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Chestnut HQ pulls up stakes

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By PATRICK McARDLE RUTLAND HERALD STAFF - Published: February 5, 2009

BENNINGTON – The American Chestnut Foundation relocated its national headquarters to North Carolina last week and announced a new president and chief executive officer on Tuesday.

Meghan Jordan, director of communications for the foundation, said the move brought them closer to their research farm in Meadowview, Va.

There are almost 34,000 trees planted on the 20-year-old research farm, which is larger than 150 acres. The new headquarters in Asheville, N.C., is about 120 miles from the farm, which brings it more than 600 miles closer than Bennington.

"We've been in Vermont for a while. There are no plans to close that office in the near future," Jordan said.

Jordan said she wasn't sure how long the headquarters of the foundation, which was founded in 1983 in Minnesota, had been in Bennington but it dates back to at least 2000.

According to Jordan, the foundation's practice of maintaining a number of regional offices along the eastern seaboard, the tree's natural habitat, has been a successful approach so the foundation may maintain its presence in Vermont.

The new headquarters is located in the U.S. Forest Service Building in what was the Southern Appalachian regional office. It will not officially open until Monday.

The foundation is undergoing a leadership change as well as a physical relocation.

Marshal Case of Shaftsbury, president and CEO of the foundation since 1997, has been named president emeritus and Bryan Burhans will take on Case's former role.

In a press release, the foundation gave Case credit for overseeing the expansion of its chapters from four to 15, growing the membership by three times to 6,000 and fundraising efforts which allow the foundation to operate on a yearly budget of \$2 million. He will continue to work with the Vermont-based Trust for Wildlife, according to the foundation.

Bryan Burhans was the director of land management programs for the National Wild Turkey Federation and developed the Hunting Heritage Club, which educates landowners on ways to attract wildlife.

Jim White, who retired as county forester for Bennington County about two years ago, said having the American Chestnut Foundation had been a valuable local asset.

"I learned a lot from them being in the area. ... We collaborated on a number of projects. Finding one of (the chestnut trees) around here was like finding a piece of gold. Sooner or later, they would always succumb to the blight but there was always hope," he said.

Washington County Forester Russ Barrett said the foundation was responsible for some large trees in Berlin and Fairlee which were part of its research into developing blight-resistant trees.

The American Chestnut Foundation's goal is to restore the tree to the forests where it once grew.

One year ago, the foundation received its largest donation — \$1 million from a family in North Carolina.

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