

Big Turnaround Fire - 2007

The Big Turnaround Fire at Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge in Georgia was the most expensive wildfire ever for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and its largest ever outside of Alaska. The Service has been supporting large fires like this on other DOI as well as U.S. Forest Service lands since the 1980s.

The Big Turnaround was an extension of the Sweat Farm Road Fire, which started on April 16, 2007 on private land ten miles west of Waycross, Georgia, when a tree limb downed a power line. Prolonged drought conditions and record low water levels in the Okefenokee swamp set the stage for this major wildfire burning into a mix of shrub-scrub, cypress, wetland prairies, peat and long-leaf pine forest.



The suppression strategy for the Big Turnaround has been to contain the fire within the swamp between the Swamp Edge Break and the Perimeter Road (mandated by Congress after the 1954-55 fire here). Firefighters and equipment can be safely positioned in this area to effectively build and reinforce fireline. Fire managers for the Refuge coordinated suppression efforts with the Georgia Forestry Commission



and Greater Okefenokee Association of Landowners (GOAL) representing federal and state agencies, industry and private landowners. These partners supported the chosen strategy as the appropriate management response to protect adjacent valuable commercial timber, isolated homes scattered on private land, and wildlife habitat for threatened and endangered species.

There is a long history of success in confining fire within the Swamp Edge Break. This strategy was used during the Blackjack Bay Fire in 2002 and hailed at local, state and national levels as an excellent example of appropriate management response.

Fire is a natural component of the Okefenokee ecosystem; since 1937, there have been over 300 fires that have burned thousands of acres here. The plants and animals on the Refuge are well adapted to survive periodic

wildfires. Yet even when wildland fires strike, the landscape on the Refuge is so fragmented that fire managers must also use prescribed fire to promote the health of many wildlife habitats.

The Big Turnaround Complex is expected to have no negative impacts on wildlife populations. Moreover, its effects will benefit many species living in the swamp and in upland areas.
