



Okefenokee Swamp Park Celebrates \$2.5 million in State Funding for Okefenokee Experience Project

Funding will serve as critical investment toward project in public-private partnership

WAYCROSS, GA (May 15, 2024) - Governor Kemp recently signed the Fiscal Year 2025 budget, which includes \$2.5 million in state funds for the planned Okefenokee Experience—a series of three new infrastructure projects and one new visitor center at separate entrance sites to the Swamp. This initial state funding will be crucial to begin the planning and construction for the Okefenokee Experience and advance public-private partnership opportunities for further contributions toward completing the project.

The Okefenokee Experience is a series of three new infrastructure projects at separate entrance sites to the Swamp. They include:

- In Waycross in Ware County, a state-of-the-art Nature Center, located on the Okefenokee Swamp Park campus, showcasing the tremendous diversity of the plants and wildlife within the swamp.
- In Folkston in Charlton County, a Cultural History and Community Center, that will celebrate the rich history of Native Americans, formerly enslaved people, and “swampers,” who each tapped the resources of the swamp in varied ways.
- In Fargo in Clinch County, a Dark Sky Observatory, situated underneath the darkest skies on the east coast and with the potential to become a research hub.



Kim Bednarek, Executive Director of the Okefenokee Swamp Park, said, "I'm elated to announce the \$2.5 million state funding for the Okefenokee Experience Project. This pivotal investment sets the stage for transformative growth, enhancing our ability to showcase the beauty and biodiversity of the swamp. We will continue pursuing additional public and private funding for these projects which will not only enrich our visitors' experiences but also fuel economic growth and prosperity for our region. Together, we're forging a path towards sustainable development and global recognition, positioning Okefenokee as a premier destination for generations to come."

Based on recently released economic data from The Conservation Fund, together, these projects would generate 362 new jobs during construction, an additional \$46 million in economic output, and total tax revenue of \$4.6 million. Ongoing operation of the facilities is likely to sustain at least 47 new jobs and generate over \$430,000 in annual tax revenue. Additionally, Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge, in conjunction with the Okefenokee Swamp Park, is currently being considered for designation as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. World Heritage Site designation would bring both international and overnight visitors, dramatically increasing spending in the region and creating a substantial opportunity for new small businesses.

The report also found that over 800,000 visits are made to the Okefenokee each year, generating visitor spending of \$91.5 million in Ware, Charlton, and Clinch Counties. If the bid to designate the Okefenokee as a World Heritage Site is successful, the region can expect the number of visits to double to 1.4 million or 1.6 million visits by 2035. Additionally, the region can expect to gain as many as 750 new jobs and grow its economic output by over \$60 million.

To learn more about the Okefenokee Experience, click [HERE](#).

To view the full economic impact report, click [HERE](#).

To learn more about the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge's World Heritage Site bid, click [HERE](#).

