

Committee on Resources

resources.committee@mail.house.gov

[Home](#) [Press Gallery](#) [Subcommittees](#) [Issues](#) [Legislation](#) [Hearing Archives](#)

STATEMENT OF CHIP CAMPBELL

PRESIDENT OF OKEFENOKEE ADVENTURES, INC.,

OKEFENOKEE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE CONCESSIONAIRE,

BEFORE THE

FISHERIES CONSERVATION, WILDLIFE AND OCEANS SUBCOMMITTEE

REGARDING

H.R. 1204, A BILL TO AMEND THE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM

ADMINISTRATION ACT OF 1966 TO ESTABLISH REQUIREMENTS FOR THE AWARD OF CONCESSIONS IN THE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE SYSTEM, TO PROVIDE FOR MAINTENANCE AND REPAIR OF PROPERTIES LOCATED IN THE SYSTEM BY CONCESSIONAIRES AUTHORIZED TO USE SUCH PROPERTIES, AND FOR OTHER PURPOSES

June 26, 2003

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak in support of H.R. 1204. I believe that the passage of this bill is important to the public use and support of our country's outstanding National Wildlife Refuge system.

My wife, Joy, and I own and operate Okefenokee Adventures, Inc. in Folkston, Georgia. In the spring of 2000, we were awarded the concession contract for the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge's East Entrance, also known as the Suwannee Canal Entrance. Okefenokee Adventures began operations on September 1, 2000.

Established in 1937, Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge is the largest National Wildlife Refuge in the eastern United States, encompassing 396,000 acres of the 438,000-acre Okefenokee Swamp, a vast peat wetland complex of cypress, bay, gum and pine forests, dense shrub bogs, freshwater marshes, small lakes and streams. In a region that abounds with wetlands, Okefenokee is "The Swamp". The most ecologically and hydrologically intact of the great Southern wetlands and the largest blackwater swamp ecosystem in the world, it is also a landscape of incomparable beauty. Home to hundreds of black bears and thousands of American alligators, as well as endangered woodpeckers, threatened tortoises, and a tangled riot of birds, frogs, dragonflies and vegetation, the Okefenokee is a natural wildlife refuge. Although it bears the fading scars of human economic endeavors, including a failed drainage attempt in the late 19th century and successful logging operations in the early 20th century, it remains one of the most fundamentally wild places in America. In recognition of its enduring wilderness qualities, in 1974 Congress designated 354,000 acres of the Okefenokee as a federal Wilderness Area.

The human history of the Okefenokee is as rich as its biological diversity and its wilderness values. Once inhabited by people of Woodland and Mississippian cultures whose burial mounds dot the interior islands and upland edges, the Okefenokee was later home to Timucuan and then Seminole before being settled by frontier folk of extraordinary toughness and self-reliance: the "swampers". Today the residents of Okefenokee communities take great pride in the colorful history and folklore of their swamper heritage.

As the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge's concessionaire, it is the business of Okefenokee Adventures to help visitors understand and appreciate the extraordinary ecological dynamics, wilderness values and cultural history of the Okefenokee Swamp. In doing so, we help to further the mission and purposes of the National Wildlife Refuge system while engaging in a compatible private enterprise that contributes directly to the local economy. Our commitment to developing a high-quality visitor services operation was the centerpiece of our contract proposal. We have worked hard to meet that commitment, and we are gratified

to note that U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service management, the local community, and Okefenokee regulars tell us our efforts have succeeded. We view our relationship with the Refuge public use program as that of a cooperating partnership and our role as that of a liaison between Refuge management and the visiting public.

While public use is understandably and properly a priority secondary to conservation on a National Wildlife Refuge, it is a significant factor in the management and operation of a Refuge that attracts approximately 400,000 visitors each year from the local communities, across the United States, and around the world.

A Georgia Department of Industry, Trade and Tourism study reveals that Okefenokee visitors produce an average annual economic impact of \$55-\$65 million for the three Georgia counties, Charlton, Clinch and Ware, in which the Refuge is located. In 2000, overall tourism expenditures in these counties totaled \$77.2 million. According to GDITT data, tourism supports 66 businesses and provides 1,083 jobs in this same three county area. The Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge administers three public entrances under varying arrangements. A private attraction, Okefenokee Swamp Park, on the north side of the swamp in Ware County near Waycross, Georgia, receives about 80,000 visitors per year. On the swamp's Clinch County side near the small town of Fargo, the State of Georgia operates Stephen C. Foster State Park under a lease agreement with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which provides access for approximately 120,000 visitors per year. And about half of the Okefenokee's visitors, approximately 200,000 people per year, come through our entrance, the East Entrance, located in Charlton County south of Folkston, Georgia. The East Entrance serves as the primary National Wildlife Refuge entrance.

The facilities provided to our company, Okefenokee Adventures, under our concession contract with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service are located onsite at the East Entrance, which was formerly known as the Suwannee Canal Recreation Area and historically known as Camp Cornelia. These facilities consist of two buildings: an 1800-sq. foot, climate-controlled building and a 900-sq. foot storage shed without climate control. Along with the Refuge Visitor Center, these structures were built in the late 1960's to replace the dilapidated shacks of a fish camp that had operated at the site. The buildings were completed about 1970 and are immediately adjacent to a boat basin that includes a 400-foot wooden bulkhead and dock, twenty-five (25) 15-foot long "finger" docks, and a concrete boat ramp. A 6'X6' oil/gas house for hazardous material storage and a 500-gallon above-ground fuel storage tank are located away from the water's edge across a paved parking area.

