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News Release



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South Georgia-North Florida Fire Initiative Receives National Recognition

Folkston, GA...For the second time in 10 years, collaborative partnerships in south Georgia and north Florida are being recognized by the National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC) for their outstanding work in the field of wildland fire management. The South Georgia-North Florida Fire Initiative has been named the recipient of the 2015 Pulaski Award. Named in honor of its creator, the Pulaski is a half ax/half hoe fire tool and has become the symbol of wildland firefighters.

The South Georgia-North Florida Fire Initiative is made up of a collection of organizations and private landowners including the Georgia Forestry Commission, Florida Forest Service, U.S. Forest Service, Osceola National Forest, Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge, and the Greater Okefenokee Association of Landowners (GOAL). “We are privileged to live and work in an area such as the Okefenokee, Osceola, and Pinhook Swamp landscapes in southeast Georgia and northeast Florida. This area remains a largely intact ecosystem that is driven by fire and requires fire to survive,” states Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge Project Leader Michael Lusk.

By providing a bridge for partnerships, the South Georgia-North Florida Fire Initiative acts as a pathway between state, federal, and local governments to engage and partner with private and commercial landowners, non-government organizations, and local organizations with an interest in wildfire protection. For example, the group has participated in the formation of the Okefenokee Osceola Local Implementation Team (O2LIT), a partnership of federal, state, private, and commercial groups dedicated to landscape scale longleaf pine restoration. The O2LIT is a longleaf implementation team which strives to educate the public on the importance of fire in all aspects ranging from prescribed fire, wildfire suppression, and preparedness in this unique landscape.

The success of the South Georgia-North Florida Initiative lies in each partners’ willingness to work where the most good can be accomplished, regardless of ownership. Thousands of acres of fuels treatment through prescribed burning and mechanical hazard fuel reduction projects have been completed, as well as thousands of longleaf pine seedlings planted. “The value is in knowing that when we must act, we are better prepared to defend our communities, our properties, our homes, and our livelihoods. The South Georgia-North Florida Fire Initiative has accomplished outstanding work and will continue to do so for years to come,” says Lusk.

This annual award recognizes groups demonstrating outstanding performance in the areas of interagency collaboration, cooperation, and coordination; safety of wildland firefighters or the American public during a wildfire; outstanding group performance in fire management and fire operations activities; outstanding performance on a wildland fire management project or activity; and development of partnerships or communication tools. “It is the hope of the interagency fire community that collaborative efforts such as this will continue inspiring and forming new partnerships across the country,” states the governing board of NIFC.

The Suwannee Canal Recreation Area (East Entrance) to the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge is the main entrance managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and is located 11 miles southwest of Folkston, GA off Hwy 121/23. Entrance fees are \$5 per vehicle/\$1 per bicycle for a daily pass (good for 7 days). Annual passes are also available. The refuge is open daily and offers a variety of opportunities for the visiting public. Call 912-496-7836 or visit the refuge website at www.fws.gov/refuge/okefenokee for hours of operation, upcoming events, and entrance fee information.

The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is working with others to conserve, protect and enhance fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. For more information on our work and the people who make it happen, visit www.fws.gov. Connect with our Facebook pages at www.facebook.com/okefenokeewildliferefuge or www.facebook.com/usfwssoutheast