

Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge **Commercial Guide Special Use Permits**

Background

Okefenokee is one of over 550 national wildlife refuges managed in a system that extends from the Alaska tundra to the Florida Keys, including all 50 states, several U.S. Territories, and the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico. The mission of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is to work with others to conserve, protect, and enhance fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The National Wildlife Refuge Improvement Act of 1997 defined protecting and managing wildlife as the purpose of national wildlife refuges and the identification of six “priority” public uses known as the Big 6: hunting, fishing, wildlife photography, wildlife observation, environmental education and interpretation. On October 1, 1974, ninety percent of the lands in the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) were designated as part of the National Wilderness Preservation System. The Wilderness Act of 1964 defines wilderness as “an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled (unfettered) by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.”

About 500,000 visits are counted at Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) each year. Visitors come from all over the country and around the world to view wildlife, paddle wilderness canoe trails, learn about swamp heritage, and explore the vast Okefenokee Swamp. The goal of visitor services management at Okefenokee NWR is to provide high-quality, wildlife-oriented experiences for visitors to the refuge.

Why do we issue Commercial Guide Special Use Permits?

In order to better serve our visitors, Okefenokee NWR has an established procedure for the issuance of commercial guide permits for day-use and overnight guiding.

The objectives of the Commercial Guide Permit Procedure are to:

- Ensure that guides have the knowledge, skills, and resources to ensure safe recreational and educational use of Okefenokee NWR
- Ensure that guides are trained on the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System, local flora/fauna, refuge history/facts, etc
- Promote high-quality visitor experiences on the refuge
- Protect the natural resources at Okefenokee NWR

Who needs a Commercial Guide Permit?

Any person or business that charges or includes a fee for guiding on the refuge is required to have a commercial guide permit, including non-profit organizations. Okefenokee has defined two types of commercial guide permits: day-use and overnight. Individuals and businesses may apply for both permits (if necessary).

Types of Guide Permits:

	Overnight Guiding Permit	Day-Use Guiding Permit
Issued for:	Guides/organizations that lead overnight canoe trips for a fee. (Refuge reservations required)	Guides/organizations that lead activities including fishing, wildlife observation, wildlife photography, environmental education, and interpretation for a fee.
Length of permit	1 year	1 year
Price of permit	\$200/year to be paid at beginning of permit	\$50/year to be paid at beginning of permit
Number of permits issued	15 total 1st come/1st served Must meet application standards	100/year 1st come/1st served Must meet application standards
Requirements	Insurance (\$500,000/occurrence General Liability) Refuge Training Current First Aid and CPR Training for all employees	Insurance (\$300,000/occurrence General Liability) Refuge Training Current First Aid and CPR Training for all employees
Entrance Fees	Pay Wilderness Canoe Trail system fees as described. Entrance fees apply for other visits.	9 people in vehicle: \$5/day 10-25 people: \$25/day 26 or more: \$50/day

Permit Requirements

1. All interested companies or organizations are required to submit a one-time application form (Form FWS Form 3-1383-C) for Commercial Services. This form can be found at www.fws.gov/forms/3-1383-C.pdf or by contacting the refuge at okefenokee@fws.gov
2. Supporting documentation is required with the application
 - a. Proof of insurance
 - b. Proof of First Aid/CPR certification for all guides
 - c. Annual report form for commercial services provided on the refuge
 - d. Annual Permit Fee
3. The permit application is only required with the initial request. Each subsequent year, the permit holder will be required to submit the supporting documentation and fee when requested by refuge personnel. If supporting documentation is not received by the established deadline, the permit will be revoked.

Insurance

All guides will be required to furnish proof of liability insurance by an insurance company which is acceptable to the Service. Day-use guides will be required to furnish \$300,000 general liability/occurrence; overnight guides will furnish \$500,000 general liability/occurrence.

Each policy or certificate evidencing the insurance shall contain an endorsement which provides that the insurance company will notify the refuge 30 days prior to the effective date of any cancellation or termination of the policy or certificate or any modification of the policy or certificate which adversely affects the interest of the Government in such insurance. The notice shall be sent by registered mail and shall identify the permittee and the number of the special use permit.

Training

All permittees and their employees who guide on Okefenokee NWR are required to attend a training course that describes the refuge and its mission, the habitats and history of the area, and the customer service standards expected of all permittees. Training will take place on the refuge, in an eight-hour (1 day) session. Trainings for new permit holders or employees of permit holders will be required to take the refuge-specific training – offered twice a year, dates to be determined based on demand. In addition, all guides that work at Okefenokee NWR will be required to maintain current Certified First Aid and CPR qualification.

Evaluation Criteria

Below are criteria we expect guides to follow when on Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge.

