



The West Virginia Chapter
of
The American Chestnut Foundation
NEWSLETTER



In the heart of American chestnut's natural range

December 2020

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Summer 2020 Student Intern

During the summer of 2020, a student intern, **Logan Hosaflook**, was hired by the WV chapter. He was scheduled to work 9-12 days during the summer, but his work as an assistant forester with JTH Enterprise LLC did not allow Logan to work as much as he wanted. Logan is a senior at Glenville State College. His report is as follows:

This summer as a part-time intern in West Virginia, I was able to help collect some very important data and meet some very important people and landowners who are going to be influential in the revival of American Chestnuts. Only working 1-2 days a month limited me to doing everything that I wanted to do, but the information collected, and knowledge gained proved well worth the short time spent.

My first day was spent traveling to Braxton County, WV where I met with 3 landowners in the

county who all had American Chestnuts on their property. The first landowner I met was Mrs. McGowan to take some leaf samples off her tree and spoke with her on some information and things she can do too improve the health of her tree, there was no visible sign of blight on that tree, which made me feel really good about those samples. The second property I visited that day was Jimmy Jenkins and took some leaf samples off several trees on his property about 10 miles away from Mrs. McGowan's. Jimmy's trees were not as big, but he had several more trees than her. Jimmy had told me that there were a lot of trees that were popping up on his property because of a timber sale a few a few years ago.



Logan Hosaflook, WV-TACF summer intern

On another day, I traveled to Fayette County, WV to meet with Mr. Steven Swank, who owns a large property right on the edge of the New River Gorge. Mr. Swank has a ton of American

Chestnuts on his property. The trees were no more than 6" but there was a massive amount of them across his property. I took samples and collected information off some of his trees.

Recently, Mr. Rick Sypolt and I took a day to paint the boundary lines on the Bolgiano property in Randolph County, WV. The lines were painted with purple boundary paint, each tree within eye shot of the other. Some corners were found and flagged up, but others where not. The timber on the Bolgiano property could be very well managed and is ready to be harvested in my opinion.

There is still a lot of work to be done, and I did not accomplish as much as I wished to, but there was definitely knowledge gained and work done.

Recap of October TACF Board of Director's Meeting

The national Board of Directors holds quarterly meetings. As a result of the coronavirus pandemic, the meetings have been held over Zoom since March. As the president of the WV chapter, I am invited to the meetings, although I do not vote

since I am not a voting member of the board. One facet of the meeting was a summary of the open comment period on the transgenic tree by **Jim Searing**, chair of the TACF/ESF Public Comment Task Force. The open comment period ended 19 October 2020 and there were nearly 4,000 comments. Of those comments, 71% were positive, 28% negative and 1% neutral. Searing indicated that more than 800 members of TACF commented, which is about 20% of our membership. About two-thirds of the positive comments came from members of state chapters. Also, there were 48 positive comments from colleges and universities. Searing was extremely pleased with the number of positive comments and he is hopeful that the USDA-APHIS will eventually deregulate the State University of New York's transgenic tree. I am pleased to report that the WV chapter was one of four state chapters to submit a resolution in support of the transgenic tree program.

Jared Westbrook, TACF's Director of Science, was asking how do we assess ecological fitness of TACF's backcross trees. Generally, the following five assessments are made to determine the fitness of a tree: (1) is the main stem alive; (2) are cankers greater than 15cm long; (3) are cankers sunken; (4) is there exposed wood in a canker; and (5) is the fungus sporulating on a canker? Westbrook stated that small stem assays can be used to screen out the most susceptible trees in the greenhouse before they are outplanted in the field. A small

stem assay is conducted on greenhouse seedlings that are only a few millimeters in diameter. A scalpel is used to create a small wound in the stem and an agar block of the chestnut blight fungus is affixed to the wound. Resulting canker size is then assessed.

Westbrook also reported that DNA markers are proving to be very accurate as predictive models and the markers are strongly associated with blight resistance.



Dr. Jared Westbrook, TACF's Director of Science

TACF is not only breeding for resistance to the chestnut blight fungus, but also to ink disease, *Phytophthora* spp. At the greenhouse in Meadowview, VA, 4,000 seedlings were screened for *Phytophthora* and about 180 were resistant. Those seedlings can then be used in future breeding with the transgenic (oxalate oxidase) trees to increase resistance to not only chestnut blight but also *Phytophthora*.

It has been shown the chestnut trees can be forced to produce early flowering under very high light conditions. This work is being done with the transgenic trees and Westbrook reported that they hope to install high-light

chambers at the Meadowview farm next spring.

The Meadowview farm has been given a special permit to use pollen from transgenic trees. In 2020, 50 of the best trees were pollinated with transgenic pollen.

