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American Chestnut seedlings planted in Wayne National Forest

Apr 16, 2008 @ 02:07 PM

Herald-Dispatch.com

Submitted by the U.S. Forest Service

NELSONVILLE, Ohio — Hundreds of American chestnut seedlings are taking root in southeast Ohio thanks to a partnership between researchers, forestry organizations and volunteers that are working to restore the once dominant tree to its natural habitat.

Workers and volunteers from the Wayne National Forest; The American Chestnut Foundation, Ohio Chapter; Ohio University, Department of Environmental and Plant Biology; and researchers from the U.S. Forest Research Lab in Delaware, Ohio recently planted more than 100 disease-resistant American Chestnut seedlings on a reclaimed strip mine site on the National Forest; with plans to plant up to 600 more throughout the spring.

The American chestnut was nearly wiped out by a blight that killed an estimated four billion trees in the eastern United States in the early 20th century. The naturally surviving trees remain vulnerable to the fungus, however through years of cross breeding with its disease-resistant counterpart, the Chinese chestnut, researchers are seeking to develop a blight-resistant American chestnut.

The American Chestnut Foundation's backcross breeding program produces seed that combines the disease-resistant traits of the Chinese chestnut with the superior size and timber traits of the American chestnut. In order for the seedlings to grow in the poor soil conditions of the reclaimed mines, Forest Service Researchers inoculate the chestnut seedlings with mycorrhizal fungi that will aid in the survival, growth and development of the seedlings.

"Mycorrhizal fungi play a vital role in reforestation by providing the plant several benefits that are critical for its survival and growth in a nutrient poor and hostile environment such as in reclaimed mined sites," said Shiv Hiremath, a Forest Service biologist in Delaware, Ohio, in a news release. "Reintroduction of this species will serve both reforestation efforts of reclaimed lands as well as restoration of the American chestnut tree."

The re-establishment of native vegetation like the American chestnut and American elm has been made a priority for the Wayne National Forest. In the Forest's 2006 Land and Resource Management Plan, it lists the Forest's initiative to promote the planting of disease-resistant species on the Wayne as varieties become available.

Learn more about the work of U.S. Forest Service researchers by visiting the Northern Research Station Web site at www.nrs.fs.fed.us. Also, visit the

Ohio Chapter of The American Chestnut Foundation Web site at www.oh-acf.org to learn more about their work.

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