

Good news for Benton MacKaye Trail

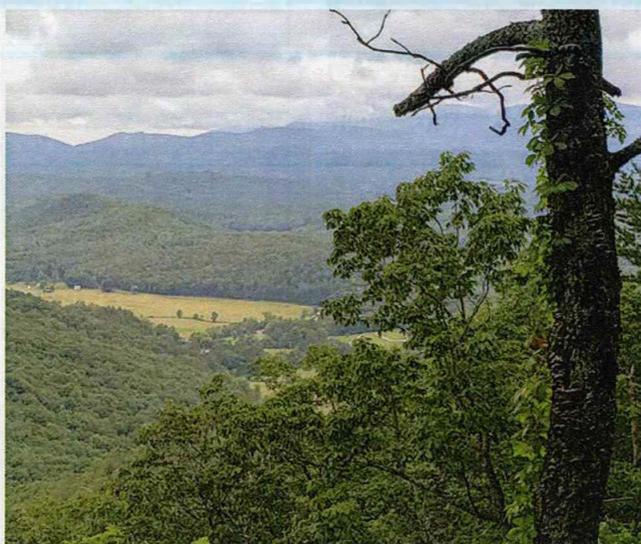
On March 5, 2026, the Benton MacKaye Trail Association celebrated the successful passage by unanimous consent of the H.R. 2768 Benton MacKaye National Scenic Trail Feasibility Study Act of 2025, as amended, out of the House Committee on Natural Resources. The amendment requires the feasibility study to be completed within two years. (The Senate version required a one-year study.)

This is another step forward towards permanent protection for the 288-mile Benton MacKaye Trail. The bill, sponsored by Representatives Chuck Fleischmann (TN), Steve Cohen (TN), Chuck Edwards (NC), and Lucy McBath (GA) passed the committee by unanimous consent. The Senate now will need to approve the amended version of the bill.

“We are grateful for the leadership from Representatives 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. The Senate will need to approve the amended version of the bill,” said Bob Cowdrick, President of the Benton MacKaye Trail Association.

A National Scenic Trail (NST) 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.

Ninety-five percent of the 288-mile-long Benton MacKaye Trail (BMT),



Benton MacKaye Trail offers spectacular views

which traverses three states, already is on public land. One hundred seventy-three of those miles pass through six Wilderness Areas as well as the Great Smoky Mountains National Park which is maintained as Wilderness. Those 173 miles already enjoy the enhanced protection provided by the 1968 Wilderness Act for Wilderness Areas. If the BMT is designated as a NST, the rest of the trail will have the much-needed extra protection.

Managed either by the Forest Service (USFS) or by the National Park Service (NPS), the trail’s working relationship with the USFS and NPS will be made even stronger by an NST designation for the trail. A detailed study of issues on the trail and potential future remedies and opportunities will be proposed.

The trail’s corridor will be monitored for views-protected protection. As an NST, BMTA will be eligible to receive funds from the Land and Water Conservation Fund. The BMTA

could utilize these resources to acquire land from willing sellers to increase protection along the trail’s corridor.

The NST designation will provide enhanced environmental and wildlife-related protections as well as habitat management. The natural character of the trail will be preserved.

The impact of visitors to the trail would be monitored. Events would be regulated so both participants and nonparticipants traverse the trail safely with minimal impact to the trail while they enjoy the journey.

The already popular BMT draws more than 60,000 hikers annually. An NST designation will increase that number significantly. Those hikers will visit nearby communities, like those in Polk County, to purchase even more goods and services.

Studies show trails can increase the value of nearby residential and commercial properties, leading to higher local tax revenues. Trails make it more attractive for new residents, remote workers, and small businesses focused on outdoor recreation.

The influx of hikers, their friends and families will increase the demand for outfitters, guides, shuttle services, hostels, campgrounds and hospitality services will lead to new patrons and jobs – a boon for existing local businesses.

To learn more about BMTA’s quest for National Scenic Trail designation for the BMT, go to bmta.org/quest-nst.