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## Chestnuts Used to Restore Strip Mines

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PIONEER, Tenn. (AP) -- In a double-barreled approach to environmental restoration, Appalachian mountains scarred by strip-mining are being planted with American chestnut trees, a species that has been all but wiped out in the U.S. by a fungus.

For the past 30 years or so, federal regulations essentially said that once a forested mountainside was scraped open and the coal extracted, mine companies had to smooth the soil over and seed it with grass.

But recently, federal regulators have begun promoting the planting of chestnuts and other hardwoods to improve drainage, reduce erosion and return the landscape to a more natural state.

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Chestnut Trees

The project has the added advantage of helping to bring the American chestnut back from the brink of extinction.

American chestnuts "were a critical part of the forest and they are gone now, for all intents and purpose," said John Johnson, a former leader in the militant environmentalist group Earth First! and now an employee and student in the University of Tennessee forestry program. "So this in a way is like double research - like, how to bring chestnuts back and how to reclaim these sites."

Earlier this month, 60 volunteers in a public-private partnership clambered over a coalfield on Zeb Mountain, 50 miles north of Knoxville, and planted chestnut seeds. The same thing will be done in the coming weeks in Ohio, West Virginia, Kentucky, Maryland and Virginia.

The Zeb Mountain planting was so popular, volunteers had to be turned away. Students, retirees, mining regulators, mine operators, researchers and conservationists participated. They left muddy, wet and enthusiastic after planting more than 200 germinated nuts over a two-acre plot of rocks, boulders and sandstone.

"I was just so excited to be part of it," said Jeff Gately, a senior in civil engineering at the University of Tennessee. "I just thoroughly enjoyed it, just being a part of something that could help reclamation in the future."

In pioneer days, American chestnuts towered 100 feet over the American landscape, providing timber, oil for tanning hides and food for people and wildlife. But a still-lingering blight wiped out 3.5 billion chestnuts from Maine to Mississippi during the first half of the 20th century.

With any luck, the seeds on Zeb Mountain will be 3- to 5-foot saplings next year. But the trees are still susceptible to blight, and Barry Thacker, an environmental engineer and organizer of the Zeb Mountain planting, said they will probably live for only 10 or 15 years. But by then, scientists hope to have developed a blight-resistant hybrid.

Marshal Case, president and chief executive of the Vermont-based American Chestnut Foundation, a partner in the venture, said he has long dreamed of seeing chestnuts planted on reclaimed mine sites in Appalachia, for this was where America's great chestnut forests used to be.

"It just seemed like it would be a natural for us. We could do a lot of things, including healing the land," he said. The American chestnut "is a legacy of hope now. People are getting the idea that this tree has a tremendous future for the landscape in the Eastern forest."

Nearly 2.7 million acres of strip-mined land will need restoration in coming years, according to the Interior Department. Case said at least 300,000 acres could be suitable for chestnuts and other hardwoods.

The project got its start in 2004, when regulators and university researchers in Appalachia and the mid-Atlantic states formed a network to push for the planting of chestnuts. It joined forces with the American Chestnut Foundation, and the idea soon gained backing from the U.S. Office of Surface Mining and the U.S. Forest Service.

The Office of Surface Mining has given nearly \$100,000 for chestnut research, and the American Chestnut Foundation is providing \$1.8 million. It is supplying the seeds and operating a research nursery in Virginia.

Tree scientists know that American chestnuts actually grow better in loose, rubble-strewn soil than they do in compacted earth. But mine companies that took pride in their ability to turn coalfields into rolling meadows initially resisted the idea of leaving mountainsides ungrouted, even though the practice could save them money.

"They said, 'Absolutely no. It is not the way we do things,'" Thacker said. "But, boy, you mention the idea of restoring the American chestnut and it is a whole different ballgame because of the history that is there and the desire, if you will, to return to our roots. Once they realized they could be part of restoring the American chestnut, they changed their minds."

Dan Roling, president and chief executive of Knoxville-based National Coal Corp., which owns the 2,000-acre Zeb Mountain mine, agreed: "Everything we have been seeing

across the country in reforestation suggests this is the way to go."

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On the Net:

American Chestnut Foundation: <http://www.acf.org>

Appalachian Regional Reforestation Initiative: <http://arri.osmre.gov>

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