

U. S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

ENVIRONMENTAL ACTION STATEMENT FOR CATEGORICAL EXCLUSION

Within the spirit and intent of the Council on Environmental Quality's regulations for implementing the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), and other statutes, orders, and policies that protect fish and wildlife resources, I have established the following administrative record and determined that the following Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge (NWR or refuge) Minor Expansion in Charlton, Ware, and Clinch Counties, Georgia and Baker County, Florida is categorically excluded from NEPA documentation requirements consistent with 40 CFR §1508.4, 43 CFR §46.205, 43 CFR §46.210, 43 CFR §46.215, and 516 DM 8.

Proposed Action and Alternatives.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Southeast Region, proposes to expand the approved acquisition boundary through a minor expansion of approximately 22,000 acres of lands. The expansion will allow the Service to work with willing landowners to acquire lands through fee-title or conservation easements. This expansion includes a one-mile fuel reduction zone around the refuge boundary and lands located along Trail Ridge outside of the approved acquisition boundary (Figure 1). Trail Ridge is higher and drier than the surrounding topography and therefore supports an unusually high level of biodiversity in a relatively small area. These lands have some of the highest densities of gopher tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*) in the area and if properly managed, could greatly increase their numbers and help prevent the species from being listed as a Threatened species. These higher lands are ideal for planting longleaf pine and supporting the Longleaf Pine Initiative for the Southeast. Planting longleaf would also enable the refuge to establish a fuel reduction zone around the refuge to prevent the spread of wildfire outside of the swamp's boundary. As the longleaf pine grow older, they will provide foraging and breeding habitat for the threatened red-cockaded woodpecker (*Dryobates borealis*) and contribute to its recovery and eventual delisting. The addition of these tracts will be value added to Okefenokee NWR. The proposed action meets objectives identified in the Okefenokee Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP; USFWS 2006).

The Service's goals and objectives for this land acquisition are to:

- Protect and maintain the populations of threatened and endangered species, expanding their populations where possible, and enhancing the refuge's habitats by working with adjacent landowners.
- Encourage other land managers in the area to promote appropriate habitats for threatened and endangered species to increase genetic diversity, increase opportunities for survival within the ecosystem, and restore a piece of the area's natural heritage.
- Restore, maintain, protect, and promote native habitats and healthy natural systems where possible to imitate the historical distribution, frequency, and quality of natural resources on and off the refuge and preserve the associated cultural sites and wilderness

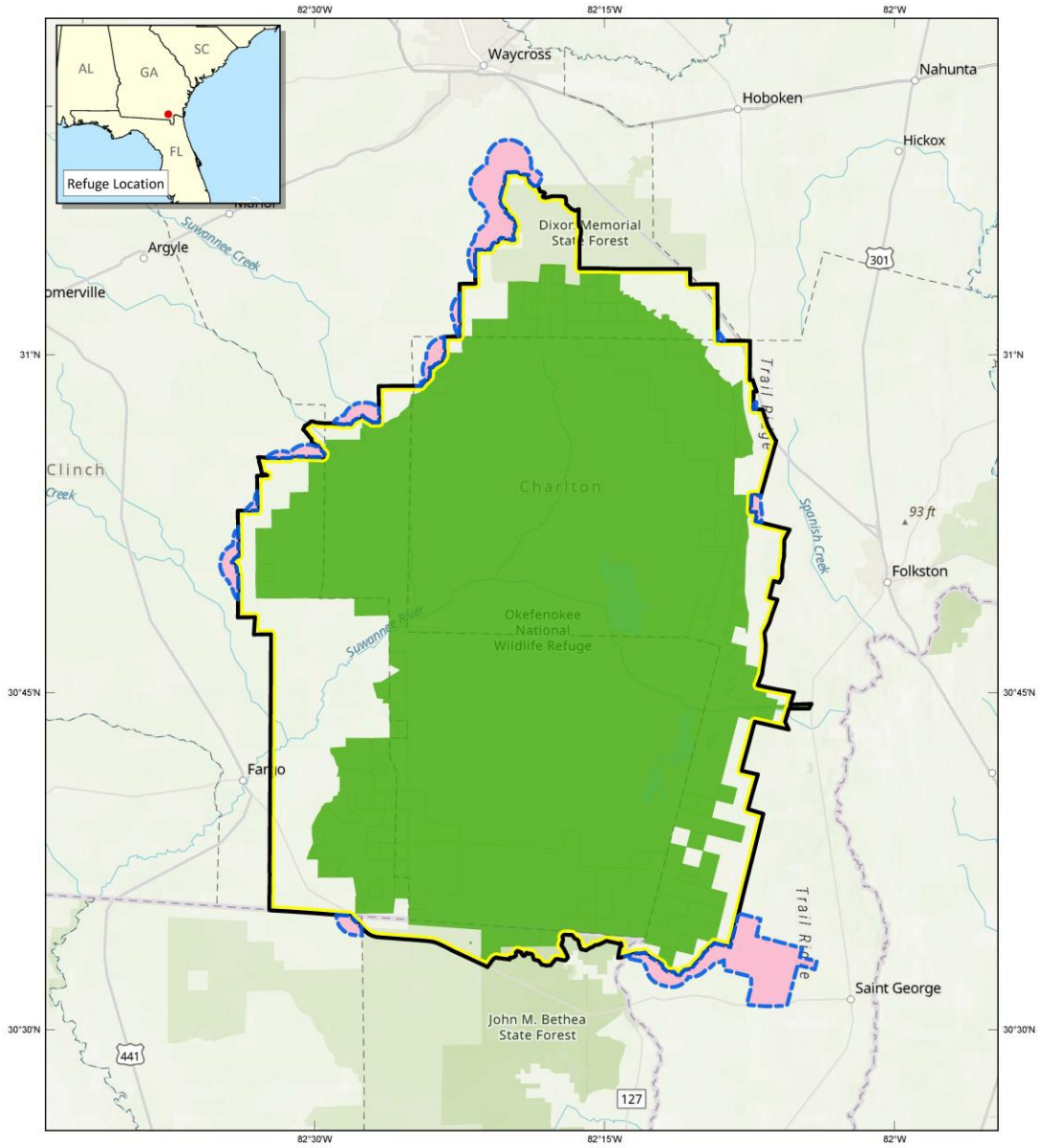
qualities.

