

National trail status sought for Benton Mackaye

SPECIAL TO
news@thenewsobserver.com

Representatives 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 Georgia) and David Scott (Democrat from Georgia) are co-sponsors of a bipartisan House Bill which, if approved by Congress and signed by the President, will designate the Benton (BMT) MacKaye Trail as a National Scenic Trail.

Congressman Cohen announced the introduction of the bipartisan Benton MacKaye Scenic Trail Act in his May 25, 2023, press release.

The prestigious designation is reserved for trails that epitomize the stunning, natural beauty of America's wide array of natural landscapes. The trails also offer outstanding recreational opportunities. Only 11 trails have received this honor, including the Appalachian Trail, Pacific Crest Trail and the Continental Divide Trail.

"We are grateful to Representatives Steve Cohen, Chuck Fleischmann, Chuck

Edwards, Scott DesJarlais, Lucy McBath and David Scott for co-sponsoring the legislation in the House proposing the BMT be designated a National Scenic Trail!" said Ken Cissna, President of the Benton MacKaye Trail Association (BMTA). "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 beauty found in the Southern Appalachian Mountains. If the bill passes, the BMT will be able to offer even better recreational opportunities to the tens of thousands of day hikers, backpackers and long-distance hikers who take advantage of the BMT every year."

"We've been working on this for about two years. A bill was introduced in the House last year. The bill achieved substantial bipartisan support in Congress but was not passed," Cissna continued. "This year's a whole new ballgame. The outpouring of public support has been fantastic and we're making steady progress – the House Bill is just the first step."

Known for its beauty and peaceful seclusion, the 288-mile BMT crosses three

states (Georgia, Tennessee and North Carolina); passes through three National Forests (the Chattahoochee-Oconee, the Cherokee and the Nantahala); and traverses six Wilderness Areas as well as 93 miles in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

Since its inception in 1980, the BMTA first constructed and now has maintained the trail for 43 years. The route was completed in 2005. Today, just 15 miles remain on private land or as short road walks – 95% of the route is on public lands managed by either the US Forest Service or the National Park Service.

In fiscal 2022, BMTA's all-volunteer work force put in almost 8,000 hours maintaining the trail.

The association's 872 members volunteer in ways other than trail maintenance as well. 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!

Hikers in the Fannin County area love the treks

to the iconic Suspension Bridge over the Toccoa River and Fall Branch Falls. Backpackers especially enjoy the peaceful solitude of the BMT in the Cohutta.

More details are available by emailing Joy Forehand, BMTA Communications Director, at jwfbga@gmail.com.