

THE LAND TRUST FOR THE LITTLE TENNESSEE



July 29, 2015

Mr. Bill Lane
Atlanta Federal Center
National Park Service – RTCA Program
100 Alabama Street, SW- 1924 Building
Atlanta, GA 30303

Dear Mr. Lane,

The Land Trust for the Little Tennessee (LTLT) is pleased to support the Smoky Mountain Host organization's grant application for technical assistance from the National Park Service (NPS).

LTLT is a non-profit conservation organization working since 1997 to conserve the waters, forests, farms, and heritage of the Little Tennessee and Hiwassee River valleys in western North Carolina and north Georgia. We are pleased to be a member of the Smoky Mountain Blueways Advisory Council, coordinated by Smoky Mountain Host.

LTLT is very supportive of the designation of the lakes and streams of the upper Little Tennessee River basin as a National Water Trail. We believe that the NPS' Technical Assistance Program would be critical in the coordination and designation of the Smoky Mountain Blueways as a National Water Trail. In addition, your assistance is critical in helping us develop a "wayfinding signage program" and developing a strong conservation education component for the regional effort. Overall, we believe that NPS assistance in helping the water resource managers and other main stakeholders develop a coordinated set of "best management practices" will allow continued water-based economic development while protecting our resources.

The five rivers in the system all flow into Lake Fontana and provide some of the nation's most treasured waterways. These rivers lie in the heart of the Southern Blue Ridge (SBR), one of the most biologically significant eco-regions in the United States (TNC/SAFC 2000). The SBR's streams and rivers are world renowned for their aquatic diversity, supporting vast numbers of fish, mussels, snails, and crayfish. The SBR is also the center of the world's salamander diversity (Bruce et al., 2000).

For example, the upper Little Tennessee River (LTR) watershed, containing the entire remaining 53 miles of the LTR as a free-flowing river, stretches from the river's headwaters near Rabun Gap, GA, through Macon and Swain Counties of NC, to the head of TVA's Fontana Reservoir. This river is a known biodiversity hot spot—the only remaining major

P.O. Box 1148 • 557 East Main Street • Franklin, North Carolina 28744-1148
Tel: 828-524-2711 • Fax: 828-524-4741 • Web: www.ltl.org

river in the SBR still containing its full complement of native aquatic species. The majority of the upland area of the 455 mi² watershed is located within the Nantahala and Chattahoochee National Forests. The lower 13 miles of the 27-mile reach of the LTR below the town of Franklin, home to a suite of threatened and endangered species, are protected within North Carolina's Needmore Game Lands. The 27-mile reach is designated as a Significant Natural Heritage Area by the NC Natural Heritage Program and as Critical Habitat for two listed aquatic species by the US Fish & Wildlife Service. Another 10.2 miles of river frontage upstream of Needmore have also been protected by LTLT since 1999.

Besides our national forests and state gamelands, the region is also home to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, 60% in this region of North Carolina, and the Blue Ridge Parkway, America's favorite scenic drive. In addition, our region is an integral part of the Blue Ridge National Heritage Area, the 24th. in America.

The entire southwest region of North Carolina will benefit economically from this designation and your assistance will solidify the extensive work that has already been done by the Advisory Council and their many collaborative partners in the Little Tennessee basin.

Travel and tourism is a major engine that drives our economy. Recent improvements in public access to our rivers and lakes is allowing the water sports industry to lead the way to further economic development. We believe if we can foster conservation of our natural resources through public education while marketing our "competitive advantage" it will serve our residents, our visitors, and our resources.

Smoky Mountain Host has a long history of partnering with public and private organizations to carry out initiatives such as the Smoky Mountain Blueways. They operate the Smoky Mountain Visitor's Center through a long-standing agreement with the NC Department of Transportation that is located near the border of Georgia. They have conducted regional co-op marketing since their inception in 1987. They also work closely with the Southwestern Commission, the region's Council of Governments in various community and economic development initiatives such as this one that provides connectivity between towns, counties, private industry and local governments.

We believe that the designation of the Smoky Mountain Blueways by the National Park Service as a National Blueways Trail System will be a huge step in securing our place in the global market and making our regions natural resources stronger through collaboration and conservation.

Sincerely,


Sharon Fouts Taylor
Executive Director