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Old mine site getting new lease on life- by PAULA TATE

A regional reforestation initiative and students planted nearly 2,000 trees on an old strip mine in Splashdam.

HAYSI - Not long ago, it was a harsh-looking expanse of old strip mined land at Splashdam. Though it's still far from the heavily wooded mountain it once was, the site has taken on new life.

Last Thursday, about 1,900 hardwood trees were planted on nearly two acres there. Credit goes to 110 county school students and several groups, including a local watershed team, a timber investment firm and a foundation aimed at bringing back a giant in our country's eastern forests.

The event was part of an initiative to plant hardwood trees on abandoned surface mine sites. The students' participation was organized by Gene Counts, an avid outdoorsman and environmentalist and the director of Friends of the Russell Fork, a group aimed at improving the river's water quality.

FORF Partnered with the Appalachian Regional Reforestation Initiative and landowner, The Forestland Group, to plant the trees. ARRI, according to its Web site, is a coalition of groups, including citizens, the coal industry, and government, dedicated to restoring forests on coal mined lands in the Eastern United States.

Last Thursday morning, students in earth science, ecology and forestry classes from all three Dickenson County high schools Clintwood, Ervinton and Haysi - gathered at the site, located not far from the Dickenson County Fairgrounds. Students didn't just get to spend their day. playing in the dirt, however. They spent half their time planting trees and the remaining time visiting "teaching stations" to learn about related topics.

AMERICAN CHESTNUT

The mix of trees planted Thursday included red oak, white oak, green ash, river birch , persimmon, silky dogwood, redbud and, most importantly, the American chestnut.

Once king of the Appalachian forests, the American chestnut was attacked by blight in 1904 and was all but wiped out by 1950. Now The American Chestnut Foundation is trying to develop a blight resistant chestnut hybrid, a cross between the American species and its Chinese cousin, to repopulate the eastern forests.

TACF has joined in reforestation efforts on abandoned mine sites. The foundation's hybrid chestnut isn't expected to be introduced into the forests in large quantities until 2010, so pure American chestnut seedlings are being planted on selected sites.

NEW RECLAMATION APPROACH

Beginning in 1977, with the passage of the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act, environmental effects of strip mining became regulated.

Mining reclamation must now restore mountain slopes to their approximate original contour. Conventional reclamation methods include replanting fast-growing trees and grasses to prevent erosion.

But ARRI takes a different approach. The initiative seeks to plant more high-value hardwood trees.

Dr. Patrick Angel, a forester and soil scientist with the Office of Surface Mining, said the method has several benefits. Planting viable trees is an investment in the future, he told the group of students during a presentation a week prior to the actual tree planting event. "'

A SUCCESS

Counts is thrilled with the event at Splashdam and noted that some participants referred to it as "wildly successful."

Chris Eberly, an OSM VISTA who works with the Friends of the Russell Fork, cited teamwork as the reason for the project's success.

"What made this project work were the partner groups that came together to organize it and get it done, and just as importantly, how seriously the students took it," said Eberly.

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The Coalfield Progress
P.O. Box 380, 725 Park Ave., Norton, Va. 24273
Phone: 276/679-1101 - Fax: 276/679-5922