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Partnership Restores American Chestnuts

The National Wild Turkey Federation recently signed a Memorandum of Understanding with The American Chestnut Foundation (TACF) to benefit American chestnut trees and wild turkeys.

The American chestnut tree was once abundant across the Eastern half of the United States and west across the Ohio River Valley, and was an important food source of wild turkeys. However, in the early 1900s, an exotic fungus called blight virtually eliminated the tree from nearly 9 million acres of American forestland.

“Blight destroyed a beautiful tree, and a major food source of wild turkeys,” said Robert Abernethy, NWTF director of agency programs. “Reintroducing a blight-resistant, American chestnut tree will benefit everyone, especially wild turkeys.”

Through the MOU, the NWTF will work with TACF to plant blight-resistant chestnut trees in orchards to provide a future source of American chestnut trees. Together the NWTF and TACF will work to improve forest health by eventually planting American chestnut trees to benefit wildlife in the eastern United States.

“The single purpose of both the NWTF and The American Chestnut Foundation has been to restore a species that will benefit forest health and many other species of wildlife,” said Marshal Case, TACF president and CEO. “Given the wild turkey’s preference for chestnuts, our partnership will serve to increase wild turkey populations and help restore the American chestnut to its native eastern forests. This is a wonderful opportunity for two volunteer-based organizations to come together to do fieldwork in the restoration process.”

TACF is developing a tree that has the blight resistance of the Chinese chestnut while keeping the physical appearance of the American chestnut tree. The new tree will be over 94 percent American chestnut with blight resistance as the only remaining trait of the Chinese chestnut.

The restoration of the American chestnut tree is a long-term project. While there are some trees ready for planting, it will take many more years to develop enough genetic lines to begin to restore chestnuts across the Eastern half of the country to increase the regional adaptability of the trees.

“This partnership will benefit wild turkeys and their habitat, along with everyone who believes in the conservation of the wild turkey and the preservation of our hunting tradition,” said Dr. James Earl Kennamer, NWTF senior vice president for conservation programs. “

For more information about the NWTF, its habitat work or its partnership with TACF, call (800) THE-NWTF, or go online at www.nwtf.org.

The American Chestnut Foundation: Founded in 1983, TACF is a non-profit 501(c)(3) foundation with nearly 6,000 members and chapters in 15 states including Virginia. For more information about chestnut restoration, visit www.acf.org, or call (802) 447-0110.

About the NWTF: In 1973, when the National Wild Turkey Federation was founded, there were an estimated 1.3 million wild turkeys and 1.5 million turkey hunters. Thanks to the work of wildlife agencies and the NWTF’s many volunteers and partners, today there are more than 7 million wild turkeys and nearly 3 million turkey hunters. Since 1985, the NWTF and its cooperators have spent more than \$230 million upholding hunting traditions and conserving more than 11.3 million acres of wildlife habitat.

The NWTF is a nonprofit organization with 545,000 members in 50 states, Canada, Mexico and 14 other foreign countries. It supports scientific wildlife management on public, private and corporate lands as well as wild turkey hunting as a traditional North American sport.