



Thanksgiving meal effort

• Sit 2C

MacKaye Trail group cleaning up after Zeta



BENTON MACKAYE TRAIL ASSOCIATION

Benton MacKaye Trail Association member Frank Forehand gets an up-close look at one of many downed trees along an 80-mile section of the hiking trail that extends through north Georgia to the Tennessee border.

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Members of the Benton MacKaye Trail Association (BMTA) have surveyed "incredible" damage along the recreational hiking trail following Tropical Storm Zeta's tear through the north Georgia mountains, confirmed members of the volunteer trail maintenance group.

"As soon as the Forest Service gave the go-ahead, BMTA teams sprang into action to inspect the damage. Well over 100 trees are reported down between Three Forks and Weaver Creek, (while) crews have reported tangled piles of blowdowns further north on the trail," said association vice president Joy Forehand.

The Georgia leg of the association is responsible for maintaining an almost 80-mile section of the trail that extends north of Blue Ridge

to Tennessee, noted Bob Cowdrick, the BMTA's new Georgia maintenance director.

"There are 11 sections in Georgia. We start at Springer Mountain, which is the southern end, and go up to the Tennessee border," he added.

About 40 volunteers have taken turns surveying and clearing trees from that part of the trail for more than a week, Cowdrick noted.

"We call them blowdowns because the wind blows the trees down across the trail. So far, we've cut and removed about 156 trees, which range from real small ones, which we can throw off and don't count, to ones we have to get the chain saw or the crosscut saw out for," he added. "Some of them have taken two people about an hour to clear out of there."

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Some areas can take longer to clear depending not only on the size of downed trees, but also the type of equipment that BMTA members can use to remove them. In designated wilderness areas, like the Cohattas, only nonmechanical saws can be used for that purpose.

"Up north of Blue Ridge into the Tennessee border is wilderness area. The Wilderness Act of 1964 says no mechanized equipment is allowed in there and that includes chain saws. That's why we have chain saws for nonwilderness areas and crosscut saws for wilderness areas. We're certified from the Forest Service for first aid, as well as crosscut and chain saw certified for safety purposes," said Cowdrick.

After the trees are cut, BMTA workers, fortunately, do not have to drag or load the chopped wood. Instead, it's left to nature.

"We cut it up and move it aside for accessibility purposes, then it becomes habitat. We throw the branches and limbs off to the side, and it becomes habitat for the squirrels, birds, bugs and other critters," Cowdrick said.

Forehand said Fall Branch Falls — a popular trail stop where a worn, half-mile section near a scenic waterfall was rerouted and restored with a 2018 BMTA maintenance project — was spared from storm damage. However, damage that extends from the BMT's intersection with the Stanley Gap Trail to the Weaver Creek Trailhead was severe, she added.

"Clearing the trail to the swinging bridge was a priority. Our crews removed 38 trees in two days and the bridge is clear for hikers," noted trail association member Phil Guhl.

"Twenty trees have been removed in the vicinity of Dyer Gap / Double Hogpen Gap, but there's a lot more work to do. Thirty

trees are down between the Weaver Creek Trailhead and the old homestead site. The steep inclines on Scroggin Knob make getting around some of them dangerous," he added.

Currently, no Georgia sections of the trail are closed, Cowdrick said.

"Initially (some sections were closed) because the Forest Service wasn't quite sure in terms of the access roads to the trail. There aren't any sections that are closed now, per se, but you do have to walk around or over or under in some of these sections. That does make it tougher for hikers to walk through them," he added.

"Our crews are clearing the trees and repairing the tread as quickly as possible. In the meantime, hikers need to be cautious as they navigate around the numerous obstacles they'll encounter on the trail," Forehand advised.

The work is expected to continue this week into next, Cowdrick noted.

"We've surveyed almost every section. We'll have a workday next Saturday where we get the entire organization together to try and finish the job," he added.

With leaves falling and cooler air filtering in, fall tends to be a busy season for a variety of trailgoers. This year is no exception, Cowdrick confirmed.

"The storm did influence recreational areas and opportunities, which people are big on right now. It's a beautiful time of year, so they want to get out and do things like hiking and biking. We not only have hikers and bikers, we also have trail runners. This weekend is the Georgia Death Race, which is a 74-mile trail race form Vogel State Park almost to the swinging bridge area. The big push was to open this (part of the) trail for runners of this race," he said.

"You also have many families who use the trail and, because it is hunting season, we see a lot of hunters on the trail accessing their favorite hunting spots. It's public land that everybody can use, and we try to make it passable for everybody."

For more details on the Benton MacKaye Trail Association, as well as its workdays and scheduled activities, see BMTA.org or contact Joy Forehand at 386-334-0336.



BENTON MACKAYE TRAIL ASSOCIATION

Above, Benton MacKaye Trail Association member Clare Sullivan uses a handsaw to cut tree limbs that were obstructing part of the trail. At right, Ed Sullivan, front, and Phil Guhl, behind tree, use a chain saw to remove one of several large trees blown down across the trail by high winds during Tropical Storm Zeta.

