

Oral Testimony (5:00)
Federal Lands Subcommittee of the House Natural Resources Committee
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Good morning, Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and other members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you regarding protecting the Benton MacKaye Trail by passing the **Benton MacKaye National Scenic Trail Feasibility Study Act**, which authorizes a feasibility study into designating the Benton MacKaye Trail as a National Scenic Trail. I would also like to thank Congressmen Cohen and Fleischmann for their leadership on this bill as well as our partner, the United States Forest Service, for their help and support over the years.

My name is Ken Cissna. I live in Morganton, Georgia among the southern Appalachian Mountains. I am the Immediate Past President and a member of the Board of Directors of the Benton MacKaye Trail Association.

Work began on the trail in 1980, and it was completed in 2005. It runs for 288 miles from Springer Mountain in Georgia through Tennessee and North Carolina, enters the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, and ends in the northeast corner of the park. 95% of the trail is on protected federal land—either national forest or national park.

The development and maintenance of the trail depends on volunteers. The BMTA is an all-volunteer organization, and more than 200 of us work on the trail each year, generating about 8,000 hours of volunteer maintenance annually.

The National Trails System Act defines National Scenic Trails as having outstanding scenic values and high-quality recreation experience. The Benton MacKaye Trail has, for many years, met those high standards. The trail traverses some of the nation's most unique natural lands and biodiverse habitats as it runs through three national forests (Chattahoochee in Georgia, Cherokee in Tennessee, and Nantahala in North Carolina), six federally designated Wilderness areas, and more than 90 miles in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

A NST designation would have important benefits for the trail and for local communities. It would enhance the trail's value as a first-class recreational destination and bring with it important economic benefits to its rural communities. This designation will also improve the people's quality of life by increasing outdoor recreation opportunities for families and individuals, young and old. Designation would have the added benefit of helping to pass on our outdoor heritage to future generations.

Currently, the trail has no official federal designation. Although the BMTA has been successful in building and maintaining the trail with our Forest Service partners, becoming a National Scenic Trail would provide significant protections. Without this, we face risks of potentially losing these lands for future generations.

Our efforts to designate the trail as the twelfth National Scenic Trail has strong local support from all states and counties the trail goes through, including Chambers of Commerce and Visitors' Bureaus; local businesses and political leaders; and numerous trail, hiking, and outdoor organizations. We know of no opposition to protecting this trail as a National Scenic Trail.

We are seeking a feasibility study with a one-year deadline. Although this might appear to be an ambitious timeline, the trail was fully completed 20 years ago, has a strong volunteer non-profit organization that manages and maintains it and has for over 40 years; and is very popular with hikers. The trail is extremely deserving of designation as a National Scenic Trail, and we are confident that the feasibility study will agree. It is reasonable for Congress to expect the study to be completed within a year after this legislation is approved.

In conclusion, the Benton MacKaye Trail 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 Benton MacKaye Trail as a cherished part of our national heritage.

Thank you for your time and consideration.