

National Wildlife Refuge Compatibility Determination

Refuge Use: Refuge Lands Designated for Public Uses as Part of the GA State Park Program

Refuge Name: Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge

Date Established by Executive Order: March 30, 1937

Establishing and Acquisition Authority: Executive Order 7593

Refuge Purpose: The executive order establishing Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge in 1937 stated the purpose of the refuge as “a refuge and breeding ground for migratory birds and other wildlife.”

For lands acquired under the Migratory Bird Conservation Act (16 U.S.C. 715-715r), as amended, the purpose of the acquisition is: “for use as an inviolate sanctuary, or for any other management purpose, for migratory birds” (16 U.S.C. 715d).

The Wilderness Act of 1964 (Public Law 88-577) purposes are to secure an enduring resource of wilderness, to protect and preserve the wilderness character of areas within the National Wilderness Preservation System, and to administer this wilderness system for the use and enjoyment of the American people in a way that will leave them unimpaired for future use and enjoyment as wilderness.

Mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System:

The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System is to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans. (National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966, as amended [16 U.S.C. 668dd-668ee]).

Description of Use:

The Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge has multiple visitor entrances, one of which is located near Fargo, GA on the west side of the swamp and is currently administered through a lease agreement with the Georgia Department of Nature Resources (DNR) – Parks Division. This 50-year lease agreement has been in place since February 3, 1966. The refuge would endeavor to continue this partnership through a no-cost lease agreement between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the GA Department of Natural Resources for the administration and management of the Stephen C. Foster State Park.

Currently, the DNR administers the visitor services and maintenance programs on the portion of land associated with the Stephen C Foster State Park. There are six priority wildlife-dependent public uses identified in the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997: hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, wildlife photography, environmental education, and interpretation. These six uses, called the “Big Six” are dependent upon healthy fish and wildlife populations and receive enhanced consideration or priority over other public uses in planning and management. Types of priority wildlife-dependent recreation include wildlife observation, photography, environmental education, interpretation, and fishing. Additionally, opportunities for visitors to hike, bicycle, canoe and kayak, picnic, and camp are offered by the DNR to support

priority wildlife-dependent recreation. This area encompasses approximately 142 acres known as Jones Island. Facilities include a park office and maintenance area, 9 cottages, 64 campsites, 3 picnic shelters, and other facilities (built in the 1960s), maintained, and owned by the DNR. In any future modifications or upgrades to facilities associated with the Stephen C. Foster State Park, the DNR will use the same footprint or slight modifications and allow facilities to meet current engineering code and public safety requirements.

Stephen C Foster State Park, within Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge, offers an unparalleled visitor experience in the National Wildlife Refuge System. Visitors from across the country are given an opportunity to camp within a national wildlife refuge, rent a canoe/kayak and paddle into the heart of the refuge, or take a naturalist-led boat tour to explore and learn about the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge.

Visitation numbers generally fall between 200,000 and 400,000 per year, but fluctuate depending on the year and available access. In FY15, total visitor numbers for the refuge were 429,000 with 47,000 visitors accessing refuge water trails and 122,000 visitors to visitor centers and visitor contact stations. In FY15, the Stephen C. Foster State Park recorded a visitation of 110,000 visitors. The Stephen C. Foster State Park is open to visitors year-round, with peak visitation occurring in March, April, and May.

Currently, the refuge does not have any full time, permanent employees that work out of this section of the refuge. Without this critical partnership for managing visitor services operations in this remote area, the refuge would not be able to support keeping this portion of the refuge open. The driving distance between the refuge headquarters and this section of the refuge is 75 miles and is not feasible to commute on a regular basis.

Supporting Uses: Due to the operation of the Stephen C. Foster State Park, there are many public uses associated with the Park that although not a priority-public use, as defined by the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997, these uses support one or more of the priority public uses of a national wildlife refuge (wildlife observation, wildlife photography, hunting, fishing, environmental education, and interpretation). Bicycling, hiking, camping, picnicking, and boating are all popular visitor activities at Stephen C Foster State Park. The park provides facilities for such uses including picnic shelters, campsites, and boat ramps/launches. These uses have been determined to be an appropriate use and to not detract from the mission and goals of the refuge. These uses enhance and support a visitor's experience, and without these uses and facilities, the visitor's appreciation and support would be impacted.

Availability of Resources:

Coordination between the refuge and DNR is generally handled by the Supervisory Refuge Ranger, Deputy Project Leader, and/or Project Leader. The majority of the maintenance needs for the Jones Tract are handled by DNR employees, although occasionally one of the refuge maintenance workers will work with/coordinate with DNR employees. Additionally, a minimal amount of time is required of the refuge's administrative staff in working with the DNR processing reports and financial statements and occasional correspondence.

