." The bill is not scheduled for a vote this session.

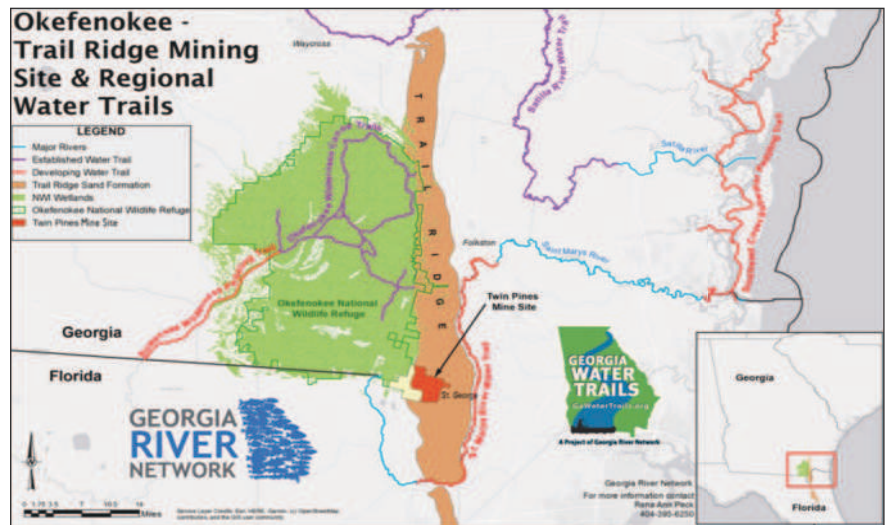
"Riverkeeper is concerned that the proposed mine as presented to Georgia Environmental Protection Division will negatively impact the St. Marys River watershed ecosystem," the Riverkeeper said in public comment. "Riverkeeper's comments focus on the significant risk of failure and the use of several experimental and untested techniques for sand mining due to the catastrophic events that could happen should something go wrong."

"The St. Marys River and its headwaters, the Okefenokee Swamp, are pristine waterways and loved by locals and all who come to experience its scenic wilderness," the Riverkeeper continued. "The St. Marys River and Okefenokee Swamp are too important to risk with untested mining methods from a company that does not have experience in greenfield mining and has a negative track record of environmental stewardship."

A 2019 article from the Georgia Recorder reported "massive fish kills, state environmental investigations and lawsuits by nearby cattle ranchers" as a result of two wood-fired power plants run by Twin Pines that promised a new source of electricity and an economic boom for the local community.

Despite assurances from Twin Pines Minerals that the surface mine would cause no significant nor permanent damage to the swamp, environmentalists remain concerned about the project. The mine would cover an area of 580 acres nearly three miles from the swamp.

"Twin Pines Minerals, LLC has applied for permits for the purpose of extracting titanium and zirconium from a tract of land, that at (its) closest point is approximately 2.9



miles southeast of the Okefenokee Refuge," the company's website reads. "However, we will mine only 582 acres, and at any given time excavate in a very small section of the property (1.5 to 2.5 acres) to a maximum depth of 50 feet, advancing 100 feet per day. We will remove the noted minerals, which make up a tiny fraction of the soils and sand, and then replace the soil to present-day elevations and contours within 20 days."

Floore explained to the Nassau County commissioners that this process of using experimental equipment to pump the water out of the mining site and make it possible to mine the soil could reduce the flow of water to the upper St. Marys River.

"When you reduce the flow of water," Floore explained, "there is a possibility of salt water intrusion coming into the St. Marys River because there's not enough force pushing the salt water back. We have endangered and threatened species such as the Atlantic sturgeon and short-nosed sturgeon in our river."

Nassau County Commissioner Alyson McCullough said she has been doing her own research into the project and its potential impact on the St. Marys River, which borders her district.

"It is something so prevalent and something I believe BOCC needs to be educated and informed on," she said. "It doesn't just affect my district, it affects every one of our districts as it goes to the ocean."

During the BOCC meeting, Commissioner Jeff Gray said he has also been doing his own research but came to a slightly different conclusion.

"This Trail Ridge project has to have five permits approved by the state of Georgia. It is the state of Georgia and I want to caution you from dabbling," he said. "I love the river. I

ride the river, I fish the river, it's a beautiful river and I want to protect it. Legislation was rolled back in this country because sometimes we need to make America great and quit buying all our stuff from overseas. I'm sure Charlton County is going to have a lot of jobs that will be created from this if it ever comes to fruition."

The rollbacks Gray referred to were made during the Trump administration. The Navigable Waters Protection Rule gives new definitions of wetlands, tributaries and other small bodies of water, placing bodies like the Okefenokee Swamp under the jurisdiction of the state and eliminating the need for federal permits.

The Okefenokee Swamp is the largest blackwater swamp in North America. Not only does its health heavily impact the health of the St. Marys River, but it is also home to gopher tortoises, barred owls, sandhill cranes, an estimated 15,000 alligators and other birds, reptiles and mammals. Many endangered and protected species call the Okefenokee Wildlife Refuge home.

Along with the environmental significance of the swamp, the site is culturally significant to the Muskogee Creek Nation, whose ancestors were forced to Oklahoma from their homelands near the swamp.

Floore explained the geological significance of Trail Ridge: "The Trail Ridge is an ancient barrier island. Just like we have Jekyll Island, Cumberland Island now, that's what Trail Ridge used to be. Around 6,500 years ago, when the seas retreated, it trapped the water in the swamp behind it to the west. That's what formed the swamp. The water in the southeastern corner of the swamp collected because it had nowhere to go, and the only way it could find to the Atlantic Ocean was through that gap in Trail Ridge."