

# House passes feasibility study to add Benton MacKaye to scenic trail system

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June 14, 2026 by [Ben Benton](#)



Contributed photo / The Benton MacKaye Trail offers this view from Big Frog Mountain in Polk County, Tenn., near the Georgia state line. A congressional bill now in the Senate seeks a feasibility study of the trail for possible designation as a National Scenic Trail.

A North Georgia-based nonprofit conservation group is celebrating the successful passage of the Benton MacKaye National Scenic Trail Feasibility Study Act of 2025 by the full U.S. House.

The Senate will now need to approve the amended version of the bill, according to Joy Forehand, spokesperson for the Cherry Log, Georgia-based Benton MacKaye Trail Association. The amended version of the bipartisan bill requires the study of the trail in Polk County, Tennessee, to be completed within two years.

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The passage is a significant step toward the permanent protection of the 288-mile Benton MacKaye Trail, Forehand said via email. The House bill is sponsored by U.S. Reps. Chuck Fleischmann, R-Ooltewah; Steve Cohen, D-Tenn.; Chuck Edwards, R-N.C.; and Lucy McBath, D-Ga. The amended bill was [passed by the House Committee on Natural Resources in March](#).

Cohen, a sponsor of the bill since 2022, praised the trail for its connectivity and beauty in a June 2 speech on the House floor when it was passed.

"The Benton MacKaye is a beautiful trail," Cohen told fellow House members. "It is the longest trail in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, and it overlaps the Appalachian Trail at six separate points and passes through three national forests. North Carolina, Georgia and Tennessee all have pieces of the trail, and a lot of residents from Chattanooga, Knoxville, Asheville and Atlanta visit for camping and adventures."

Fleischmann said the bill is a forward stride on the trail's path to the designation.

"The BMT is long overdue for recognition," a statement attributed to Fleischmann in a press release said, "and this critical distinction will bring better resources and maintenance to a wonderful and heavily used alternative to the Appalachian."

Association President Bob Cowdrick thanked lawmakers for advancing the bill and called for quick action.

"We're excited about the progress that we made with the House of Representatives passing the feasibility study bill," Cowdrick said Thursday by phone. "Now it's up to the Senate to support our efforts, and all the efforts of the trail communities that we pass through, the individuals that hike the trail, adventure on the trail and enjoy the public lands."

Cowdrick urged lawmakers to keep up the momentum for current users and future generations.

"Those are the real beneficiaries of this bill, as it passes through the House Representative and back to the Senate for approval," Cowdrick said. "Then it's on to the White House for a presidential signature."

Cowdrick thanked supporting legislators for advancing the bill and urged senators to move quickly.

Sens. Tom Tillis, R-N.C.; Rafael Warnock, D-Ga.; and Ted Budd, R-N.C. are the Senate sponsors of the original 2025 bill, congressional records show. The original version of the bill reached the Senate Agriculture Committee in 2025. Tillis is a former Chattanooga resident.

The study, to be performed by the U.S. Forest Service if passed, would cost less than \$500,000 over the 2026-31 period, according to an estimate by the Congressional Budget Office. The estimates for the original and amended versions of the bill are the same.

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More than 170 miles of the trail are already protected by the 1968 Wilderness Act for Wilderness Areas, according to the association. Over 100,000 visitors hike the trail annually, and association officials have said a National Scenic Trail designation will mean the already positive economic impact on nearby communities will increase substantially.

The most recent time a National Scenic Trail designation was approved by Congress was 2009, when the Arizona National Scenic Trail and the Pacific Northwest National Scenic Trail were added to the list.

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