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U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services

[Submitted Electronically to Okefenokee@fws.gov]

RE: Say Yes to USFWS' Okefenokee Border Expansion Proposal

Dear U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service,

On behalf of Birds Georgia members across the state, we are writing today to express support for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's proposal to expand the boundary of the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge. We applaud the Service's willingness to engage landowners and to further conservation actions around the Okefenokee Swamp.

Birds Georgia's mission is to build places where birds and people thrive. We fulfill our mission through education, conservation, and community engagement. With more than 2,500 members and more than 5,000 National Audubon Society members from across the state, Birds Georgia represents a broad constituency united by a desire to protect birds and other wildlife. Our constituents include Georgia residents, frequent visitors, and concerned citizens who understand both the significance and beauty of the Okefenokee Swamp for birds and other wildlife.

At 438,000 acres, the Okefenokee Swamp is one of the most wild, pristine, and ecologically intact places in America, sheltering more than one thousand animal and plant species within its vast labyrinth of cypress forests, pine islands, and blackwater channels. In addition to providing refuge to wildlife, the Okefenokee offers an escape to hundreds of thousands of people who fish, hunt, paddle, birdwatch, and camp in its wilderness each year. As the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service put it, "The Okefenokee is like no other place on earth." By expanding these protections, critical habitat and biodiversity will be buffered and preserved for generations to come.

By working with landowners on conservation efforts, the Service would provide opportunities for longleaf pine restoration, which benefits a suite of priority avian species, including the threatened Red-cockaded Woodpecker, Southeastern American Kestrel, Bachman's Sparrow, and Northern Bobwhite. Once blanketing over 90 million acres, Longleaf Pine is now isolated and fragmented across approximately 5 million acres of the southeast. It is imperative to continue to protect and preserve these large swaths of Longleaf Pine to benefit these imperiled species, especially the Red-cockaded Woodpecker. Currently, the Refuge is home to 90 clusters of Red-cockaded Woodpeckers, 55 of which are active. These *"are most likely the remains of a much larger population that once depended on the pine stands surrounding the Refuge"*. This habitat that may be afforded protection and restoration from this boundary expansion. These protections, especially the fuel reduction zone, would help to improve habitat, serve as a buffer for this habitat during severe droughts, and mitigate catastrophic wildfire impacts.

Additionally, priority avian species such as the federally threatened Wood Stork, Florida Sandhill Crane, Prothonotary Warbler, Little Blue Heron, Swallow-tailed Kite, and Bald Eagle would benefit from the protection and strengthening of protections of both the ecological and hydrological integrity of the swamp itself. Even a small reduction in the amount of water in the swamp could have far reaching impacts for the wading birds and other species that rely on the swamp for food and shelter.

We are delighted that the Fish and Wildlife Service has demonstrated their responsibility to protect both the ecological integrity of the swamp and the surrounding lands as well as the interests of local property owners.

Thank you for considering our comments.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jared Teutsch". The signature is fluid and cursive, written over a light blue horizontal line.

Jared Teutsch
Executive Director