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BMT closer to becoming National Scenic Trail

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BENTON MacKAYE TRAIL ASSOCIATION

Owen's Vista is among the many scenic sites on the Georgia portion of the Benton MacKaye Trail.

BMT closer to becoming National Scenic Trail

STAFF REPORTS

The Benton MacKaye Trail Association (BMTA) is one big step closer to its goal of having the near 300-mile hiking path declared a National Scenic Trail.

As the trail's official management and maintenance organization, the BMTA has been seeking congressional approval for the national designation for much of the past year.

Covering 288 miles spanning sections of north Georgia, Tennessee and North Carolina, the BMT begins on Springer Mountain in Gilmer County.

Tennessee Congressio-

TRAIL CONTINUED ON 3A

TRAIL

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nal Representatives Steve Cohen, Jim Cooper, Scott DesJarlais and Chuck Fleischmann recently introduced a House Bill entitled the Benton MacKaye Scenic Trail Act.

If the bill is approved by Congress and signed by President Joe Biden, the BMT will officially become a National Scenic Trail.

"The Benton MacKaye Scenic Trail will provide serious hikers and leisurely day-trippers a natural wonderland of hills, valleys, trees, wildlife and natural beauty," said Rep. Cohen in a statement.

"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."

The National Scenic Trail designation is reserved for trails that epitomize the "stunning, natural beauty of America's wide array of natural landscapes," according to a statement from the BMTA. Only 11 other U.S. trails have received the honor, including the AT, Pacific Crest Trail and Continental Divide Trail.

"We are grateful to (the Tennessee) representatives for co-sponsoring legislation in the House," said BMTA President Ken Cissna, of Ellijay. "The inherent qualities of the BMT make it worthy of such a designation. The trail's emerald green forests, stunning vistas, rippling streams and rushing waterfalls exemplify the spectacular beau-

ty found in the southern Appalachian Mountains."

The trail passes through the Chattahoochee-Oconee, Cherokee and Nantahala National Forests, six wilderness areas and 93 miles in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Ninety-five percent of it is on public lands managed by either the U.S. Forest Service or National Park Service.

Popular attractions for hikers who begin their trail treks in Gilmer County include a 260-foot suspension footbridge over the Toccoa River, the Fall Branch Falls waterfall site near Cherry Log and the Brawley Mountain fire lookout tower in Morganton, according to the BMTA, which has maintained the trail for 40-plus years.

If the bill passes, the trail even better recreational opportunities could be provided to the tens of thousands of day hikers, backpackers and long-distance hikers who travel the trail each year, Cissna noted.

"Those hikers would provide a boon to local economies. As a National Scenic Trail, the BMTA would be better able to preserve, protect, and maintain the trail's natural beauty," he added.

The introduction of the Benton MacKaye Scenic Trail Act is just the first step in the process, Cissna noted.

"There's still a lot of work to be done," 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."