

Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge Post-fire Invasive Plant Surveillance

Southeast Georgia



Proactive inspection of the Okefenokee Swamp perimeter enables the Refuge to detect and rapidly respond to new infestations of potentially threatening invasive plants.

Occupying over 402,000 acres, the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge is located in one of the largest blackwater swamps in North America. Periodic fires and elevation differences, have created a unique mosaic of plant communities, including open prairie, cypress bays, hardwood forests, and pine uplands.

As fire is central to the health of the Okefenokee ecosystem, but potentially damaging to surrounding private timberlands and residential communities, fire containment within the refuge is an important management strategy of the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS). During the spring of 2007 this strategy was put

to the test as a series of fires burned approximately 400,000 acres. Crews were mobilized from across the country to create a fire perimeter and limit damage to private property. This fire eventually turned into the most expensive suppression effort ever undertaken by the USFWS.

Recognizing that the earth-moving activities, creation of firebreaks, and the influx of equipment from across the U.S. could potentially create opportunities for invasive plants to become established within the refuge, the USFWS contracted with Biohabitats' Institute for Supply Management (ISM) partner Invasive Plant Control (IPC) Inc. to undertake post-fire surveillance of the refuge boundary and fire staging areas. Biohabitats' ISM, in conjunction with IPC,

circumnavigated the entire perimeter of the refuge in order to visually assess infestations of invasive vegetation. While the operation was conducted in difficult terrain over an extensive area, Biohabitats was able to successfully identify and prioritize areas of newly established, undesirable vegetation. The early detection of invasive plant populations allowed the Refuge to cost-effectively contain and potentially eradicate new infestations. It also provided the Refuge with the baseline information needed to properly assess invasive plant risk during future fire response efforts.

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