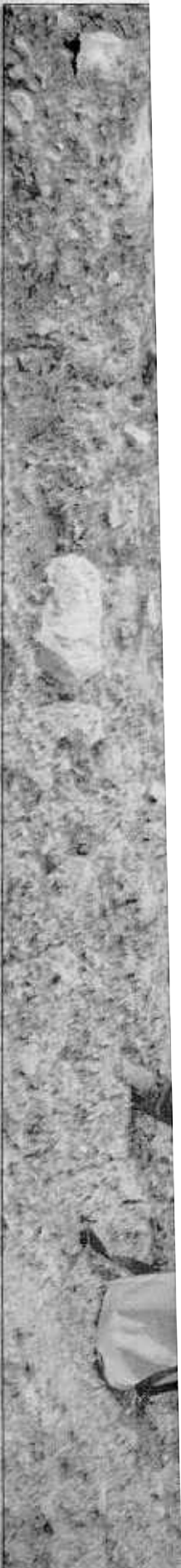


# Appalachian Reformation





AP PHOTOS (2)

**Volunteers plant saplings on a mountaintop near Blackey, Ky., March 21. The goal is to reforest the land that was stripped bare by coal mining.**

## United Nations lauds effort to revitalize region's mountains

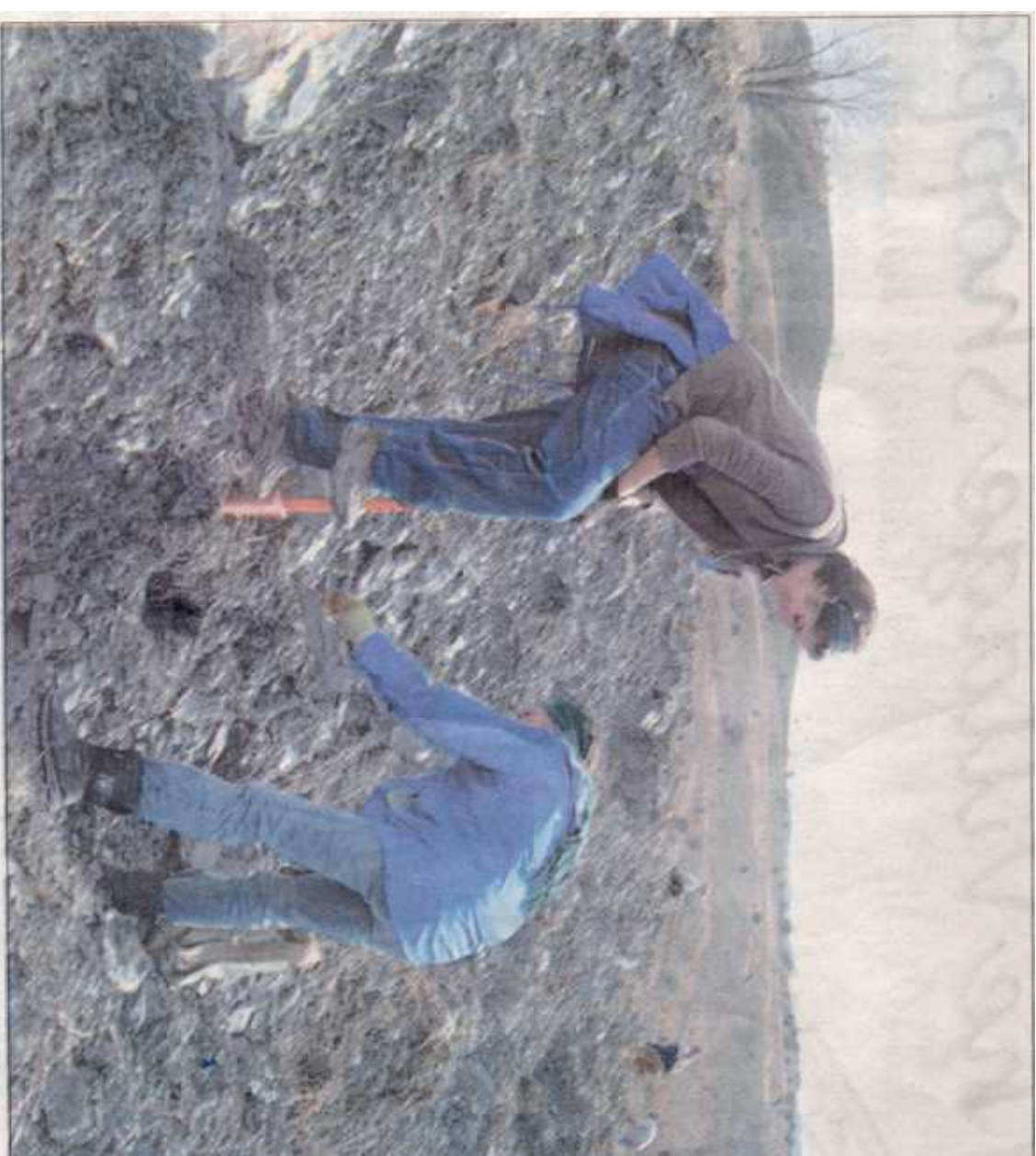
**By Roger Alford**  
ASSOCIATED PRESS WRITER

**B**LACKEY, Ky. — Sam Adams laid his tools aside and gently pushed fresh dirt around an oak sapling he hopes one day will be part of a hardwood forest high above this Appalachian community.

