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CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Whigg Meadow on the Benton MacKaye Trail is pictured in 2016.

'SO MUCH TO OFFER'

Bipartisan bills seek study of National Scenic Trail designation for Benton MacKaye Trail

BY BEN BENTON
STAFF WRITER

A pair of bipartisan bills seeking to designate the almost-300-mile-long Benton MacKaye Trail in the Southern Appalachian Mountains of Tennessee, Georgia and North Carolina a National Scenic Trail have been introduced for the first time in both the U.S. House and Senate.

Members of the association by the same name are celebrating the effort to get a green light for a feasibility study en route to the designation that finally is getting bipartisan attention from lawmakers in both houses of Congress. Bills introduced twice in recent years in the U.S. House sought the National Scenic Trail designation, but no Senate members picked it up, according to Clare Sullivan, vice president of the Benton MacKaye Trail Association.

"We were delighted to get a companion bill in the Senate," Sullivan, also a member of the National Scenic Trail Committee, said in a phone interview.

The U.S. Senate version

introduced by Sen. Raphael Warnock, D-Ga., and Sen. Thom Tillis, R-N.C., authorizes a feasibility study of the National Scenic Trail designation, according to a statement from the trail association. A companion bill was introduced in the U.S. House by Reps. Steve Cohen, D-Memphis, Chuck Fleischmann, R-Southeast Tennessee, Scott DesJarlais, R-Sherwood, Chuck Edwards, R-N.C., Lucy McBath, D-Ga., and Nikema Williams, D-Ga.

FEASIBILITY STUDY

The bills include the requirement for a feasibility study that analyzes a trail's long-distance trail viability, according to association officials. The federal agency conducting the study evaluates whether the proposed National Scenic Trail has scenic, historic, natural and cultural features that qualify it for the designation. The study also considers the ability of the nonprofit trail organization to sustainably manage and maintain the trail.

Trail association president Bob Cowdrick said he is confident the study will meet or exceed

requirements for the designation of the trail completed in 2005 and known for its emerald-green forests, crystal clear streams, cascading waterfalls and panoramic views. He said the fact the association has been building and maintaining the trail for the past 40 years lends to that certainty.

"Our credentials for National Scenic Trail designation are impeccable," Cowdrick said.

If designated, the trail would become the 12th National Scenic Trail in the U.S., which in the South includes the Appalachian Trail, Florida National Scenic Trail and Natchez Trace National Scenic Trail.

The 288-mile Benton MacKaye Trail traces an 82-mile path in Georgia and 206 miles more along the Tennessee-North Carolina border, including lands in the Cherokee National Forest in Tennessee, Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest in Georgia and Nantahala National Forest in North Carolina, according to the association. Almost 100 miles of the trail is contained

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within the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, which straddles the state line between Tennessee and North Carolina.

BENTON MACKAYE

Benton MacKaye was a visionary forester known for his advocacy for the Appalachian Trail, according to the association. Today's route closely resembles MacKaye's proposed southern spur that extended the Appalachian Trail into north-central Georgia. Currently, the Benton MacKaye Trail and Appalachian Trail start at the same point on Springer Mountain in Georgia, and 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 association officials.

From Long Creek Falls, the trail heads north to cross the Toccoa River on the iconic swinging bridge in Fannin County, Georgia, before turning west to traverse numerous 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, according to association officials. The trail then ascends to the boundary ridge between Tennessee and North Carolina near Sandy Gap, where hikers get 360-degree views of the Southern Appalachians.

After tracing solo paths for 180 miles, the trail meets up with its sibling Appalachian Trail near Fontana

National Scenic Trails

National Scenic Trails are primarily nonmotorized 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 through 14 states from Georgia to Maine
- › **Arizona Scenic Trail:** 800 miles in Arizona
- › **Continental Divide National Scenic Trail:** 3,100 miles through five states from New Mexico to Montana
- › **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 through eight states from New York to North Dakota
- › **Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail:** 2,650 miles in California, Oregon, Washington
- › **Pacific Northwest National Scenic Trail:** 1,200 miles in Idaho, Montana, Washington
- › **Potomac Heritage National Scenic Trail:** 710 miles in Washington, D.C., Maryland, Pennsylvania, Virginia

Source: National Park Service

Dam, then enters the Great Smoky Mountain National Park, sticking close to Fontana Lake. From there, it climbs to the top of Mount Sterling — the trail's highest point at 5,842 feet — and descends to Big Creek in North Carolina, the trail's remote northern terminus about 5 miles south of Interstate 40.

WHAT IT MEANS

The designation could create a far-reaching economic influence for the communities it touches, association officials said, and 95% of the trail is on land managed by either the U.S. Forest Service or the National Park Service.

About 15 miles of the trail remain on public roads/private lands, so new land acquisition will be limited.

Association member and past president Rick Harris said the trail is becoming more heavily used by hikers as it becomes more widely known.

"There are a lot of through-hikers who want to hike every single National Scenic Trail," Harris said in a phone interview, referring to hikers who complete long trails in one go. "And I think we're going to see more traffic on the trail."

More foot traffic will improve hiking conditions,

and a scenic trail designation would increase the number of feet to keep trails clear.

More traffic also means side benefits for communities along the trail — more people going to restaurants, buying gasoline, staying in motels, Harris said.

"We have certainly seen a lot more traffic since COVID," said Harris, also an avid hiker. "There's been an uptick in through-hikers. The Benton MacKaye Trail has really been highlighted as one of their favorite trails, and it'll increase once we get the National Scenic Trail designation. The trail has so much to offer — high altitude, river and waterfalls, greenery and solitude and all the natural beauty."

"I'd rather be hiking the Benton MacKaye Trail than the Appalachian Trail," he said.

Sullivan, one of three members of the National Scenic Trail Committee representing the three states involved, said there are four primary steps toward the designation:

› An amendment to the National Trail System Act requests consideration of associated legislation.

› A feasibility study evaluates the route, the environmental impact, its cultural significance and determines if there is a strong, well-organized citizen-based organization working on behalf of the trail. The feasibility study results in a recommendation supporting or not supporting the designation.

› An act in Congress adds a new National Scenic Trail.

› The official designation kicks off a comprehensive management and use plan.

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