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High School Students Plant Trees On Strip Mine Site

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By D. J. Mathews
Special to the Herald Courier

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FLINT GAP, Va. — About 60 Southwest Virginia high school students braved a chilly rain Friday to plant hardwood trees, including American chestnuts, on a reclaimed mining site near Dante, Va.

The plantings were part of an Arbor Day observance.

"The support and enthusiasm for Arbor Day is tremendous," said Butch Lambert, director of the state's Division of Mined Land Reclamation. "In addition to being a fun experience for the students, Arbor Day activities also emphasize Virginia Standards of Learning [SOL]. The Arbor Day sponsors gave presentations that directly related to secondary SOLs for biology and earth science."

Prior to 1900, the American chestnut was a dominant tree in North America's Eastern forests. Since that time, the chestnut has succumbed to blight inadvertently introduced from Asia.

Marshall Case, president of the American Chestnut Foundation, said the future of the chestnut "holds a promise of return to dominance. ACF hopes to use surface-mined land as sites for introducing blight-resistant American chestnuts. Arbor Day events are excellent opportunities to share the promise of restoring the American chestnut."

Ervinton High sophomore Victoria Turner said she thought planting the trees was a good project for her class.

"I like getting dirty," she said, adding that she enjoys studying about trees.

Ervinton biology teacher Hope Farmer agreed the field trip was beneficial for her ecology/ biology class.

"We've already dealt with a reforestation project before," she said, but it focused on water.

The students are working on developing an outdoor classroom and wanted to learn how to plant American chestnuts at their school, Farmer said.

Lynn Scarlett, deputy secretary of the U.S. Department of the Interior, was very appreciative of the Ervinton High and Coeburn Career Center students' efforts, despite working in muddy areas.

"It's great to see them out there," she said. "... The trees need the rain."

Scarlett also said the students were planting for the future, which needs science, conservation and partnerships to make things happen.

While rain and a threat of flooding kept away some students, plans are to finish planting up to 1500 trees on the cleared acre of the 85-acre property, said Mike Abbott, Department of Mine, Minerals and Energy spokesman.

Along with the American chestnuts, students were planting white oak, black oak, northern red oak and yellow poplar tree varieties.

The Russell County reforestation effort was also a carbon sequestration project, said Brad Kreps of the Nature Conservancy.

Trees capture carbon dioxide and "reforestation projects are one of the many projects to slow climate change," he said.

The project also used techniques developed from Virginia Tech studies, which found that trees planted on land that is not "compacted," as is traditionally done on mine reclamation sites, grow better and fuller. Kreps hoped they can "re-establish a mixed, native Appalachian [vegetation] site."

The Nature Conservancy specifically worked with the Forest Land Group to lease the Flint Gap site for 60 years. The goal is to make it permanent so the site becomes part of the surrounding forest.

Take Pride in America and the Appalachian Regional Reforestation Initiative were also involved in Friday's event.



Photo by Tim Cox
Laken Boyd of Dickenson County Career Center plants trees at the Arbor Day event.

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