- Restore, enhance, and promote the native upland communities and the associated wetlands to maintain the natural vegetation mosaic, diversity, and viability found historically within the Greater Okefenokee Ecosystem while improving opportunities for red-cockaded woodpecker activity.
- Conserve natural resources through partnerships, protection, and land acquisition from willing sellers within the “zones of influence.”
- Establish a fuel reduction zone around the refuge to prevent the spread of wildlife outside the swamp’s boundary.
- Provide and enhance fully accessible opportunities for hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, wildlife photography, and environmental education and interpretation when compatible to promote public appreciation, understanding, and action on behalf of the Okefenokee Ecosystem while maintaining the wilderness resources of the Okefenokee Wilderness Area.
- Contribute to the goals of the Greater Okefenokee Association of Landowners, the Longleaf Alliance Initiative, the Georgia State Wildlife Action Plan (Georgia Department of Natural Resources 2015), and Okefenokee NWR’s CCP (USFWS 2006).

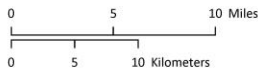


U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge
 Charlton, Clinch and Ware Counties, Georgia

Proposed Minor Expansion



Produced in the Division of Realty
 Atlanta, Georgia
 Land Status Current To: 10/25/24
 Map Date: 12/25/2024
 Basemap: ESRI Vector Base v2, PWS, BLM PLSS
 Web Mercator Projection - NAD 83
 ArcGIS Pro v3.1.1



- OKE Approved Acquisition Boundary
- Proposed Minor Expansion (~21,313 acres)
- FWS Interest
- Fee

Figure 1. Okefenokee NWR Expansion Boundary

The scope of the Decision Report is limited to the proposed minor boundary expansion of lands for Okefenokee NWR. The report is not intended to cover the specific method(s) of land acquisition that may be used, nor the development and/or implementation of detailed, specific programs for the administration and management of those lands. If the lands are traded and the needed lands or interests in lands are acquired, the Service will apply the refuge's existing management plans to incorporate the new lands and resources under its control. At that time, these refuge management plans will be reviewed in accordance with Departmental requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act.

Refer to the Decision Report for more details and alternatives.

Categorical Exclusion(s). Multiple categorical exclusions, as listed below, apply to the Proposed Action because it has been determined to be a class of action which does not individually or cumulatively have a significant effect on the human environment.

516DM 8.5, A. (4) The acquisition of real property obtained either through discretionary acts or when acquired by law, whether by way of condemnation, donation, escheat, right-of-entry, escrow, exchange, lapses, purchases, or transfer and that will be under the jurisdiction or control of the United States. Such acquisition of real property shall be in accordance with 602 DM 2 and the Service's procedures, when the acquisition is from willing seller, continuance of or minor modification to the existing land use is planned, and the acquisition planning process has been performed in coordination with the affected public.

