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House committee advances Benton MacKaye Trail study Bill is step toward National Scenic designation

15 hours, 57 minutes ago by [Ben Benton](#)



Staff File Photo by Matt Hamilton / Richard Harris and Brenda Harris, of Tellico Plains, Tenn., walk to an exit point of the Benton-MacKaye Trail in Polk County, Tenn. A congressional bill seeking a feasibility study to designate the Benton MacKaye Trail in the Southern Appalachian Mountains the nation's 12th National Scenic Trail was passed March 4, 2026, out of the House Committee on Natural Resources.

A bipartisan congressional bill seeking a feasibility study to designate the 288-mile Benton MacKaye Trail in the Southern Appalachians a national scenic trail has passed the House Committee on Natural Resources.

Its passage is a long stride in the effort to get the national scenic trail designation for the trail since the legislation was first introduced in 2021 by U.S. Rep. Chuck Fleischmann, R-Ooltewah.

Benton MacKaye Trail Association President Bob Cowdrick praised the bill's sponsors, Fleischmann and U.S. House Reps. Steve Cohen, D-Memphis, Lucy McBath, D-Atlanta, and Chuck Edwards, R-N.C.

"We are grateful for the leadership from Reps. Fleischmann, Cohen, Edwards and McBath for advancing legislation to protect the Benton MacKaye Trail and set it on the path to becoming our country's 12th national scenic trail," Cowdrick said in an emailed statement. "The Senate will now need to approve the amended version of the bill."

The bill was amended Wednesday to require the feasibility study to be completed within two years after the act is signed into law. The association is listed in the bill as one of the study's consultants.

Such studies, performed in consultation with other federal agencies and stakeholders, evaluate whether it is possible to develop a trail along a route being studied and whether the development of a trail would be financially feasible. The Benton MacKaye Trail was built between 1980 and 2005, when it opened to hikers.

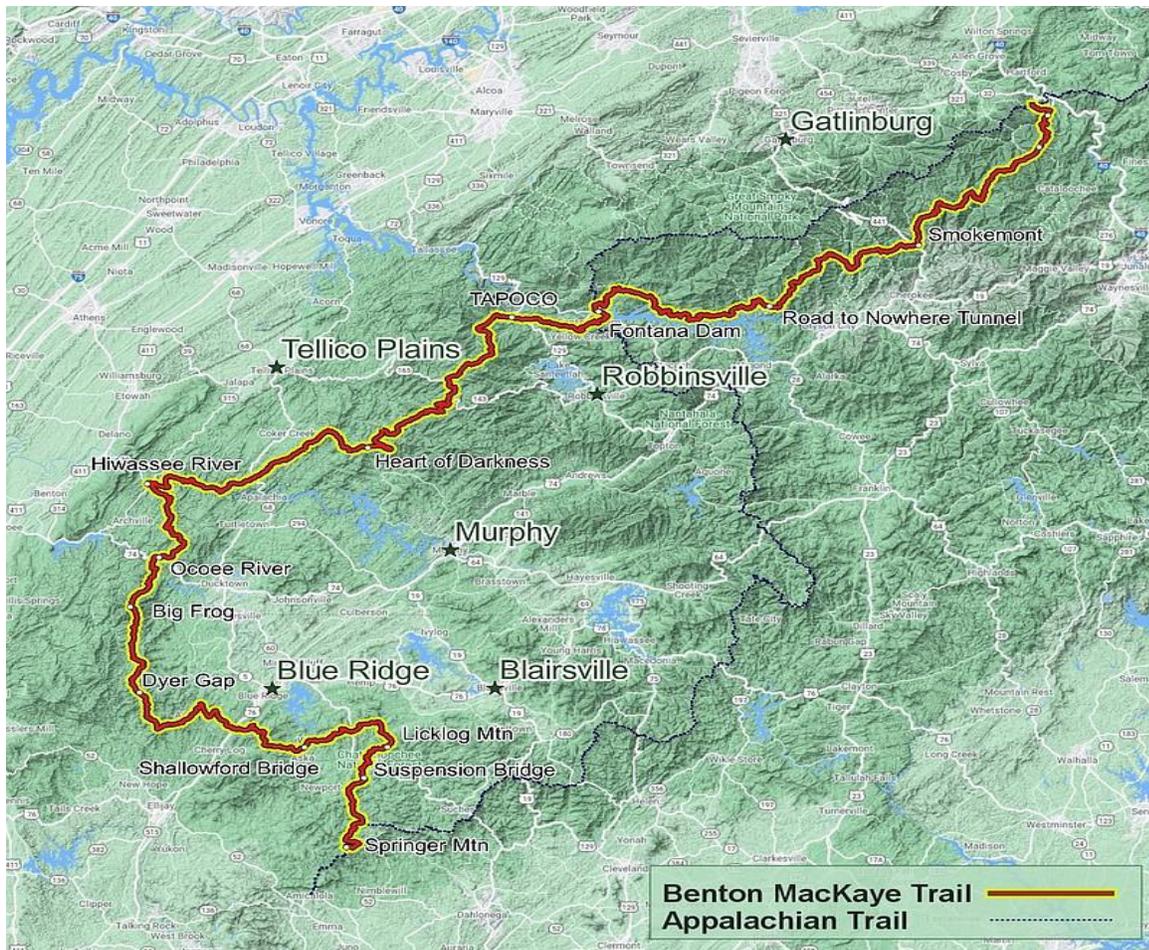
[\(READ MORE: Bipartisan Benton MacKaye Trail feasibility study act advances to full Senate\)](#)

