



**Statement of Kenneth N. Cissna
Benton MacKaye Trail Association
Before the House Natural Resources Committee
Subcommittee on Federal Lands**

**On H.R. 8403, Benton MacKaye National Scenic Trail Feasibility Study Act of 2024
July 24, 2024**

Good morning, Chairman Tiffany, Ranking Member Neguse, and other members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today regarding the importance of protecting the Benton MacKaye Trail by passing the **Benton MacKaye National Scenic Trail Feasibility Study Act of 2024**, which will authorize 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.

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. I have held four previous positions on the Board and have been a Board member continuously for the past ten years. I have led upwards of a hundred hikes on sections of the Benton MacKaye Trail and have spent nearly a thousand hours over the last fifteen years building and maintaining the trail. I have been leading the BMTA's National Scenic Trail Working Group for the past four years.

The Benton MacKaye Trail Association was founded in 1980 as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. In partnership with the United States Forest Service, our mission is to preserve, protect, and maintain the Benton MacKaye Trail. The trail was named for Benton MacKaye, a visionary regional planner and forester, who over 100 years ago gave the country the gift of the idea of having an Appalachian Trail. We look forward to continuing to collaborate with the Forest Service as we manage and protect the Benton MacKaye National Scenic Trail.

Work began on the BMT in 1980, and the trail was completed in 2005. It runs for 288 miles from Springer Mountain in northwest Georgia through western Tennessee and eastern North Carolina, enters the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, and ends at Big Creek in the northeast corner of the park.

Ninety-five percent of the trail is on protected federal land—either national forest or national park. Only 15 of its 288 miles run through private land or on public roads. The trail took many years to develop and was completed entirely through private funds and volunteer work, along with the support and assistance of the Forest Service.

The development and maintenance of the trail depends completely on volunteers. One hundred percent of us who work with the BMTA are volunteers, and more than 200 of us do maintenance work on the trail each year, generating approximately 8,000 hours of volunteer maintenance annually.

Our volunteers work hard to maintain the trail, and it's a labor of love. As a rather extreme example, on June 8th last month, 36 volunteers put in 362 hours clearing 48 major blowdowns on a single 6.7-mile section of the BMT in Tennessee, most of it in designated Wilderness, which means that chainsaws and other mechanical tools are not allowed. During the month of June, we removed more than 200 blowdowns from the BMT in Georgia, Tennessee, and North Carolina (almost ten times the normal amount for a month). Members of the BMTA care deeply about this trail and are committed to maintaining it, now and in the future.

In addition to maintaining the trail, we offer half a dozen guided hikes each month to our 897 members as well as to the general public, and I invite all of you to join us in experiencing the beauty of the southern Appalachian Mountains. We also work to educate our members and the public about safe and sustainable outdoor practices, foster skills in trail construction and maintenance, and instill a sound conservation ethic.

The BMT provides numerous opportunities for easy, moderate, and challenging day hikes, many routes for multi-day backpacking and camping, and of course for the most serious hikers end-to-end thru hikes. There is something on the trail for everyone – scenic mountain vistas and gorgeous waterfalls, beautiful rivers and streams, majestic trees and eye-catching wildflowers, including flat sections for easier walks. In recent years, the number of day- and long distance-hikers has increased as more people discover what the BMT offers. In addition, we are currently working with the Forest Service to identify and develop sections of the trail that could be made accessible for people with disabilities.

You will find ample road crossings with trailheads where hikers can access the trail. The BMT intersects America's first NST, the Appalachian National Scenic Trail, five times and has a connector trail at its northern terminus in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. The BMT also connects with two other long-distance trails, the Mountains-to-the-Sea Trail in North Carolina and the Pinhoti Trail in Georgia.

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 America's most visited national park, the Great Smoky Mountain National Park.

A NST designation would have important benefits for the trail and for local communities. It would undeniably enhance the trail's value as a first-class recreational destination and bring with it important economic benefits to these rural communities. This designation will also improve the quality of life for nearby communities by increasing outdoor recreation opportunities—especially for families and individuals, young and old. Moreover, the trail enhances property values and encourages sustainable development. Proximity to well-maintained trails is a desirable feature for residential and commercial real estate, attracting new residents and businesses. The BMTA's efforts in promoting the trail have also fostered a sense of community pride and conservation awareness, leading to greater investments in local infrastructure and services. A designation would also have the added benefit of helping to pass on our outdoor heritage to future generations. That is why we need this legislation – to set the trail on the path towards a NST designation.

Outdoor recreation, particularly hiking, is a major economic driver in rural communities. Hundreds of thousands of people live in the counties the trail goes through, and many millions live within a short drive of the trail in and around cities such as Atlanta, Chattanooga, Knoxville, and Asheville. Further, the BMT presently draws visitors from around the country and even overseas. Hikers stay in motels, eat at restaurants, and shop at stores from barbershops and hair salons to groceries and hardware stores—as do their friends and families who see them off, resupply them along the way, and greet them at the end. Because the NST designation will attract more hikers all along the trail, the economic impact for the small towns and rural counties nearest the trail will multiply.

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

In Congress, this effort also enjoys bipartisan and bicameral support. In the Senate, our companion legislation is led by Senators Warnock and Tillis.

Currently, the trail has no official protection or federal designation. Although the BMTA has been successful in building and maintaining the trail, a National Scenic Trail designation will provide important safeguards that currently are not in place. Without federal protection, we face continued risks of development, potentially losing these lands for future generations.

We are seeking a feasibility study with a one-year deadline. Although this might appear to be an ambitious timeline, I would like to reiterate that the trail was fully completed 20 years ago, has a strong volunteer non-profit organization that manages and maintains the trail and has for over 40 years, and is already very popular with hikers. We anticipate nominal complications to arise during the feasibility study. The trail is extremely deserving of designation as a National Scenic

Trail, and we are confident that the feasibility study will come to the same conclusion. We are ready and willing to assist the Forest Service with the feasibility study and believe it is reasonable for Congress to expect the study to be completed within a year after this legislation is approved.

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 this legislation and help ensure the trail remains a cherished part of our national heritage and a beacon for conservation and outdoor recreation.

Thank you for your time and consideration.