

Outdoor Life



Photo submitted

Ken Cissna (right) speaks at a House Federal Lands Subcommittee meeting. HR8403, introduced in May 2024, calls for a feasibility study to be completed in one year with the goal of designating the Benton MacKaye Trail a National Scenic Trail.

House committee hears BMT Scenic Trail request

The Benton MacKaye Trail Association is another step closer towards achieving their goal of having the Benton MacKaye Trail designated a National Scenic Trail.

On July 24, a hearing was held before the House Subcommittee on Federal Lands for H.R. 8403 – a bipartisan bill in the House of Representatives calling for a feasibility study of the Benton MacKaye Trail (BMT) with the goal of designating it as a National Scenic Trail.

Testifying before the committee on behalf of the Benton MacKaye Trail Association (BMTA) was former BMTA President Ken Cissna. The hearing was an important step in the legislative process towards the eventual passage of H.R. 8403.

The bill was introduced May 15, 2024, 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).

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. Ninety-three miles of the trail are in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Ninety-five percent of the trail is on protected federal land—either national forest or national park.

The BMT already is a key economic pillar in the nearby rural communities. Day hikers and backpackers contribute to local economies where they purchase food, outdoor

supplies, lodging, etc. The NST designation would boost the trail's popularity. Even more outdoor enthusiasts will view the BMT as a "must do trek," resulting in a substantial increase in economic activity.

Moreover, the designation would enhance BMTA's efforts to make sure this pristine wilderness trail that meanders through the Southern Appalachian Mountains is available for future generations to enjoy – a goal expressed in BMTA's motto: "...leaving a footpath for generations to follow."

H.R. 8403 includes a one-year deadline for completing the feasibility study, a timeline Cissna believes to be both realistic and reasonable. The trail qualifies for the designation as it is widely recognized for its historical roots and diverse natural beauty (panoramic vistas, cascading waterfalls and crystal-clear streams).

The trail was fully completed 20 years ago, and a strong volunteer nonprofit organization has managed and maintained the trail for almost 45 years. The all-volunteer work force turns in 8,000 maintenance hours annually.

Given these qualifications, Cissna believes the BMT meets or exceeds the requirements for a trail to be designated a NST. He is confident the feasibility study will agree.

Cissna concluded his testimony by stating, "... the BMT is a vital natural and economic resource that warrants national recognition and protection. Its historical significance, economic impact, and the numerous benefits it provides to communities and individuals make a compelling case for its designation as a National Scenic Trail. I urge the committee to support this designation, ensuring the long-term protection of the BMT as a cherished part of our national heritage."