516 DM 8.5 B (9) Minor changes in existing master plans, comprehensive conservation plans, or operations, when no or minor effects are anticipated. Examples could include minor changes in the type and location of compatible public use activities and land management practices.

The establishment of Okefenokee Refuge in 1937 marked the culmination of a movement initiated at least 25 years earlier by a group of scientists from Cornell University who recognized the educational, scientific, and recreational values of this unique area. The Okefenokee Society formed in 1918 and promoted nationwide interest in the swamp. With the support of state and local interests and numerous conservation and scientific organizations, the Federal Government acquired most of the swamp for refuge purposes in 1937. The current acquisition boundary and current management were previously outlined and analyzed in the Okefenokee CCP and associated Environmental Assessment/Finding of No Significant Impact (EA/FONSI) (USFWS 2006). Representing minor changes to this previously approved document, the Proposed Action is anticipated to have no or negligible impacts, justifying the use of the categorical exclusions 516 DM 8.5(A)(4) and (B)(9).

As outlined above and tiering from the referenced NEPA and planning documents, the Proposed Action is categorically excluded from further NEPA documentation. Further, this Proposed Action would not trigger an extraordinary circumstance precluding the use of a Categorical Exclusion as outlined under 43 CFR §46.215.

Extraordinary Circumstances (43 CFR §46.215):

Could This Proposed Action:

- | <u>Yes</u> | <u>No</u> | |
|--------------------------|-----------|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> | X | a. Have significant adverse effects on public health or safety? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | X | b. Have significant impacts on such natural resources and unique geographic characteristics as historic or cultural resources; park, recreation or refuge lands; wilderness areas; wild or scenic rivers; national natural landmarks; sole or principal drinking water aquifers; prime farmlands; wetlands (EO 11990); floodplains (EO 11988); national monuments; migratory birds; and other ecologically significant or critical areas? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | X | c. Have highly controversial environmental effects or involve unresolved conflicts concerning alternative uses of available resources [NEPA section 102(2)(E)]? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | X | d. Have highly uncertain and potentially significant environmental effects or involve unique or unknown environmental risks? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | X | e. Establish a precedent for future action or represent a decision in principle about future actions with potentially significant environmental effects? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | X | f. Have a direct relationship to other actions with individually insignificant but cumulatively significant environmental effects? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | X | g. Have significant impacts on properties listed, or eligible for listing, on the National Register of Historic Places as determined by the bureau? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | X | h. Have adverse effects on species listed or proposed to be listed on the List of Endangered or Threatened Species, or have significant impacts on designated Critical Habitat for these species? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | X | i. Violate a Federal law, or a state, local, or tribal law or requirement imposed for the protection of the environment? |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | X | j. Have a disproportionately high and adverse effect on low income or minority populations (EO 12898). |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | X | k. Limit access to and ceremonial use of Indian sacred sites on Federal lands by Indian religious practitioners or significantly adversely affect the physical |

integrity of such sacred sites (EO 13007).

- X I. Contribute to the introduction, continued existence, or spread of noxious weeds or non-native invasive species known to occur in the area or actions that may promote the introduction, growth, or expansion of the range of such species (Federal Noxious Weed Control Act and EO 13112).

- X m. Have material adverse effects on resources requiring compliance with Executive Order 11988 (Floodplain Management), Executive Order 11990 (Protection of Wetlands), or the Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act?

Permits/Approvals.

Section 7 ESA Consultations 12.19.24

Endangered Species Act, Section 7 Consultation, 12.19.24

Executive Order 11988/11990, Floodplain Management/Protection of Wetlands, 12.19.24

National Historic Preservation Act, Protection of Cultural Resources, Consultation will occur before acquiring lands.

Public Involvement/Interagency Coordination.

During the 55-day public scoping period, which included an in-person public meeting and a virtual meeting, the public submitted approximately 30,000 comments including individuals from 36 countries and all 50 states including Washington D.C., Virgin Islands, and Puerto Rico. Comments received represented approximately 40 non-governmental organizations, one Tribal Nation, seven government officials, and the general public. Overall, comments were in general support of the proposal. Some concerns and issues raised during the public scoping period included eminent domain, the Service not meeting the goals of the proposal, tax loss concerns, and the desire to include more lands to the proposal including all of Trail Ridge.

Supporting Documents.

U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 2006. *Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge Comprehensive Conservation Plan*. U.S. Department of the Interior, Fish and Wildlife Service, Southeast Region. 354 pp. <https://ecos.fws.gov/ServCat/DownloadFile/1508>

Michael Lusk, Refuge Manager

Date

Holly Gaboriault, Regional Chief, NWRS, Southeast Region

Date