The Chinese and American chestnut genomes have been sequenced. To date, 32,154 genes have been annotated. They found the exact location of the Oxo gene—it is on the end of Chromosome 7, and the insertion of the Oxo gene did not disrupt any native genes. This work has been conducted by HudonAlpha in Huntsville, AL.



Sara Fitzsimmons, TACF's Director of Restoration, reported on the Lesesne State Forest in Roseland, VA. Lesesne is the fifth largest State Forest in Virginia with 421 acres dedicated to a research facility for American chestnut and a wildlife sanctuary. The Lesesne Forest comprises timbered, open, and semi-open forestland, two American and hybrid chestnut orchards, and small-acreage walnut research plots. There are approximately 34 acres presently devoted to American chestnut research with the balance of 388 acres in various stages of successional timber growth. The first planting of chestnut trees on the Lesesne State Forest took place in the spring of 1969, the year the forest was dedicated. Two kinds of chestnut trees were planted: pure American chestnut grown from nuts that were radiated to produce mutations that might provide resistance to

the chestnut blight; and hybrid chestnut seedlings provided by Dick Jaynes from the Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station. Hybrid seedlings were planted in the lower area where the dedication was held, and American trees and seedlings were planted in the upper area, about a half-mile north of the lower area. Both areas had to be cleared before planting, as they were old, abandoned fields. From 1969-1974, 10,000 American chestnut trees were planted. Since then B₁F₂, B₂F₂, B₃F₂ and B₄F₂ trees have been planted. Curiously, there is no regeneration of American seedlings in the forest of 10,000 trees and they are attempting to determine why.



Sara Fitzsimmons, TACF's Director of Restoration

Sara also reported that several members of the WV chapter collected scionwood last winter. **Dr. Hill Craddock** at the University of Tennessee, Chattanooga, and his wife, **Dr. Paolo Zannini**, grafted the scionwood. Chestnut is difficult to graft, and Hill and Paolo are masters at their craft. Hill was instructed to prioritize the WV scionwood. One of the

grafted seedlings is pictured below.



Grafted scionwood from West Virginia

Hill is suggesting that any scionwood collected for next year be collected in November/December rather than later in the later in the winter.



Dr. Hill Craddock, University of Tennessee, Chattanooga

Chestnut Memories

Many people can reflect on their life, but few actually put their memories into words. Thankfully, **William J. Wilcox**, took the time to recall his life in "Recollections", a 340-page book that he self-published. Wilcox reflected on his youth in Marion County in north-central West Virginia. Wilcox,

born in 1920, wrote about his family, the farm and farmhouse, the country kitchen, neighbors as well as trees and berry plants on the farm. The following is a portion of his recollection of chestnut in the chapter titled, *Wild Fruits and Nuts*.

In the early days of my youth, a good chestnut tree was considered an asset to any farm, both for its wood and for the nuts that the tree yielded just after the first fall frost. Although many farms had several nice clumps or groves of chestnuts, we had but three large trees at the milk gap, where we milked cows in the open. We carefully observed and cared for these trees each year. Dad always noted the amount of blossoms on them in the spring, and would check to see if they had weathered the late killing frosts. When it was apparent that they would yield a good harvest of nuts, the ground beneath the trees was kept free of weeds and debris to make harvesting easier.

It seems that humans were not the only ones who liked chestnuts. Long before the first frost, it was a common sight to find "chisleywhits" (mountain red squirrels), gray squirrels and fox squirrels cutting the green burs. As quickly as the nuts began to fall, the chipmunks got in on the act and filled his gallon-sized food storage chambers. When the crop was poor, these rodents oftentimes got almost all the harvest.

I was always fascinated by the apparent contradiction of the chestnut bur. With the outside so completely armored with hundreds of needle-sharp prickles,

how could the inside be so soft and smooth? So long as there were chestnuts, I marveled at the contrast.

Chestnuts were frequently harvested by groups of from three to ten or more young people. Choosing a nice warm Sunday afternoon after a good frost and after a few good windy days to shake the nuts down, they would tour the neighborhood collecting the satiny brown nuts. Since the leaves fell before the burs opened and showered down the nuts, the area beneath the trees was frequently swept clean of leaves with a piece of brush, revealing hundreds of nuts lying on the bare ground. Usually each person was allowed to keep the nuts they picked up, so there would be a mad scramble to see who could pick up the most in the shortest period of time.

Not all the chestnut-gathering was by youth. One elderly Polish gentleman was frequently seen walking down the country road with a gunny (burlap) sack half full of chestnuts after an afternoon of gathering. Many people used the sweet-tasting nuts as an additive for stuffing and dressings for turkey and chicken. I have eaten such stuffing and can understand why the nuts were added. It made a very tasty and nutritious dish.

