



# Why is a paper giant leaving Savannah?

Closure of two International Paper mills and sale of a third along Georgia's coast triggers questions, speculation.

STATE NEWS, A13

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AJC EXCLUSIVE

## Okefenokee is safe for now, but talk of mining remains

Some think mining could help rejuvenate the economy. Others say tourism and a possible UNESCO designation hold far greater promise.



Vast timberland owned by Toledo Manufacturing sprawls at the crest of Trail Ridge, the mineral-rich area east of the Okefenokee Swamp on Aug. 11 in Folkston. Earlier this summer, land next to the swamp that was slated for a titanium mine was purchased by The Conservation Fund, spelling an end to a project some had feared could irreparably damage the fragile ecosystem. But the specter of mining near the refuge remains. PHOTOS BY HYOSUB SHIN/AJC

By Drew Kann | drew.kann@ajc.com

FOLKSTON

On a blast furnace of an August day in Georgia's southernmost county, Joe Hopkins gripped the steering wheel to steady his truck on the sandy road.

Outside, seemingly endless rows of neatly spaced trees whizzed by — mostly slash pine, the species of choice for foresters in this part of the state.

Hopkins' family has been growing timber here near the eastern rim of the Okefenokee Swamp for more than 100 years. In this maze of trees, Hopkins remembers where he killed his first deer, and where his son claimed his first turkey.

"My life is out here," he said.

The business his great-uncle co-founded is known today as Toledo Manufacturing Co. and has since amassed roughly 50,000 acres in Charlton County, making it one of the largest landowners here. At the western edge of Toledo's largest tract, pine trees give way to cypress and the wilderness of the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge.

For now, Toledo's properties are managed for commer-

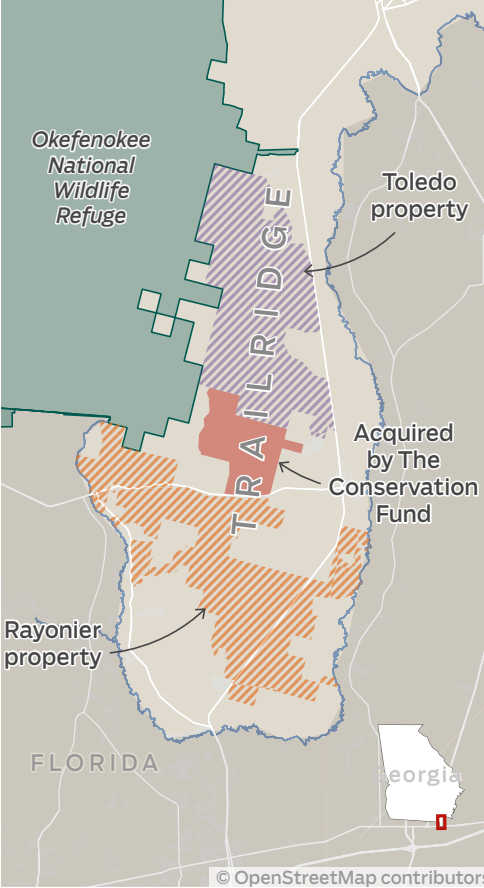
Okefenokee continued on A15



Joe Hopkins, president of Toledo Manufacturing, stands on land his company owns near the Okefenokee Swamp. Hopkins supports mining near the Okefenokee — if it can be proven it won't harm the swamp. The company has amassed roughly 50,000 acres in Charlton County.

### Large privately owned lands remain on Okefenokee's edge

The commercial timber firms Rayonier and Toledo Manufacturing each own tracts in excess of 30,000 acres on Trail Ridge near the Okefenokee Swamp. The properties also border land recently acquired by The Conservation Fund, where an Alabama company had planned to mine.



DREW KANN, JENNIFER PEEBLES AND PETE CORSON/AJC

## Suspected homicides in prisons spike again

Deaths in first half of year outpacing 2024, which was among deadliest.

By Chaya Tong | chaya.tong@ajc.com

Homicides in Georgia prisons at the six month mark this year are outpacing last year, which was one of the deadliest years on record.

In just the first six months of this year, the Georgia Department of Corrections is investigating 42 deaths as possible homicides — already nearly two-thirds of the 66 suspected prison homicides the agency investigated in all of last year.

In June alone, nine incarcerated people, including Dominique Cole, were killed in Georgia prisons.

Two months before he would have walked free, Cole was killed by another prisoner at Wilcox State Prison, the warden told Cole's sister, Jessica Nicholson. Someone would call her with more details, the warden promised.

The call never came.

Cole had been serving time for more than two years for probation violation.

The Georgia Department of Corrections is investigating nine of the 39 deaths in June as homicides. June marked the deadliest month so far in 2025 for killings in Georgia prisons.

Prison homicides have increased over the years

Prisons continued on A8

## Kemp, Jones took industry money as laws were debated

Contributions to the top Georgia Republicans draw scrutiny ahead of the 2026 race for governor.

By David Wickert | dwickert@ajc.com

When Gov. Brian Kemp unveiled his proposal to limit lawsuits and jury awards, a key insurance industry group hailed it as a way to address "abuse" of the legal system in Georgia.

And when Kemp's plan met resistance in the General Assembly, the American Property Casualty Insurance Association opened its wallet to help the governor promote it. The group wrote a \$183,000 check to Kemp's Georgians First Leadership Committee — the biggest contribution Kemp received during the legislative session.

But it wasn't the only one. Georgians First collected about \$1.5 million in contributions during this year's legislative session, an analysis by The Atlanta Journal-Constitution found. Lt. Gov. Burt Jones' leadership committee collected another \$757,000 during the session, records show.

Finances continued on A8



Gov. Brian Kemp (top) and Lt. Gov. Burt Jones face scrutiny for the fact that leadership committees allow some top officials to accept campaign cash even as bills are debated.

STATE NEWS, A2

### How Hyundai ICE raid puts spotlight on visa program

A majority of the 475 people arrested at the Hyundai Metaplant campus were Korean nationals with visa waivers.



HEALTH CARE, A4

### COVID-19 boosters halted in Georgia amid uncertainty

Big pharmacies and public health clinics in Georgia are not yet giving this year's COVID-19 booster shots.

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8 LOCATIONS IN GEORGIA.

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