He was one of about 70 people gathered in Blackey last week to plant thousands of trees on the barren grasslands left behind by mining companies that have ripped the mountaintops apart to unearth coal, decimating entire forests.

"We've got an estimated 741,000 acres in Appalachia that are barren," said Adams, the Kentucky coordinator for the conservation group Appalachian Coal Country Watershed Team. "If we put a dent in that, if we could correct that, I think it's well worth doing."

Adams and the others were volunteering for the Appalachian Regional Reformation Initiative, a movement led by the U.S. Office of Surface Mining and several Appalachian states to replace trees uprooted in the search for coal. The campaign is being lauded by the United Nations Environment Programme, which wants to plant 7 billion trees worldwide in the next three years to combat global deforestation.



**Emma**  
plant a sapling

ripped the mountaintops apart to unearth coal, decimating entire forests.

"We've got an estimated 741,000 acres in Appalachia that are barren," said Adams, the Kentucky coordinator for the conservation group Appalachian Coal Country Watershed Team. "If we put a dent in that, if we could correct that, I think it's well worth doing."

Adams and the others were volunteering for the Appalachian Regional Reformation Initiative, a movement led by the U.S. Office of Surface Mining and several Appalachian states to replace trees uprooted in the search for coal. The campaign is being lauded by the United Nations Environment Programme, which wants to plant 7 billion trees worldwide in the next three years to combat global deforestation.

Elisabeth Guilbaud-Cox, a staff member of the U.N. Environment Programme's Regional Office of North America, was scheduled to visit an eastern Kentucky mine site on Saturday to help volunteers plant more trees.

The overall goal is to plant about 38 million trees on Appalachian mine sites.

"That's a significant commitment, and we hope for much more to come," she said. "Whatever effort is being undertaken to rehabilitate forests, we are happy about it."

The Appalachian initiative is important in helping combat global warming, she said, because forests convert carbon dioxide to oxygen, minimizing one of the most common greenhouse gases.

The scene on the mountaintop at Blackey has the look of badlands, with scattered grasses, scrub trees and lots of dust or mud, depending on the weather. Before mining companies removed the mountaintops, it was a dense, unbroken forest of oaks, hickories and other hardwoods.

The U.S. Office of Surface Mining, armed with university research debunking the myth that



**Emma Blue** of Georgetown and **Miranda Brown** of Winchester, both students at Murray State University, plant a sapling on an abandoned mountaintop near Blackey, Ky., March 21.

trees won't grow on the played-out mine lands, has been encouraging coal companies to restore the forests. Patrick Angel, a Kentucky-based forester for the federal agency, said native trees can grow as long as the soil and rock isn't so heavily compacted that their roots can't penetrate the reclaimed land.

University of Kentucky forester John Lhotka said research over the past 25 years shows it can work.

"In terms of the growth rate, some of them are similar to natural forests," Lhotka said.

Angel said restoring forests on mine land also helps prevent downstream flooding and greatly reduces erosion and silt pollution.

"If the mine soils are compacted like a Walmart parking lot, where you have 100 percent runoff, zero percent infiltration of rainwater, you can imagine what kind of erosion and gullying will occur," Angel said. "There's no force in nature more powerful than running water. With this forestry reclamation approach, mine soils are very loose and porous, such that water is soaked up

like a sponge."

Angel said landowners and coal operators traditionally have opted to turn mine lands into hay and pasture land after the coal has been removed and the mountaintops flattened.

"There are many hundreds of thousands of acres of barren grasslands in what was prior to mining forest land," he said. "There's very little cattle infrastructure in the mountains, not enough to justify the amount of grasslands that have been created. A higher and better use would be to return them to forest land."

The coal industry supports reforestation, said Luke Popovich, spokesman for the National Mining Association in Washington.

Preparing the mine land for reforestation is no more expensive than compacting the ground and turning it into grasslands, Popovich said.

"I don't sense there's been any industry push-back," he said. "It seems to be simply what is a reasonable for the typography and the terrain. For a lot of that area, hardwood stands would make sense."