Mostly nuts were eaten raw while sitting in front of the gas heating stove in the living room on cold winter evenings. Sometimes we would place several chestnuts on the apron of the heating reflector and allow them to roast. Roasting seemed to make them even

sweater tasting. The first time I tried roasting chestnuts, I produced a minor disaster. I was busily earing raw chestnuts while at least six were heating. Suddenly, it sounded as though someone had fired a gun in the living room. Within seconds, it sounded like a miniature war had erupted. There were pieces of chestnut hulls and meats all over the living room. Someone had forgotten to tell me to puncture the shells to allow the steam to escape. From then on, I took one of the old sharp-tined kitchen forks and punched three or four holes through the thin shells.

Somehow it seems no one has the time to gather wild fruits and nuts anymore. We buy a few commercial mixed nuts each Christmas, and a few shelled English walnuts and pecan meats for baking. It's been years since we gathered hickory or walnuts. There seems to be almost no butternut trees in the area where we now live, and the chestnuts are all gone.

TACF's Science and Technology Plan

Successful restoration of American chestnut across its former range requires the development of a population of genetically diverse American chestnuts that are resistant to at least two imported pathogens, *Cryphonectria parasitica* (chestnut blight) and *Phytophthora cinnamoni* (ink or root rot disease). While TACF is encouraged by the progress of its traditional backcross breeding program, and the largescale volunteer engagement it created, it is committed to incorporating the

rapidly advancing knowledge and capabilities of the biological sciences and the techniques of modern biotechnology to achieve this goal. To ensure that TACF's science programs are aligned with its goals and mission, TACF regularly evaluates its programs internally, and periodically conducts comprehensive external peer reviews. Since its inception, TACF has pursued several different major paths to restore the American chestnut. These have included the backcross breeding program, biotechnology, and hypovirulence. The backcross breeding program uses traditional plant breeding techniques to move genes for pathogen resistance from resistant chestnut species into American chestnuts. It has been implemented by TACF at its research farm in Meadowview, VA, and at orchards planted by sixteen different state chapters. The backcross breeding program is focused on identifying both blight and root rot resistance and incorporates genome mapping and marker-assisted selection to further refine and identify its most disease resistant trees suitable for large-scale restoration. The biotechnology program has developed under the auspices of the State University of New York, College of Environmental Science and Forestry (SUNY-ESF) and the New York Chapter of TACF. In this program, individual genes are tested for their ability to enhance pathogen resistance in American chestnut using the tools of genetic engineering and molecular biology. Through this search, a gene has been found and incorporated into American chestnut that enhances blight resistance significantly. Hypovirulence is a persistent viral infection of the blight fungus that reduces its virulence and has resulted in the biological control

of chestnut blight in several regions of the world. Hypovirulence and future biological controls may best be used when combined with the increased resistance afforded by the breeding and biotechnology advances. These programs are now reaching such a point of maturation that TACF is integrating them to shorten the time to achieve a population of trees of regeneration with the form and function of the original American chestnut for restoration.

GOAL Develop a population of genetically diverse American chestnut trees resistant to chestnut blight and ink disease. **Strategy** 1. Encourage and support the development of fundamental genetic information about American chestnut and chestnut resistance to blight and ink disease. 2. Use advances in biotechnology and knowledge to increase the accuracy, efficiency, and cost effectiveness of TACF's programs to develop disease resistant American chestnuts. 3. Work to further the use of genomics and genetic engineering in TACF's mission. 4. Ensure that TACF's programs for the development of trees for the restoration of American chestnut are based on the best available scientific information, use efficient technologies for production, and are responsive to new findings and techniques. 5. Monitor and support basic research on the use and efficacy of bio controls, such as hypovirulence, in controlling blight and ink disease.

Restoration will be accomplished when the American chestnut can continuously and sustainably evolve in the wild to reassume its former ecological role. TACF's goal is to reestablish the American chestnut's

function in its native range. The work-to-date (science and technology) will eventually progress into broad-scale production and ultimately natural regeneration. Our goal is to create viable plantings of trees that can spread naturally or with human help, each with the genetic variability necessary for long-term success under natural selection. This section sets goals and strategies explaining how the existing resources will be used in preparation for seedling and nut production at the level our developed science and proven silvicultural practices allow.

Restoration will involve increasing seedling and nut production at a large scale and will be a broadly cooperative venture. Partnerships are necessary across a variety of public and private entities, in full cooperation and coordination with the existing strong chapter, volunteer, and donor base.

GOAL 1. Science staff and board members collaborate with skilled and committed volunteers to create regional American chestnut restoration plans. **STRATEGY 1.1.** Provide chapter members with an outline and guidelines for developing regional restoration committees. 1.2. Create detailed maps of areas suitable for American chestnut restoration in each state. 1.3. Determine possible sources for seeds and seedlings to be used, when they may be available, and which nurseries would produce them. 1.4. Identify and begin working with possible cooperators to locate, establish, and maintain silvicultural, reintroduction, and restoration trials, and restoration plantings.