The unamended Senate version of the bill, sponsored by Sen. Raphael Warnock, D-Georgia, and North Carolina Republican Sens. Thom Tillis and Ted Budd in April 2025, was passed out of the Senate Agriculture Committee in October. Tillis is a former Chattanooga resident.

Last year was the first year bills seeking the scenic trail designation made it to the Senate. The earliest bills sought the designation directly, but the 2024-26 versions seek a feasibility study first. Once the amendment is passed, the bill will go before the full Senate.

If successful, the effort would make the trail the 12th national scenic trail in the U.S. Those trails includes the Appalachian Trail, Florida National Scenic Trail and Natchez Trace National Scenic Trail in the South. Cowdrick said the Benton MacKaye Trail is already popular with hikers.

"A national scenic trail designation will ensure this trail is protected for future generations and remains a premier recreation destination for hikers while expanding its positive economic impact on nearby communities," Cowdrick said. "This is a major step forward for the association and everyone who cherishes the beauty, solitude and challenge the trail offers. The study will evaluate the trail's scenic, natural and recreational value, which more than 60,000 hikers already enjoy every year."



Contributed map / This overview map shows the paths of the Benton MacKaye Trail and the Appalachian Trail through the Appalachian Mountains of Tennessee, Georgia and North Carolina. A congressional bill seeking a feasibility study to designate the Benton MacKaye Trail in the Southern Appalachian Mountains the nation's 12th National Scenic Trail was passed March 4, 2026, out of the House Committee on Natural Resources.

TRAIL HISTORY

Benton MacKaye (1879-1975) was a forester, conservationist, regional planner and the trail's namesake, known for his advocacy for the Appalachian Trail and conservation of the natural world's wildest places, according to association historical accounts.

Today's trail route closely resembles MacKaye's proposed southern spur to extend the Appalachian Trail into North-Central Georgia.

Dave Sherman, a founding member of the association, was intrigued by MacKaye's proposed spurs extending from the Appalachian Trail and first conceived the idea of building a trail in 1975, association accounts said. Eventually, Sherman proposed a new trail following the high ridge running south along the Tennessee-North Carolina border between the Smoky Mountains and the Cohutta Mountains in Northwest Georgia.

The Benton MacKaye Trail and the Appalachian Trail begin at the same point on the southern end of Springer Mountain in Georgia. At first, the two trails overlap, intersecting four times in the first 7 miles before taking separate paths at Long Creek Falls, according to trail descriptions. Those segments are good choices for day hikes.

From Long Creek Falls, the trail heads north to cross the Toccoa River on the iconic swinging bridge in Fannin County, Georgia, before sweeping west to traverse several summits ranging from 2,500 to 3,500 feet in elevation in 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 crossings over the Ocoee and Hiwassee rivers. The trail then ascends to the boundary ridge between Tennessee and North Carolina near Sandy Gap, where hikers get a 360-degree view of the surrounding landscape.

After tracing separate routes for 180 miles, the Benton MacKaye and Appalachian trails meet again near Fontana Dam, then enter the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. In the Smokies, the Benton MacKaye sticks close to Fontana Lake, then climbs to its highest point at the top of Mount Sterling — 5,842 feet — followed by a descent to Big Creek in North Carolina, the trail's remote northern terminus about 5 miles south of Interstate 40.

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. Currently, there are 11 National Scenic Trails,

- **Appalachian Trail:** 2,190 miles in Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia, West Virginia, Tennessee, North Carolina, Georgia
- **Arizona Scenic Trail:** 800 miles in Arizona
- **Continental Divide National Scenic Trail:** 3,100 miles in Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, Colorado, New Mexico
- **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 in Michigan, Minnesota, North Dakota, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin

- **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

PATH AHEAD

The path to a national scenic trail can be a long one, according to the National Park Service.

First, an amendment to the National Trails System Act must be passed, requesting a feasibility study. Second, the feasibility study must be conducted. Third, if the feasibility study recommends the trail be established, an act must be introduced seeking to add the trail to the National Trails System.

Finally, once the trail is established, a comprehensive management and use plan that outlines the roles of the federal government and its partners must be created.

The process can take from six to 15 years, the park service said, and because of the amount of discussion involved, it often requires "a strong, well-organized, citizen-based organization at work on behalf of the trail," meaning the association easily fits the bill. When the feasibility bill was passed in the Senate committee, Cowdrick noted the trail already checks most boxes.

