

BMT one step closer to National Scenic Trail

By MICHAEL ANDREWS
MOUNTAIN LIFE EDITOR

The effort to obtain a national title for a hiking trail that includes sections in Gilmer and Fannin County moved closer to that goal last week.

U.S. Senators Raphael Warnock, D-Georgia, and Thom Tillis, R-North Carolina, introduced legislation to launch a feasibility study on naming the Benton MacKaye Trail a National Scenic Trail. A companion bill was also introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives by co-sponsors including Reps. Lucy McBath, D-Marietta, and Nikema Williams, D-Atlanta.

"More than simply initiating a new federal walking path through our natural environment, this bill is an investment in our nation's forests and green spaces, a bridge connecting communities and a powerful catalyst for our rural economies," Warnock said. "By preserving the natural beauty of our landscapes, we help protect the planet for future generations to enjoy."

If the proposed feasibility study is favorable to the National Scenic Trail request, that will allow Congress to add the BMT to the National Trails System.

"It's a study to determine the path and the route and if it is feasible to be a National Scenic Trail," said Bob Cowdrick, president of the Benton MacKaye Trail Association (BMTA), the nonprofit volunteer group that maintains the trail. "The senators and representatives couldn't agree on whether it should be a National Scenic Trail, so they're going to have the USDA and National Forest Service scope out the trail. (They will be looking at things like) does it go through wilderness areas, is it accessible by others and is it a benefit to the community."

The study could also open the scenic trail proposal up for public comment, Cowdrick noted.

"That's a good thing be-

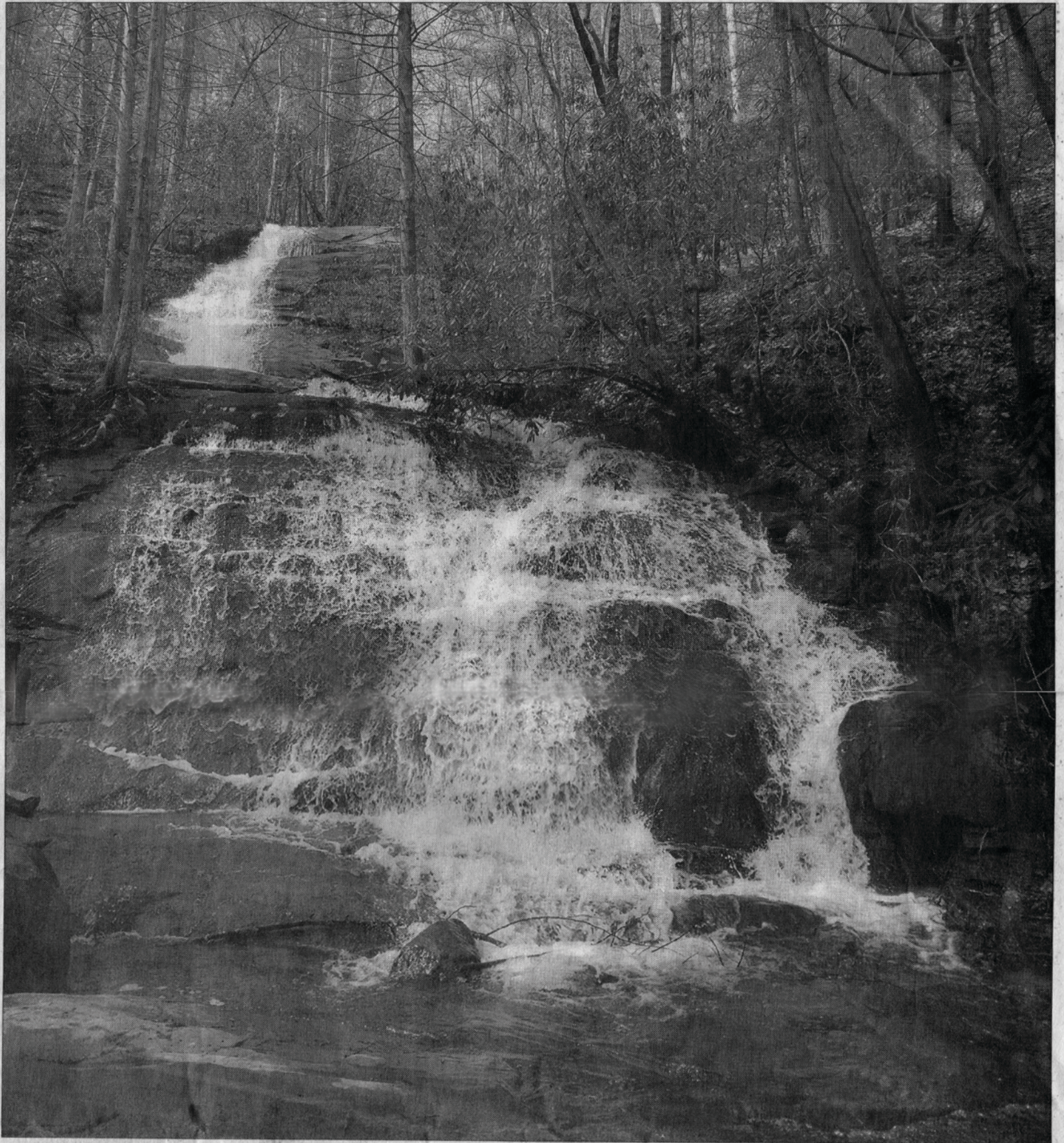


PHOTO BY JOY FOREHAND

Fall Branch Falls is among the many scenic wonders on the almost 82-mile section of the Benton MacKaye Trail that winds through north Georgia.

cause you or I can have input into it," he added.

The effort to nationally recognize the trail, which is named after forester, nature conservationist and Appalachian Trail (AT) founder MacKaye, has been going on for almost three years. In 2023, the bipartisan Benton MacK-

aye Scenic Trail Act was introduced in the U.S. House with Republican and Democrat senators from Georgia, Tennessee and North Carolina co-sponsoring the bill.

"We thought maybe a House or Senate bill would go through this session. That didn't happen, but the

feasibility study is a good thing," Cowdrick said.

The 288-mile long trail winds through Georgia, Tennessee and North Carolina with almost 82 miles in upper north Georgia. First opened in 1980 and completed in 2005, it crosses six national wilderness areas, and 95 percent of the trail

is on public lands managed by either the U.S. Forest or National Park Service. Popular scenic sites along the Georgia trail section include Fall Branch Falls and the swinging bridge across the Toccoa River.

"Some people find the AT too busy for them, so they look to the BMT for an al-

ternative trail. It covers some of the same territory, but with less hikers," Cowdrick said.

The National Scenic Trail designation recognizes trails that "epitomize the stunning, natural beauty of America's wide array of

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natural landscapes, while also offering outstanding recreational opportunities," according to the BMTA. Only 11 U.S. trails have received the title, including the AT, Pacific Crest Trail and Continental Divide Trail.

"For Ellijay and other communities that touch the trail, it will make the BMT more visible to the public. (They may) have heard about the AT and the Pacific Crest Trail, but not as much about the BMT. There will be more visitors and economic benefit to these communities," Cowdrick said.