At the time of their completion in the early 1970's, these structures served a site that was primarily an access for fishermen. According to Refuge officials, the projected useful life of the buildings was 20 years. They are still in use, although the primary public uses have changed and visitor numbers have increased.

Over the years, I have observed numerous renovations of this service area as the operators have sought to accommodate changing visitor needs. When I was a boy, we purchased fish bait and tackle in a tiny waterside shop that offered little in the way of visitor amenities beyond Vienna sausages, beanie-weenies and soda crackers. A counter was located in the half of the larger building that was wired for electricity. The other half of the building was unwired and used for storage.

As visitor numbers increased, the larger building's former storage area was enclosed and wired. The building's electricity, air conditioning and plumbing systems were extended into the expansion. Restroom facilities were constructed, although they could not (and still cannot) be accessed from the building's interior. In the 1980's and 1990's, as visitor demographics continued to shift towards traveling families and retirees, birders, wildlife photographers, canoeists, and other outdoor recreationists – so-called "ecotourists" or "nature-based tourists" – items such as T-shirts, postcards, rubber alligators and other souvenirs appeared on concession shelves. The Refuge removed a fish cleaning station beside the boat ramp that had become far too attractive to the boat basin's resident alligators and replaced it with an attractive and handicapped-accessible 1,100-sq. foot picnic deck. The 900-sq. foot outbuilding was divided into three rooms to accommodate storage and workshop needs, and a 40-foot canoe storage rack was constructed. In the late 1990's, the previous concessionaire converted a back room into a small kitchen, primarily to prepare meals for organized groups.

Today, using these same facilities, our company, Okefenokee Adventures, provides a full range of visitor services. We are open 364 days a year (every day except Christmas) from half an hour before sunrise until 5:30 p.m. during Daylight Saving Time and until 7:30 p.m. during Standard Time. We have 12 employees, most of whom work full-time or nearly so. With 5 tour boats, we conduct guided interpretive tours for individuals, families and organized groups. We also offer guided half-day and full-day canoe and kayak

tours by arrangement, and we outfit and guide multi-day excursions on the Refuge wilderness canoe trail system. We conduct custom walking tours for birders and photographers on the Refuge's upland trails and $\frac{3}{4}$ -mile boardwalk. In addition to our interpretive tours, we have 60 canoes, 22 kayaks, and 23 motorized skiffs available to rent for self-guided explorations. We also rent camping gear, fishing gear, and bicycles, which visitors use to observe wildlife along our drive. We sell Georgia hunting and fishing licenses. Our gift shop inventory includes a variety of swamp and nature-related souvenirs, educational toys and local crafts. In addition to packaged snacks, beverages, and ice cream, we have expanded the facility's limited kitchen into a full service food service operation, Camp Cornelia Café, which serves quality sandwiches and hot meals to the visiting public, organized groups, and Refuge employees.

Since Okefenokee Adventures began operations September 1, 2000, we have enjoyed tremendous assistance and support from Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge managers, staff, volunteers, and AmeriCorps crews. At the same time, we are aware of the extremely limited funding available to repair and maintain our facilities. While critical materials such as replacements for rotten dock boards have been obtained promptly, other projects languish for lack of funds. If H.R.1204 becomes law, necessary maintenance projects could be funded from our concession revenues. We need a ready supply of replacement dock boards and nails. The ceramic tiles in the original half of our main building do not match the linoleum tiles of the expansion and kitchen, and they are all badly discolored and worn, so we would like to replace our tiling. Our bathroom fixtures are old and corroded and need to be replaced: in fact, we would like to renovate the bathrooms completely. And we can identify several repairs and upgrades to our kitchen facilities that would probably please our county health inspector.

In addition to basic maintenance and repairs, the provisions for funding of facility enhancements are appealing. A new concession building has been identified as a priority by the Refuge. Though we assume that major facility enhancements such as new building construction would continue to require special project grants or appropriations, the proposed amendment could help provide funding for substantial facility enhancements. Examples that would be of direct benefit to Okefenokee Adventures' interests could include the proposed Mizell Prairie boardwalk, the trailhead for which is slated to be located adjacent to our facility; new observation decks and/or benches; upgrades to the composting toilets at the wilderness canoe trail campsites; construction of new canoe trail camping platforms; and new landscaping with native plants. If, as proposed, H.R. 1204 assures that Revenue Sharing Program payments will not be affected, it seems reasonable to conclude that returning our concession fees to the Okefenokee would provide a net gain for the Refuge and the local economy and preferable to the current situation. Furthermore it is our opinion that any Refuge projects receiving our concession fees, however unrelated to the public use program, ultimately benefit our business interests.

An important point that I respectfully urge the Committee to consider: the proposed change should represent a net gain for Refuge public use program funding. If, as I understand it, one of the purposes of H.R. 1204 is to provide Refuge managers with greater incentives to enter into concession contracts that enhance their public use programs, the proposed change will need to provide revenues that supplement other funding sources rather than replacing them.

In conclusion, I wish to thank Congressman Mark E. Souder for introducing this important and necessary legislation. It makes good business sense for Refuge concessionaires, Refuge managers and Refuge public use programs – and, by extension, it makes good business sense for the local communities in which National Wildlife Refuges are located.

It is a privilege and the realization of a lifelong dream to serve as the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge's concessionaire. And it is a tremendous honor to be asked to share my views today. Thank you.