

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

February 15, 2023

Mr. Richard E. Dunn
Director, Georgia Environmental Protection Division
2 Martin Luther King Jr. Drive, SE
14th Floor East Tower – Suite 1456
Atlanta, Georgia 30334-4713

Dear Director Dunn:

As a Georgia resident, I respectfully urge you to reject the application for a permit submitted by Twin Pines Minerals, LLC (Twin Pines) to mine near the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge.

The Georgia Environmental Protection Division's notice of the opportunity to provide comment on a draft Mining Land Use Plan (Mining Plan) submitted by Twin Pines states that:

"...the statute and rules require the Mining Land Use Plan to contain a specific plan of action, being based on sound engineering and conservation principles, for accomplishing the operator's reclamation objective and for protection of adjacent watersheds from effects of erosion and siltation. In addition, where a mining site is to be located on lands or adjacent to lands containing natural or other resources which may be adversely affected by the mining operation, the mining operator shall include as an attachment to the Mining Land Use Plan, a plan to alleviate and/or mitigate adverse effects of such impacts."

Both the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which is responsible for the stewardship of the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge, and a leading hydrologist at the University of Georgia, Dr. Rhett Jackson, have conducted expert analysis and produced clear and convincing evidence that the Mining Plan does not meet the standards outlined above.

For example, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) notes that hydrologic models in the Mining Plan "are incapable of appropriately evaluating the impacts of the project on water levels in the Okefenokee Swamp"¹ and fail to consider seasonal and annual hydrologic variations that will affect mining operations. This analysis directly calls into question Twin Pines' statement in document [MLUP App L-a Impact on the Trail Ridge Hydrologic System 1-14-2020](#) that "proposed mining activities will have an insignificant impact [on] the groundwater and stream flow to the Okefenokee Swamp."

¹ U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Letter to Army Corps of Engineers. September 30, 2022.
https://www.ossoff.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/FWS_ACE_Sep22.pdf

Dr. Jackson, who has extensively studied the hydrology of both the Okefenokee Swamp and the St. Marys River, concluded that the Mining Plan “fails to address key environmental issues, specifically the effects of salt deposition downwind of the evaporation system [and] the necessity of a contingency plan for unplanned discharges to the local tributaries to the St Marys River....”² He also identified deficiencies in the proposed reclamation plan, noting they are likely to result in “poor soil conditions, a low-productivity scrubby forest, and few, if any, wetland areas on the ridge top.”³

Furthermore, FWS specifically noted its concern that “the reclamation activities proposed as part of the mining project will result in a loss of wetland areas” and reduce the reclaimed area’s ability “to maintain wetland properties, thereby reducing available habitat for wetland ... species.”⁴ These conclusions underscore that the Mining Plan does not meet the standards outlined in EPD’s notice.

Twin Pines also claims that “the water table around the moving mine pit will quickly recover to close to its original position and that mining activities will not dewater the Okefenokee Swamp.”⁵ However, FWS’ initial hydrologic review showed that “mining activities would disrupt the Trail Ridge soil profile and result in seasonally lower mean water table levels.”⁶

These scientific authorities are clearly warning that these hydrologic changes would directly and adversely affect the Okefenokee and the Georgians who live near it. Dr. Jackson found that “groundwater withdrawals from the mining pit will triple the frequency of severe drought in the southeast portion of the swamp and the Upper St. Marys River.”⁷ FWS concurred that mining activities altering the hydrology of the Okefenokee would “elevate fire frequency and intensity.” These extended drought conditions could lead to permanent changes to the Okefenokee’s precious ecosystem and significant economic detriment for our state. A 2007 fire in the swamp cost \$130 million, closed schools and roads, and forced more than 6,000 Georgians to flee their homes.⁸

² Dr. Rhett Jackson, University of Georgia. “TPM LLC’s Proposed Trail Ridge Mine: Hydrologic Effects on the Okefenokee Swamp.” January 28, 2023. <https://www.ossoff.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/TPM-LLC-operation-and-hydrology-Jan-28-2023.pdf>

³ Jackson.

⁴ Fish and Wildlife Service.

⁵ Twin Pines. MLUP App L-a

. Available at: <https://epd.georgia.gov/twins-pines-docs-comment>.

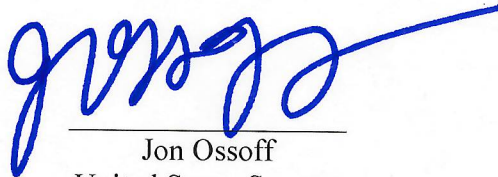
⁶ Fish and Wildlife Service.

⁷ Jackson.

⁸ Mary Caldwell, Atlanta Journal-Constitution. “Okefenokee Swamp Fire: Why swamps burn.” May 19, 2017. Available at: <https://www.ajc.com/news/disasters/okefenokee-swamp-fire-why-swamps-burn/Nu803TLFPjM8xvAQsr2hNL>.

Above all, the Okefenokee Swamp is a unique and irreplaceable natural resource. Damage to the swamp will irrevocably harm the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge, the State of Georgia, and Georgia's tourism economy. With great respect, I submit to you that the risk of severe damage to this ecosystem is unacceptable. I therefore urge EPD to reject Twin Pines' application.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Jon Ossoff", with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Jon Ossoff
United States Senator