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BENTON MACKAYE TRAIL

National designation gaining support



STAFF PHOTOS BY MATT HAMILTON

From left, Karen Kocher of Cleveland, Lucia Case of Athens, Doug Lynch of Knoxville and Brenda and Richard Harris of Tellico Plains, hike the Benton-MackKaye Trail in Polk County, Tenn. on Friday.



A sign marks the Benton-MackKaye Trail in Polk County, Tenn. on Friday.

BY BEN BENTON
STAFF WRITER

The grassroots effort launched in 2021 seeking to get the Benton MacKaye Trail that spans three states in the Southern Appalachian Mountains named a National Scenic Trail has gained bi-partisan congressional support in a new bill introduced in the U.S. House.

Tennessee U.S. House Reps. Steve Cohen and Jim Cooper, both Democrats, and Scott DesJarlais and Chuck Fleischmann, both Republicans, are co-sponsors of a bill that, if approved by Congress and signed by President Joe Biden, will designate the Benton-MackKaye Trail as a National Scenic Trail. The bill has House co-sponsors in Georgia, as well, in Democrats David Scott and Lucy McBath.

The designation was first sought by members of the Benton MacKaye Trail Association in fall 2021. The association has been around for more than 40 years.

Cohen, a member of the Natural Resources Committee, introduced the Benton MacKaye Scenic

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Trail

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Trail Act May 27 seeking the designation for the trail that traces a path through Georgia, Tennessee and North Carolina over 287 scenic miles of mountains, valleys, forests and waterfalls, according to a statement issued by Cohen when he introduced the bill.

The trail, on federal land for 95% of its length, would be administered by the National Forest Service and would become the 12th National Scenic Trail in the nation, he said.

"The Benton MacKaye Scenic Trail will provide serious hikers and leisurely day-trippers a natural wonderland of hills, valleys, trees, wildlife and natural beauty," Cohen said. "I'm proud to be joined by Representative Chuck Fleischmann, whose district is part of the route, and by Representatives Jim Cooper and Scott DesJarlais, in enhancing our nation's portfolio of scenic trails."

Fleischmann said Friday in an email the bill seeks to make the most out of the trail.

"I am very hopeful that the bill will pass out of the Natural Resources Committee and receive a quick vote in the House and Senate," he said.

"The Benton MacKaye Trail connects some of the most beautiful parts of Tennessee with Georgia and North Carolina, and I am honored to work with Congressman Cohen and other bipartisan members from Tennessee and Georgia to get this bill passed and signed into law," he said.

Tennessee's natural beauty is scenic's calling card, Cooper said.

"The Benton MacKaye Trail in East Tennessee is no exception," he said Friday in an email. "It would be great to pass this bill to make sure we honor this beautiful trail."

DesJarlais said Friday in an email the trail connects federal lands, parks and people across its nearly 300 miles.

"It passes through the Chatahoochee, Cherokee and Nantahala national forests, crossing six designated wilderness areas and the Great Smoky



STAFF PHOTO BY MATT HAMILTON

From left, Lucia Case of Athens, Doug Lynch of Knoxville, Karen Kocher of Cleveland and Brenda and Richard Harris of Tellico Plains, take a break to talk as they hike the Benton-MackKaye Trail in Polk County, Tenn. on Friday.

National Scenic Trails

National Scenic Trails are primarily non-motorized continuous trails and most extend for 100 miles or more. The routes traverse beautiful terrain and connect communities, significant landmarks and public lands.

- ▶ **Appalachian Trail:** 2,190 miles in Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, West Virginia, Tennessee and North Carolina.
- ▶ **Arizona Scenic Trail:** 800 miles in Arizona.
- ▶ **Continental Divide National Scenic Trail:** 3,100 miles in Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, Colorado and New Mexico.
- ▶ **Florida National Scenic Trail:** 1,300 miles in Florida.
- ▶ **Ice Age National Scenic Trail:** 1,000 miles in Wisconsin.
- ▶ **Natchez Trace National Scenic Trail:** 65 miles in Mississippi.
- ▶ **New England Trail:** 215 miles in Connecticut and Massachusetts.
- ▶ **North Country National Scenic Trail:** 4,600 miles in Michigan, Minnesota, North Dakota, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin.
- ▶ **Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail:** 2,650 miles in California, Oregon and Washington.
- ▶ **Pacific Northwest National Scenic Trail:** 1,200 miles in Idaho, Montana and Washington.
- ▶ **Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail:** 710 miles in Washington, D.C., Maryland, Pennsylvania and Virginia.

