

CHESNUT TREE PLANTING PROJECT HAS THREEFOLD PURPOSE

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HAYSI, Va. – Strip miners and environmentalists are working with schoolchildren to make the world a better place – by planting chestnut trees.

In what once would have been an unlikely collaboration, three very different projects converged in the tree-planting project Thursday on Splashdam Strip. The tiny chestnut trees they placed in the ground are hope threefold: to reforest surface-mine land; to revive a tree that once dominated the forest; and to help youth of the coalfield region build a solid future on their heritage.

Devin Gibson and Matt Blansett, who attend Clintwood High School in Dickenson County, have a stake in all three.

Both work part-time at Paramount Coal's Deep Mine 26. Both said their grandparents told them about the chestnut forests that once dominated the region. And both see the work they did Thursday as part of a foundation for their futures.

Mining “puts food on the table; you’ve got to work around here,” said Matt, 17. “Mining’s going to go on. We have to power the country, ... but also, when you tear things up you’ve got to go and fix them ... and that’s what everyone is doing today.”

They were among more than 90 teens from Dickenson County’s three high schools – Clintwood, Haysi and Ervinton – who helped to plant about 2,000 hardwood seedlings on the strip Thursday. About 100 of those trees were American Chestnuts, which no longer populate the region’s forests due to a devastating blight in the early 20th century.

“It’s going to bring future jobs,” Devin, 17, said of the project. “The mines are not going to last forever ... but the American Chestnut was a huge tree and such a beautiful tree, and maybe people in the city would like to come here and experience that.”

Restoring the land

For coal and timber companies, the tree-planting represents a new method for land reclamation: Restoring profitable forest to the land.

It’s also a way to offset carbon dioxide emissions, because trees sequester the gas.

“It’ll restore the productivity of this ground to a condition that can be profitable,” said Craig Kaderavek, regional director of forest operations for the Forestland Group, the timberland investment management organization that owns the Splashdam site, which was mined in the 1960s and 70s. “Now we’ll be able to have valuable trees [in 50 years].”



(Photo: More than 90 teens from Dickenson County's three high schools – Clintwood, Haysi and Ervinton – helped to plant about 2,000 hardwood seedlings on the Splashdam Strip Thursday.)

Sam Adams, the Kentucky coordinator for the AmeriCorps' VISTA volunteer program, said an estimated 741,000 acres of land are barren because of strip mining, most covered with grasses and sparse, stunted trees.

Volunteers with the VISTA Appalachian Coal Country Watershed Team that Adams coordinates participated in the tree planting program Thursday.

Patrick Angel, soil scientist for the federal Office of Surface Mining, said growing forests on former mine sites will mean better water quality, better habitat for wildlife, timber and jobs – and that's why the federal government is encouraging it as a reclamation method.

Environmentalist Gene Counts, a retired schoolteacher who once spent his vacations lobbying against strip mining, said collaborative projects like Thursday's tree-planting are evidence of that change in strategy.

"We're trying to work with strip miners ... because it's changed," Counts said. "We're not as radical as we were back in the '70s, so we found a way to work with these people rather than fight them.

"We're starting to lose our minerals, so now we need to go back and clean up our environment," Counts said. "We are told this is one of the most beautiful counties in the state of Virginia."

Reviving the chestnuts

To the American Chestnut Foundation, empty surface-mined sites are an opportunity to grow the blight-resistant trees they've developed in full sunlight, with a good chance of growth and survival. The organization has been working for decades to bring back the tree that was once king of the Appalachian forests.

While the trees planted Thursday aren't resistant to blight, chestnut researchers said this is a training ground and a step in the process toward restoring the towering giants in the forest.

"It's mainly just to get the people familiar with the chestnut itself so that when we do get the seed available for the resistant material we won't have any problems with people not knowing how to grow chestnut," said Bob Paris, a foundation researcher.

Angel said it could take five years or more for a blight-resistant seed to become available, but when they are, companies and organizations will be able to incorporate them into reforestation plans – with the ultimate goal of restoring them to their prominence.

“What we’re doing here is a grand experiment,” Angel said. “We’re learning how to do this so when the American Chestnut Foundation has the blight-resistant trees on a grand scale, then we’ll be able to out-plant them here.”

Adams said the Splashdam site is one of 10 around the region that involve the watershed team – a group of volunteers seeking to solve economic and environmental problems in coal camp communities, which are impacted by the boom-and-bust cycles of the industry they depend on.

“There is a possibility for green jobs in the future ... somebody has to plant these trees, other than us,” Adams said. “It’s a possibility for diversification of the economy. And you’ve also got all the environmental benefits.”

Preserving a heritage

Counts, who coordinated the high-schoolers’ participation Thursday, said local organizations are developing hiking and biking trails in the area and, if the former strip mine landscape is restored, tourism will grow here as an industry.

“If the Creeper Trail has 600,000 people a year, we expect a million people a year,” Counts said.

The Virginia Creeper Trail is a hiking and biking trail in Washington County, Va., credited with the rebirth of the small town of Damascus and growth of that area’s economy.

Yet for the teens, reforesting the land is about much more than tourism jobs; it’s also about passing on a part of their natural heritage.

“It would be such a great thing to show grandkids and know that we helped with it, helped bring it back,” said Danielle Turner, 16, a junior at Clintwood High School.

Devin and Matt said they’re just doing their part.

“Maybe one day our children can see an American chestnut,” Matt said.

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