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Group Seeks Legislation for Trail

By ANGUS PHILLIPS

A coalition of Chesapeake Bay advocacy groups hopes that before disbanding, the lame-duck 109th Congress will act on a key bit of pending legislation to create the nation's first National Historic Water Trail.

The National Park Service would oversee the proposed 2,300-mile John Smith Trail, retracing the waterborne route of the English adventurer who mapped the Chesapeake 400 years ago. Smith, who according to legend was rescued from a death sentence by the princess Pocahontas, was among English pioneers who settled Jamestown in 1607.

He set off with a small band of explorers in a 30-foot boat to probe the bay's tributaries, looking for a Northwest Passage to Asia. They didn't find it, but in two trips probed most major rivers and sent back maps and glowing reports of the region's attributes. This year a Senate subcommittee passed a bill to establish the water trail and sent it to the floor for action; in the meantime a House subcommittee held hearings in September but hasn't issued a report.

The Chesapeake Bay Foundation, the Conservation Fund, the National Geographic Society and dozens of other groups are pressing for passage of the measure this year so plans can go forward to commemorate the 400th anniversary next year.

The route stretches from the head of the bay at Havre de Grace to the mouth at Cape Charles, with diversions up rivers and streams. "It's a route people can follow by boat to explore some interesting pieces of water," said John Page Williams of the Chesapeake Bay Foundation.

"At the moment it's just a line on a map. The goal is to build infrastructure to make it easy for people to experience the trail of Capt. Smith as he would have encountered it before 60 million people showed up." If Congress fails to act, said Williams, "We'll have to start the process all over again next year, and it may be too late."