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U.S. HOUSE FEDERAL LANDS SUBCOMMITTEE

Ken Cissna, center, former president of the Benton MacKaye Trail Association, speaks to the U.S. House Federal Lands Subcommittee on July 24 regarding a feasibility study on granting the designation of a National Scenic Trail for the Benton MacKaye Trail.

Trail

CONTINUED FROM B1

since 2021 directly sought the National Scenic Trail designation, but the association and its supporters decided to shift to a feasibility study to generate evidence in support of the designation and to potentially gain the attention of a sponsor in the Senate, association Vice President Claire Sullivan said when the feasibility study bill was introduced in May. Previous House bills didn't pick up a Senate sponsor, but this year's bill did.

The Senate version introduced by Sen. Raphael Warnock, D-Ga., and Sen. Thom Tillis, R-N.C., authorizes a feasibility study and has been referred to the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry. The House version of the bill was introduced by Reps. Steve Cohen, D-Memphis, Chuck Fleischmann, R-Southeast Tennessee, Scott DesJarlais, R-Sherwood, Chuck Edwards, R-N.C., Lucy McBath, D-Ga., and Nikema Williams, D-Ga. The House Federal Lands Subcommittee has not taken action since the July 24 hearing, and there has been no action on the Senate version of the bill since May.

Congress could "reasonably expect" the study to be completed within the year-long window following the act's approval, Cissna told committee members. Much of the work necessary to bring the path up to federal standards has been completed for years, making it ripe for inclusion in the federal system.

"The Benton MacKaye

Trail is a vital natural and economic resource that warrants national recognition and protection," he told the committee. "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."

The 288-mile Benton MacKaye Trail traces an 82-mile path in Georgia and 206 miles more along the Tennessee-North Carolina border, including lands in the Cherokee National Forest in Tennessee, Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest in Georgia and Nantahala National Forest in North Carolina, according to the association. Almost 100 miles of the trail is contained within the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, which straddles the state line between Tennessee and North Carolina.

"The Benton MacKaye Trail Association is another step closer toward achieving their goal of having the Benton MacKaye Trail designated a National Scenic Trail," Joy Forehand, spokesperson for the association, said in a statement on the hearing. "Even more outdoor enthusiasts will view the Benton MacKaye Trail as a 'must-do trek,' resulting in a substantial increase in economic activity."

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Group seeks federal status for trail

BY BEN BENTON
STAFF WRITER

Members of a regional trail conservation association compared an appearance before a U.S. House subcommittee to a long hiker's stride toward the rarefied federal designation of the Benton MacKaye Trail in the Appalachian Mountains as a National Scenic Trail.

Ken Cissna, the immediate past president and a board member of the Cherrylog, Georgia-based Benton MacKaye Trail Association, addressed the House Federal Lands Subcommittee on July 24 about a House act seeking a study on adding the namesake trail to the list of National Scenic Trails currently totaling 11.

While extolling the trail's scenic, historic and recreational virtues, Cissna urged committee members to support a feasibility study en route to adopting the trail into the National Scenic Trail system, according to association officials and Cissna's speech to the House subcommittee.

"We are seeking a feasibility study with a one-year deadline," Cissna told members of the subcommittee. "Although this might appear to be an ambitious timeline, the trail was fully completed 20 years ago, has a strong volunteer nonprofit 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."

Previous bills filed in the House

See TRAIL B3