

Benton MacKaye Trail one step closer to being a National Scenic Trail

By Claire Sullivan

Bipartisan legislation (Senate bill S. 4352) was introduced in the Senate by U.S. Sens. Raphael Warnock (Democrat from Georgia) and Thom Tillis (Republican from North Carolina). The bill authorizes a feasibility study of the Benton MacKaye Trail (BMT) with the goal of designating the Benton MacKaye Trail as a National Scenic Trail (NST).

A companion bill, H.R.8403, was introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives by Steve Cohen (Democrat from Tennessee), Chuck Fleischmann (Republican from Tennessee), Chuck Edwards (Republican from North Carolina), Scott DesJarlais (Republican from Tennessee), Lucy McBath (Democrat from Marietta) and Nikema Williams (Democrat from Atlanta).

"We are grateful to Senators Warnock and Tillis and Representatives Cohen, Fleischmann, Edwards, DesJarlais, McBath and Williams for recognizing the BMT's value as a national treasure," said Benton MacKaye Trail Association (BMTA) President Bob Cowdrick. "We thank them for their continued support for our quest to have the BMT designated an NST."

These bills include the requirement for a feasibility study which analyzes a trail's "long-distance trail viability". The federal agency conducting the study evaluates whether the proposed NST has scenic, historic, natural and cultural features that qualify it for NST designation. Equally important, this evaluation also considers the ability of the non-profit trail organization to sustainably manage and maintain the trail as well as the strength of its partnership with the federal agency administering the trail.

"The BMTA Board is

and is worthy of the designation," said Cowdrick. "Given that ... The trail is known for its emerald-green forests, crystal clear streams, cascading waterfalls and exquisite panoramic views. The trail was completed in 2005. The BMTA has constructed/maintained the trail for 40 years and the association has and will continue to work closely with both the National Forest Service and the National Park Service" ... Our credentials for NST designation are impeccable," said Cowdrick.

Nestled in the Southern Appalachians, the 288-mile-long BMT offers day hikers and long-distance hikers a unique opportunity to experience a journey that winds its way through three states (Georgia, Tennessee and North Carolina). The trail passes through three National Forests (the Chattahoochee-Oconee, the Cherokee and the Nantahala National Forests) and crosses six wilderness areas. The route includes 93 miles in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park (GSMNP), making it the longest trail in the GSMNP.

Ninety-five percent of the BMT is on land managed by either the Forest Service or the National Park Service – just 15 miles of the trail remain on public roads/private lands so new

land acquisition will be limited and will be on a willing seller basis.

The BMT already is a key economic pillar in the nearby rural communities. Hikers and their families patronize outfitter stores, restaurants, lodging, grocery stores, pharmacies, laundries and more.

The association's 897 members volunteer in ways other than trail maintenance. They are Hike Leaders for BMTA's hikes that are open to the public. At regional festivals and other events, volunteers staff the BMTA Information Tent to educate the public about hiking, camping and a Wilderness experience in the Southern Appalachian Mountains – and – to instill a sound conservation ethic. There's a job for everyone!

Best of all, a portion of the BMT is in your backyard. Landmarks in or around the trail in Polk County include treks along Lost Creek and the Hiwassee River as well as hikes to Big Frog Mountain and Buck Bald. The Ocoee River/Thunder Rock Campground is an especially scenic area. Make plans for a day hike or backpacking excursion soon!

If you would like more information about the BMT or BMTA, contact Joy Forehand, jforehand@bmta.org.