

## “Maintainers” key to keeping BMT passable

FROM STAFF REPORTS  
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As we’re hiking along a trail, we’re usually soaking in the view, watching for wildlife and chatting with family, but have you ever thought about how that trail always manages to stay navigable?

Some may assume forest or park service employees do it, and that is certainly true, but in the case of the Benton MacKaye Trail, it’s often a group of dedicated outdoorsmen volunteering their time and sweat.

The Benton MacKaye Trail (BMT) from Springer Mountain in Georgia to the Smokies in North Carolina was closed, as were many other trails and trail systems, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Benton MacKaye Trail Association (BMTA) Vice President Joy Forehand said the Forest Service and Park Service closed all of the 300-mile long BMT to “maintainers,” mainly out of concern for first responders as well as the ability of local medical facilities to handle accidental injuries, although a few sections remained open to hikers.

A “maintainer” is a volunteer who helps maintain the trail by cutting trees that have fallen across the path, clearing brush, building steps and more. They generally care for the trail to make sure it’s nice, safe and enjoyable for the hiking community.

Forehand said the first order of business, when the trail reopened in May, was to assess the condition of the trail. “It wasn’t too bad in Georgia where, for the first 50 miles of trail, blowdowns averaged one per mile,” said Barry Allen, former President of BMTA. “The trail in Tennessee was another story. The trail had become an obstacle course . . . especially from Reliance to Sledrunner Gap in Tennessee.”

The group of men and women had to adhere to strict safety guidelines, which limited the number of volunteers that could go out on the trail and also limited the tools they could use to crosscut saws and axes. “Now, that’s a challenge . . . a massive number of trees down and we couldn’t use chainsaws,” Allen added. “It probably took three times as many man hours to clear the trail with crosscut and ax as it would have with chainsaws.”

The hard work paid off. “Thanks to the efforts of our volunteers, many from Fannin and Gilmer counties, the Geor-



Submitted photo

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.

gia BMT is now clear,” said Forehand. “During the month of June, some of those same Georgia trail workers volunteered their time to help our Tennessee maintainers clear 27 miles of a trail littered with blowdowns!”

Ken Cissna of Cherry Log was recently elected President of the association.

Cissna has been participating in BMTA activities since 2010. “When I retired, I started going on BMTA Work Trips and Sponsored Hikes,” Cissna said. “I realized hiking is a good thing to do. It keeps me fit.”

From 2015 until now, Cissna was BMTA’s Hiking Director and ran BMTA’s Online Store. He also maintains the Fall Branch Falls section of the Benton MacKaye Trail (BMT).

As President, Cissna wants to continue to pursue the vision of his predecessor – “to make the Benton MacKaye Trail the preeminent mid-distance hiking trail in the nation.”

Clare Sullivan of Copperhill was elected Secretary.

If you’d like to go hiking with experts, the BMTA sponsors four to five hikes each month. Many of which are listed in The News Observer’s Community Calendar. The BMTA is back to the regular hiking schedule



Submitted photo

Benton MacKaye Trail Association Secretary Clare Sullivan uses a handsaw to cut tree limbs that were obstructing part of the trail.



Submitted photo

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.

and are following COVID-19 policies.

Forehand said, “With hikes like Fall Branch Falls to the Stanley Gap Trail, the Cartecay River Loop, the BMT/AT Loop on Springer Mountain and the

BMT Loop from Dyer Gap; the hikes are filling quickly,” said Forehand. “In some cases, the Hiking Director has been able to accommodate an overflow of sign ups by adding a second Hike Leader.”

Learn more about the BMTA, sponsored hikes and trail maintenance opportunities, go to their new website at [bmta.org](http://bmta.org), or contact Joy Forehand at [jwfbmga@gmail.com](mailto:jwfbmga@gmail.com) or 386-334-0336.