Source: National Park Service

Benton MacKaye Trail Association

The Benton MacKaye Trail Association was founded in 1980. When the trail crossed the border into Tennessee in 1987, the association celebrated the completion of 93 miles of trail. The grand opening for the entire trail was held in 2005, according to association officials. Today, approximately 95% of the nearly-300-mile route is on public lands in Tennessee, Georgia and North Carolina managed by either the U.S. Forest Service or the National Park Service.

Mountains National Park. I am proud to have worked with the members of the Benton MacKaye Trail Association to bring this bill to fruition," DesJarlais said.

"The passage of H.R. 7884 would solidify the splendor, diversity and historical significance

of such a designation. The

trail's emerald-green forests, stunning vistas, rippling streams and rushing waterfalls are just part of the stunning beauty found in the Southern Appalachian Mountains," Cissna said in the release.

"Tens of thousands of hikers use the trail every year. Those numbers

would increase thanks to better recreational opportunities made possible by the National Scenic Trail designation. Those hikers would provide a boon to local economies," he said. "As a National Scenic Trail, the Benton MacKaye Trail Association would be better able to preserve, protect and maintain the trail's natural beauty."

Association members are hopeful, too.

"We are quite optimistic," Richard Harris, the association's maintenance director for Tennessee and North Carolina, said in a May email. "Next steps are introduction in Senate and favorable vote in the House and the Senate, then signature by the president."

TRAIL HISTORY

The trail is named for forester Benton MacKaye, known for his advocacy for the Appalachian Trail, according to association officials. The route today closely resembles MacKaye's proposed southern spur that extended the Appalachian Trail into north-central Georgia.

The Benton MacKaye Trail and Appalachian Trail start on the southern end at the same point on Springer Mountain in Georgia. The two trails overlap at first, intersecting four times in the first 7 miles before going their separate ways at Long Creek Falls, according to officials. Those segments are good choices for day hikes.

From Long Creek Falls, the trail heads north to cross the Toccoa River on the iconic swinging bridge in Fannin County, Georgia, before sweeping west to traverse a number of summits ranging from 2,500 to 3,500 feet in elevation, passing Fall Branch Falls through the Cohutta Wilderness Area and Big Frog Wilderness Area.

The trail crosses into Tennessee at the remote Double Spring Gap in Polk County, Tennessee, followed by dramatic crossings over the Ocoee and Hiwassee rivers. The trail then ascends to the boundary ridge between Tennessee and North Carolina near Sandy Gap, where hikers get 360-degree vistas of the surrounding landscape, according to officials.

The two trails then go their own way for 180 miles before meeting up again near Fontana Dam and entering the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, sticking close to Fontana Lake. From there, the Benton MacKaye Trail climbs to the trail's highest point at the top of Mount Sterling — 5,842 feet — then descends to Big Creek in North Carolina, the trail's remote northern terminus about 5 miles south of Interstate 40.

LONG ROAD TO THE FINISH

The path to a National Scenic Trail can be lengthy, according to the National Park Service.

First, an amendment to the National Trails System Act must be passed requesting a feasibility study; second, the feasibility study must be conducted, the park service states in a description of the steps. Third, if the feasibility study recommends the trail be established, an act must be introduced seeking to add the trail to the National Trails System. Finally, once the trail is established, a comprehensive management and use plan that outlines the roles of the federal government and its partners must be created.

"Altogether this process has taken anywhere from six to 15 years," the park service states. "Because of this dialogue back and forth between Congress and the administrative agency over many years, a trail is most likely to succeed in this process if there is a strong, well-organized, citizen-based organization at work on behalf of the trail."

The introduction of the bill in the House is just the first step, and continuing public support is needed, Cissna said.

"There's still a lot of work to be done before the BMT receives congressional approval as a National Scenic Trail," he said. "The outpouring of public support has been fantastic, but we'll need to build on that to get a final bill passed by Congress and signed by the president."

Contact Ben Benton at bbenton@timesfreepress.com or 423-757-6569. Follow him on Twitter @BenBenton.