Approximately 1% of the refuge lands are impacted directly from visitation. Highest overall refuge use occurs on 220 acres at both the east and west entrances. In addition to the Park facilities at the west entrance, the east entrance has a visitor center, boardwalk, two observation towers, wildlife drive, restored homestead, hiking trails, fishing and hunting opportunities, and

access to the interior of the swamp. There are approximately 62 miles of water trails open for day use and motorboat use. Estimating disturbance to an area 150 ft from the water trails would result in 2,247 acres potentially disturbed. An additional 50 miles of overnight (canoe-only) trails add an additional 1,679 acres with the potential of being impacted.

Maintenance Costs: (Salaries, supplies, repairs)

Approximately \$4000 in staff time spent on maintenance needs within the Stephen C. Foster State Park include: invasive species management, refuge sign maintenance, and refuge gate maintenance.

Administrative/Law Enforcement Monitoring Costs:

Approximately \$13,000 in administrative costs are associated with managing this partnership. These administrative costs include: coordination between partner agencies, fee collection administration, and visitor use management. Law Enforcement costs to the refuge have been lowered due to the placement of a DNR Law Enforcement Officer in the area that assists the refuge by patrolling both the refuge and the Park.

Offsetting revenues: The Stephen C. Foster State Park collects the refuge's entrance fees, with a FY15 total of \$19,490, which more than offset costs associated with maintenance and administration of the lease. Without the DNR staff collecting these fees, the refuge would not be able to manage a fee program at this remote refuge entrance.

Anticipated Impacts of the Use:

Without the Stephen C. Foster State Park, visitors would not be able to access the western portion and interior of the National Wildlife Refuge. Their length of stay would also be shorter due to fewer opportunities.

Park users follow the general regulations set forth for the general public. New or expanded activities related to public use proposed within the wilderness area will be evaluated through the minimum requirement process in an attempt to identify potential impacts and develop methods to accomplish management objectives without jeopardizing Wilderness values and resources.

Short-term impacts:

Impacts from individual users are expected to be similar to other public use activities in other parts of the refuge. Accommodating more visitors overall may increase the likelihood of disturbances related to noise, trampling, compaction, or longer duration of continuous activity. Regular scheduled tours to specific areas may displace wildlife use at certain locations to a greater extent than random visitor use.

Providing equipment to access the swamp (i.e. rental boats, canoes/kayaks, guided tours) allows the visitor greater opportunities for wildlife observation, photography, and fishing, thus enhancing their refuge experience. In addition, environmental education messages and proper Wilderness etiquette can be communicated since the employees are in direct contact with the visitor prior to their trip into the swamp.

Long-term impacts:

Long term use of an area will be monitored as visitation increases and adaptive management strategies developed to address significant impacts. Monitoring would include an evaluation of changes in wildlife use patterns, trampling of vegetation, and compaction of the soil around the

activity area. The refuge and the DNR will work collaboratively to manage group size and distribute groups to various sites to minimize the impacts resulting from this use.

Cumulative impacts:

Overall, the visitor is more informed about the refuge and its resources because of the operation of the Stephen C. Foster State Park. Certain information presented may be carried to other natural recreation areas giving additional benefit to the messages that are presented.

Public Review and Comment: This compatibility determination will be available for review and comment during the 14-day public review period. The compatibility determination is posted on the Okefenokee refuge website (<http://www.fws.gov/refuge/okefenokee/>), at refuge facilities open to the public (Visitor Center, Administration Building, concession building, and at Stephen C. Foster State Park).

A press release was sent out to the media distribution list for the refuge, which includes 689 recipients.

Determination (check one below):

Compatible with the following stipulations

Not Compatible

Stipulations Necessary to Ensure Compatibility:

DNR will administer the Stephen C. Foster State Park in compliance with the existing lease agreement.

Justification:

The DNR will provide recreational opportunities to a wide spectrum of individuals with various levels of outdoor skills. They also provide a needed service for visitors that do not possess appropriate equipment. The staff increases contacts with visitors, providing an opportunity to present educational information about the swamp, ecosystem and regulatory information.

NEPA Compliance for Refuge Use Description: *Place an X in appropriate space.*

- Categorical Exclusion without Environmental Action Statement
- Categorical Exclusion and Environmental Action Statement
- Environmental Assessment and Finding of No Significant Impact
- Environmental Impact Statement and Record of Decision

Mandatory 10- or 15-Year Re-evaluation Date: 2026

Approval of Compatibility Determination

Michael Lusk,
Project Leader,
NWR:

Signature Date

Pam Horton,
Regional Compatibility
Coordinator,
Southeast Region:

Signature Date

Elizabeth Souheaver,
Refuge Supervisor,
Area 3, Southeast Region:

Signature Date

David Viker,
Regional Chief,
National Wildlife Refuge
System, Southeast Region:

Signature Date