

Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge Minor Expansion
Frequently Asked Questions

1. What action is the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service taking on Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge?

After a public comment period, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Southeast Region has finalized its decision to expand the acquisition boundary around Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge. This minor expansion enables the Service to work with willing landowners to explore voluntary conservation actions, including partnerships, conservation easements, or fee-title land acquisitions. Final approval of minor expansions is at the Service's Regional Director level.

2. What are the goals of this action?

The goals of the minor expansion of the refuge acquisition boundary include establishing a one-mile fuel reduction zone around the refuge to prevent the spread of wildfire to neighboring homes and communities; strengthening protection of hydrological integrity of the swamp; and providing opportunities to restore longleaf pine habitat supporting the threatened red-cockaded woodpecker and other species such as the state-protected gopher tortoise.

3. What is a fuel reduction zone?

A fuel reduction zone helps protect people and property during wildfire season by lessening the chances of a wildfire escaping the refuge boundary. It includes areas where vegetation and other materials that can catch fire (like downed limbs, dead trees, dry leaves, grasses, or other dry flammable plants) are managed to lower the risk of catastrophic wildfires. The goal is to create a safe area around homes, communities, and other habitats that makes it harder for fires to spread. This effort is supported by state and federal partners.

4. What is the definition of a minor expansion?

A national wildlife refuge minor expansion is an action that expands refuge boundaries by up to 15% of the already approved acquisition boundary, allowing for manageable changes to a national wildlife refuge. Minor expansions can involve adding new areas of land adjacent to the existing refuge boundary, improving habitats, or enhancing visitor uses and facilities, all aimed at better protecting wildlife and their environments.

5. Why is the Service expanding the acquisition boundary of the refuge?

Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge is part of the Southeast Conservation Blueprint, which is an adaptive plan aimed at identifying important areas for connecting lands and waters to support healthy fish and wildlife populations, as well as providing the public with places to get outdoors. The current approved acquisition boundary is approximately 522,500 acres.

The expanded acquisition boundary helps meet the objectives of the refuge by protecting the hydrology of the swamp and advancing species recovery. The expanded boundary allows the Service to potentially offer priority public uses such as hunting, fishing, wildlife watching, and education to the more than 400,000 annual visitors to the refuge, thereby driving a growing ecotourism economy within the community.

6. Does this proposal include the Twin Pines property? Does the minor expansion impact the potential mine?

Yes, the minor expansion of the acquisition boundary includes lands currently held by Twin Pines Minerals, LLC as well as a one-mile fuel reduction zone adjacent to the refuge. This action does not impact the State's authorities to consider a mining permit. The expansion solely enables the Service to work with willing sellers to acquire lands to include in the National Wildlife Refuge System.

7. Does the expanded acquisition boundary have an impact on the nomination for the refuge to become a World Heritage Site?

No, the expansion neither helps nor deters any consideration to become a World Heritage Site. In addition, future inclusion as a World Heritage Site would not affect management of the refuge.

8. How does the refuge acquire additional lands?

By policy, the Service only acquires land from property owners who are interested and willing to sell their property. The current expanded acquisition boundary outlines acreage the Service would be interested in buying should landowners voluntarily decide they are willing to sell property.

9. How do interested and willing sellers work with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service?

Landowners interested in selling their land can contact Okefenokee@fws.gov for more information. This proposal includes 146 parcels.