

Remarks of Marshall Case President and CEO American Chestnut Foundation

Thank you Mr. Secretary for this wonderful opportunity to join with you in celebrating 30 years of reclamation work.

The American Chestnut Foundation is proud to be a partner as we begin the long process of restoring American chestnut to eastern forests-leading up to healthier forests, a renewed source of food for wildlife, and a real plus for the economy.

America's Chestnut Foundation will be celebrating 25 years of science and network building next year. Thanks to Charles Burnham, renowned plant geneticist from Minnesota, the Foundation began its work in 1983-entirely with volunteers.

Dr. Burnham realized that a classic backcross breeding program could result in a blight resistant tree that would lead to a major restoration of American chestnut. The Asian blight, which was first discovered infecting American chestnuts around 1904 in New City is a fungus that enters wounds in trees and grows in and under the bark until it has girdled and killed the trees.

Our backcross breeding program first crosses a Chinese chestnut, which is resistant to the fungus but grows like an orchard tree, with an American chestnut that shows good timber quality but is susceptible to the fungus. The genes for resistance from the Chinese parent are carried forward as backcrosses are made with American parents. After a period of up to 30 years, this leads to trees that are 100% blight resistant and 94% American.

There are many chestnut sprouts throughout the historic range in eastern forests, but very few reach flowering stage before the blight attacks and kills them. Fortunately, the blight does not attack the root system of these sprouts and that provides the opportunity for our Foundation to search out the small numbers of trees that do reach flowering stage and then our scientists and volunteers go to work pollinating, harvesting the nuts, and establishing orchards for trees.

We had a great find just a couple of weeks ago, in New Hampshire. This was followed by another find in neighboring Vermont, within days. In fact, the Vermont tree will be the State champion chestnut –measuring 33 inches, dbh (diameter at breast height). The reason for finding these trees is the growing network of volunteers who are on the lookout for trees that have escaped the blight. Our 15th state chapter, being formed right now, combines Vermont and New Hampshire-both states at the northern end of the historic range.

When I first began my work with the Foundation ten years ago, I asked my local county forester where I could find trees to pollinate. His response was "lots of sprouts but no flowering trees". As a result of our network building, with more and more people aware of the plight of the tree, we have been finding some very good trees that do flower and these become very important for regional genetics. The fact is there are trees out there even though they are challenging to find. Our program now includes well over 100 that we refer to as "mother" trees.

With the discovery of the first tree to be pollinated in New Hampshire, the coordinator for the University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension commented "people have been waiting for something like this for a long time". "They were good for firewood, furniture and houses because they don't rot, and they have an edible nut". "It's a beautiful wood".

This is a tree of hope. A lot of people and partners are responsible for making this science program possible. People with vision and passion who are willing to work hard for the future of a tree that they might never see growing tall in the forests. But, they know that future generations will have that pleasure and that makes all the hard work worth the time and effort and expense.

Let's look at some of these people. They come from all walks of life and all are welcome to participate in what will most likely be the comeback story of the century-restoring a species from the brink of extinction.

Dr. Norman Borlaug is a founding director of the Foundation and still very active. He is a Nobel Peace Prize recipient (credited with saving more than a billion people), winner of the Presidential Medal of Freedom and just a week ago, awarded the Congressional Gold Medal by President Bush.

Don Barger, is a long time Foundation member, whose house and farm has a view of Chestnut Ridge in western Pennsylvania. Don sent me an essay a couple of years ago-he has a passion for Chestnut. It is one of the most beautiful writings I have ever read.

When I called to thank him, he immediately apologized for his misspellings and said he had only an 8th grade education. Don grew up in an era when all family members had to work to survive. One of his chores was to cut dead chestnut trees on the farm to keep the wood stove burning and the house warm.

Honorable Jimmy Carter is a long time Foundation member and honorary and active director. And also a Nobel Peace Prize recipient. He worked with Senator Byrd and Senator Mitch McConnell to encourage critical financial support which we now receive from the Forest Service. In fact, we have a long term signed memorandum of agreement with the Service and are now an important component of the healthy forest initiative.

Wendy's mother-in-law, aged 97, from Proctorsville Vermont, watches over her planting of 15 trees that came into bloom this year. She is a fragile lady and has made her son and daughter-in-law promise that they will take care of the trees because she planted seeds from material our Foundation supplied 15 years ago. This is a 97 year old person with a great vision and great hope.

President Bush and Secretary of Agriculture Mike Johanns planted a tree with me on Arbor Day of 2005-at the White House. The First Dogs had a good time too, sniffing at the dirt pile. This came about because one of our most active members is an employee of the Forest Service and spent time with President Bush advising him on fire control in the west. They had a chance to talk about chestnut too.

We have many partners beyond the thousands of individuals who are members. Peabody Energy is active with us now too. In fact, if you go to their website, they devote a couple of pages to our cooperative American Chestnut Land Reclamation Project. They quote on their site "We are pleased to collaborate in a project aimed at bringing back the American chestnut tree to Appalachia".

That brings us right back to this planting today. I'm proud that our Foundation was one of the first to sign with the Appalachian Regional Reforestation Initiative. Patrick Angel has been of great help, taking a lead with a presentation to our board of directors, followed by signing of the agreement. And then, Brent Wahlquist became personally involved and has been extremely supportive of our Foundation efforts.

It is very interesting to be standing here today, at this site and planting these trees. Ten years ago, when I first came to the Foundation, I asked our chief scientist - Dr. Fred Hebard - "Why don't we plant our blight resistant trees in the future on coal surface mined lands? There would be so many good returns on the effort-healing of the land, wildlife habitat and a new food crop, improved forest health".

His response was that there were many challenges with the land in order to do that. Well, here we are today planting some of our early resistant American chestnut trees and guess what? -this is not only a celebration of the 30th anniversary of the Surface Mining and Reclamation and Control Act, but a celebration of the early success of some new ways to approach reclamation with reforestation. American chestnut likes the new advanced mine reforestation practices and is proving it with remarkable growth.

Mr. Secretary, we're very pleased that you and the coal industry have a lot of places to put our trees, because the day is drawing near when our network of volunteers and partners plan to overwhelm those places with blight resistant American chestnut.

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