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Groundbreaking In The Snow Held For New Chestnut Research Lab

Photo



Fred Hebard, Belle Price and Marshal Case turn the first shovels of dirt and snow to break ground on the site of the planned research facility.

By Debra McCown/Bristol Herald Courier

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By [DEBRA MCCOWN](#)
Reporter / Bristol Herald Courier
Published: November 22, 2008

MEADOWVIEW, Va. – Snowfall and frigid winds failed to dampen Mary Belle Price's mission Friday. She'd traveled over the mountains to get here, a place where she and her husband lived, near a farm that bears his name – and at the site of a new \$500,000 research lab designed to help restore the American chestnut trees to Appalachian forests.

Price was among a handful of American Chestnut Foundation members and scientists who gathered at the foundation's farms Friday to celebrate the start of the lab's construction.

The foundation also is celebrating an agreement inked just three weeks ago with the U.S. Office of Surface Mining to plant chestnut trees on reclaimed mine sites.

Price, who now lives in Dalton, Ga., said she is fulfilling her husband's dying wish.

Growing up near White's Mill, Glenn C. Price told his wife he loved to camp on Clinch Mountain and collect chestnuts. After watching a blight destroy most of the trees in the first half of the 20th century, Price longed to help restore the iconic American tree. Before he died in 1994, he asked his wife to use his money for that purpose.

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A year later, she bought and donated the 93 acres that became the foundation's second research farm here, the Glenn C. Price Research Farm – now home to several thousand trees that are crosses of American chestnut and Chinese chestnut trees.

On Friday, Mary Belle Price helped kick off the start of the new research lab for which she has provided much of the funding. Dozens of others from up and down the East Coast who also support the foundation's efforts joined her, as did the research scientists who work the farm.

"You need more than a farmhouse kitchen to do this work," said Fred Hebard, staff pathologist for the foundation, who has been working here – and doing science in a farmhouse kitchen – since the foundation's first research farm opened in 1989.

"We won't have a palatial place, but we will have a good building," he said.

Hebard promised the new facility will have a bathroom – and will not be prone to snow blowing through the cracks in the wall as it was Friday in the barn where the group gathered before turning the first shovels of dirt.

"It'll let us take advantage of advances in genetics and molecular biology," Shawn Yarnes, a post-doctoral research associate, said of the new lab.

Southwest Virginia was once in the heart of the American chestnut's range, and the farms in Meadowview have been the center of the foundation's chestnut research since the nonprofit organization formed. The goal is to develop a chestnut tree that retains almost all the characteristics of the American chestnut but keeps the blight resistance of the Chinese chestnut.

The blight, a fungus from Asia, killed off the native chestnuts, and hit the region hard.

Phil Pritchard, former development director for the foundation, said the American chestnut was "the basic building material throughout the Appalachians."

"It was all the railroad ties, it was all the utility poles, it was all the fences that you saw. It was all the barns and most of the homes," Pritchard said.

When the blight took over, "people just stood around with open mouths and said, 'Wait a minute, this can't happen,'" he said.

But it did.

A quarter-century later, the foundation is seeing progress on three fronts: the new research facility; agreements with the federal surface mining office and forestry service; and reaching the point where blight-resistant nuts and seedlings will be ready for planting.

Bob Paris, a foundation research geneticist, said Friday that surface coal mine sites should play an important role in the tree's re-introduction to the forest. About 5,000 trees have already been planted on reclaimed mining sites using a \$200,000 federal grant, he said.

"That will give us an idea how resistance might hold up on a regional basis as well as how a chestnut tree might perform on a site such as a mine site," Paris said.

Test plantings will begin in the spring at clear-cut sites on national forest land to see how the chestnut seedlings developed here will hold up in the forest – and how resistant they will be to the blight there.

And then there are the legacy trees, about 200 of them, expected to produce the nuts that will begin serious reforestation efforts.

"They're ready," Hebard said of the first trees, "but we still have a lot of work to do."

Genetically speaking, the legacy trees are about 94 percent American chestnut – and, researchers believe, 100 percent resistant to the blight.

Marshal Case, the foundation's president who came from Vermont for the ground breaking Friday, said the foundation's effort to partner with the mining and timber industries represents "the perfect match" for restoring the American chestnut.

Coal mining companies, which must reclaim large amounts of land, can use chestnut trees in reclamation, Case said. Meanwhile, the foundation can plant trees where they can grow without competition from other species.

Timber companies also are investing in the project, Case said, because they see long-term benefits to their industry from a product no one else has: a durable, fast-growing hardwood that is light and easy to work with.

"This is going to put a good cash flow into the economy with the value of the trees in many ways. We're going to help with that and because the trees sequester carbon ... we're going to help with air quality," Case said. "Small landowners, when we have this material get back into their hands, that will help the person's situation, and there are a lot of people out there who could use that kind of a boost."

Case said a chestnut tree will be planted Dec. 11 on Governors Island in New

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York Harbor as a symbol of a United Nations initiative to plant seven billion trees worldwide to offset the effects of carbon pollution.

Economic benefits could start to be realized in as soon as a decade, Case said.

Hebard said large-scale economic impacts of the American chestnut's return will be seen in 50 to 100 years.

"Everybody needs to get their children and grandchildren involved in this because they're the ones that are going to benefit from it," said Dianne Smith, a founding member of the foundation's Georgia chapter who traveled here for the ground breaking. "They'll be able to build houses and barns and fence posts with rot-resistant wood."

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Reader Reactions

Posted by (winkie) on November 22, 2008 at 6:08 pm

UT Knoxville is not a part of the efforts yet. But The American Chestnut Foundation did plant a tree at the White House. UT Chattanooga's Dr Hill Craddock has been a part of TACF program and his nursery at the school is full of chestnut seedlings.

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Posted by (tmullins) on November 22, 2008 at 4:18 pm

This is fantastic and I hope it will work, Wise County is disappearing faster than ever with plenty of mined space to make something grow on what's gone. I doubt they can figure how to build a mountain that was decapitated for the love of money. wise county issues com

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Posted by (Bill) on November 22, 2008 at 10:42 am

Isn't it true that UT Knoxville has a program going also and that they have a tree planted at the White House already. Thanks to the Price's

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Posted by (Mary in Abingdon) on November 22, 2008 at 10:06 am

Thanks for this fantastic article.
I hope this paper continues to follow this progress on the great American Chestnut Tree! I've thought about donating some of my farm near Abingdon for the same purpose!

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