1. All guides will follow federal, state, local, and refuge regulations regarding alcohol, illegal drugs, and firearms while on refuge property. Guides who are convicted of possession of an illegal substance, violations involving alcohol, or illegal possession of a firearm will immediately have their permit revoked permanently.
2. Guides are expected to follow established trails, adhere to refuge hours, and operate under the conditions of both the Overnight Camping Permit and Special Use Permit (i.e. no motors, must leave before 10:00 a.m., etc.)
3. Guides will be considerate of their guests, other refuge visitors, and refuge staff at all times. All complaints against guides or the guiding company on refuge trips must be submitted to refuge staff for investigation.
4. Guides will be able to explain the mission and objectives of Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge, describe management policies, understand safety and emergency procedures, and other topics discussed in Refuge Training (provided by refuge staff). Guides will protect the natural resources of Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge - they will not pick plants, feed wildlife, drink untreated swamp water, or dispose of wastewater in the swamp. Guides will be committed to “Leave No Trace” principles and will leave trails, campsites, and other facilities in better condition than they were found.

Overnight Camping Permit Reservations

Guides will not receive any special privileges in scheduling or reserving overnight camping sites through the reservation system.

Entrance Fees

The private, non-commercial vehicle entrance pass is a daily pass (good for 7 days). However, all day use commercial guides will be required to pay daily entrance fees based on the number of passengers in the vehicle.

For overnight guides, the entrance fee is included in the canoe permit fee. (However, any guiding outside a canoe permit requires the appropriate entrance fee.)

Guiding permits do not exempt permittees or their employees from entrance or other fees when visiting for non-work related activities.

Any other commercial use on the refuge, including catering, shuttle service, and outfitting will require the minimum \$25.00 commercial vehicle fee (up to 25 people).

If you are guiding a group with an educational/scientific entrance fee waiver, you must either board their vehicle to enter the refuge or pay the commercial vehicle rate for your vehicle.

Reporting

Permit holders are required to fill out a short form including dates, times and number of trips taken into Okefenokee NWR; total number of participants for each trip; and total fees collected per trip. There will also be space to list problems encountered and additional comments (see attached form). Forms will be emailed out to all permit holders and must be submitted to the refuge within 30 days of receipt.

Definitions

Day-Use Guiding: Any organization or business that charges or includes a fee or donation to the public for fishing, wildlife observation, wildlife photography, environmental education, or interpretation.

Overnight Guiding: Any organization or business that charges or includes a fee or donation to the public for guided overnight trips on the Wilderness Canoe Trail System.

Commercial Organization: An organization that uses the national wildlife refuge for economic gain.

Commercial Vehicle: Any conveyance (car, van, bus, truck, etc.) that provides the operator, passengers, and/or equipment with access to a national wildlife refuge for economic uses.

Economic Use: Any activity involving the use of a national wildlife refuge or its resources for a profit.

Commercial Guide Permit: A Special Use Permit issued by the refuge to an individual, business, or organizations for a particular commercial recreational use.

Private Non-commercial Vehicle: Any passenger vehicle utilized by its operator and his/her passengers to gain access to a refuge for personal recreation purposes.

Recreational Use: Any activity relating to recreation on the refuge.

Okefenokee NWR Educational/Scientific Entrance Fee Waiver: Organized school groups conducting trips to Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge for educational or scientific purposes may be able to apply for an entrance fee waiver. Groups must contact the Richard S. Bolt Visitor Center (912-496-7836) for information on this process.

Visits that are strictly for recreational or experiential purposes do not qualify for a fee waiver.

**Application Procedures
Commercial Guide Permit - Overnight
Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge**

1. First time companies and organizations complete the application: www.fws.gov/forms/3-1383-C.pdf.
2. Submit the following:
 - a. Completed and signed application.
 - b. Payment (\$200) via cashier check, money order, or credit card. Cashier checks and money orders should be made out to "U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service". If paying with credit card, call 912-496-3331 between 7:00 a.m. – 10:00 a.m. Monday – Friday.
 - c. A copy of insurance coverage (a Certificate of Insurance with adequate Comprehensive General Liability coverage, the minimum limit of liability being \$500,000 per occurrence).
 - d. Proof of current Certified First Aid and CPR qualification for all guides.
 - e. Current permit holders submit all above with exception of application
3. Submit all documents by mailing to Okefenokee NWR, 2700 Suwannee Canal Road, Folkston, GA 31537.
4. Register ALL new guides for refuge-specific training by calling Gracie Gooch at 912-496-7836.

Incomplete applications will not be considered. NO EXCEPTIONS.

Application packages containing false statements and/or fraudulent or misleading information will be denied and the application fee will be forfeited.

**Application Procedures
Commercial Guide Permit – Day-Use
Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge**

1. First time companies and organizations complete the application: www.fws.gov/forms/3-1383-C.pdf.
2. Submit the following:
 - a. Completed and signed application.
 - b. Payment (\$50) via cashier check, money order, or credit card. Cashier checks and money orders should be made out to “U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service”. If paying with credit card, call 912-496-3331 between 7:00 a.m. – 10:00 a.m. Monday – Friday.
 - c. A copy of insurance coverage (a Certificate of Insurance with adequate Comprehensive General Liability coverage, the minimum limit of liability being \$300,000 per occurrence).
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