Quest for trail designation goes forward

By Joy Forehand
Contributing Writer

Cherry Log, Ga. – The Benton MacKaye Trail Association celebrated on March 5 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 toward permanent protection for the 288-mile Benton MacKaye Trail. The bill, sponsored by U.S. Reps. Chuck Fleischmann (Tenn.), Steve Cohen (Tenn.), Chuck Edwards (N.C.) and Lucy McBath (Ga.), passed the committee by unanimous consent. The Senate will need to approve the amended version.

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.

Joy Forehand/Contributing Photographer
This photo shows the view from Lookout Rock in North Carolina, which is near Fontana Village/Fontana Dam in Graham County. Lookout Rock Trail connects to and shares a segment with the Benton MacKaye Trail.

Ninety-five percent of the 288-mile-long Benton MacKaye Trail, 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 Benton MacKaye Trail is designated as a National Scenic Trail, the rest of the trail will have the much-needed extra protection.

Managed either by the Forest Service or by the National Park Service, the trail's working relationship with the USFS and National Park Service will be made even stronger by an National Scenic Trail 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 viewshed protection. As an National Scenic Trail, Benton MacKaye Trail Association will be eligible to receive funds from the Land and Water Conservation Fund. The Benton MacKaye Trail Association could utilize these resources to acquire land from willing sellers to increase protection along the trail's corridor.

Details: Visit bmta.org/quest-nst.

Joy Forehand is communications director of the Benton MacKaye Trail Association.