GOAL 2. Use TACF restoration planting protocol and "Best

Management Practices" with adaptations for regional differences in restoration plantings. **STRATEGY 2.1.** Use the current available science for decision support and "adaptive management" adjusted as needed. 2.2. Develop planting, monitoring, and reporting protocols for silvicultural, reintroduction, and restoration trials and plantings. Develop consistent monitoring protocol. 2.3. Conduct training sessions as needed for committed volunteers. 2.4. Encourage consistent reporting of data to central repository via database.

GOAL 3. Establish disease-resistant chestnut stands for seed production. **STRATEGY 3.1.** Develop adequate planting-stock production methods.

GOAL 4. Source wild American chestnut germplasm throughout the native range. **STRATEGY 4.1.** Develop clone banks and live-tree networks (a/k/a "germplasm conservation orchards" or "mother tree orchards") across chestnut's native range. 4.2. Identify and protect populations of American chestnut in natural forests, focusing on areas containing the greatest diversity.

GOAL 5. Identify and encourage mission-critical research **STRATEGY 5.1.** TACF Restoration and Science Oversight Committees will identify research priorities needed for mission success.

Promotion and Outreach. The promotion and outreach strategy is a comprehensive approach to develop TACF into a more externally focused organization in which fundraising and marketing are core functions. It will catapult TACF to become an organization with the scale and strategy required for success.

Efficient outreach to current and future donors, increased social media presence, and the maturation of the education program will complement and promote efforts and achievements in science and restoration. The product of our work, disease-resistant American chestnut populations, anticipates new technological advances that will require consistent funding in order to maintain pace with those innovations. We must move quickly to identify and cultivate our current donors, future prospects, and key stakeholders who are committed and invested in the restoration of this species and reach out to those audiences who may not know the compelling story of its comeback. These audiences include younger generations who will be reached by targeted educational leaders, social media platforms, and outreach to the public to ensure continued success.

GOAL 1. Fundraising and marketing is a core function of the organization, represented by a comprehensive, consolidated strategy that incorporates all operating arms of national, Meadowview and the state chapters. **STRATEGY 1.1.** Define the product, process, and outcome that we seek to achieve. **1.2.** Develop a specific strategy for targeting and growing major stakeholder groups and specific audiences. **1.3.** Develop a revenue strategy for each major stakeholder group and specific audience. **1.4.** Develop promotional strategies that target specific stakeholder groups and audiences to improve response by using the most effective message. **1.5.** Benchmark all efforts against industry best practices. **1.6.** Develop a specific fundraising campaign strategy. **1.7.** Prepare TACF for a 3rd Party Due

Diligence process to support its increased fundraising effort.

GOAL 2. TACF has an Educational Program (Outreach and Marketing) that describes and promotes the Foundation's vision and mission and that markets TACF goals in support of its fundraising efforts. **STRATEGY 2.1.** Pursue educational programs at arboreta by expanding ArbNet and key centers for environmental education. Focus on outreach that maximizes the number of people reached per dollar. **2.2.** Promote the public understanding of our mission by developing partnerships with middle and high school science teachers. **2.3.** Investigate a greater virtual presence to appeal to younger audiences who get most of their information online. **2.4.** Determine best group cultivation strategies and awareness campaigns to bring in new members and donors. This includes but is not limited to examining annual meeting structures and exploring new high leverage ways to communicate with our constituency. **2.5.** Support efforts to increase the membership and donor base, particularly for major gifts (both outright and deferred).

Organizational Advancement. The effectiveness of an organization is based on how well its parts function individually and as an integrated unit. The American Chestnut Foundation is a strong, multi-faceted non-profit organization comprising a board of directors and committees, professional and scientific staff, volunteers, members, partners, and donors. These organizational constituents and ambassadors depend on each other for clear and consistent communication, sharing of resources and technology, and building from existing and future

collaborative efforts toward a shared mission and vision. TACF is committed to advancing the efficient and effective function of each of these entities, individually and collectively, and to the overall advancement of the Foundation as a whole. TACF also recognizes that its current structure may require reorganization as the Foundation grows and evolves. National TACF will work with chapters in a collaborative process to streamline administrative operations, and to develop an action plan for the existing chapter-sponsored orchards. Along with the board and its working committees, we will ensure consistency of messages and communication across chapter and regional boundaries. This coordination will enhance the effectiveness of TACF and prepare all entities for the challenging work ahead.

GOAL 1. Encourage and coordinate collaboration, innovation and exploration of new scientific approaches and processes among the organizational entities. **STRATEGY 1.1.** Aggressively seek new partnerships and respective sources of funding with cutting-edge academic institutions, public agencies, and private technology firms. **1.2.** Share TACF national and chapter initiatives with each other and with the board.

GOAL 2. TACF staff provide necessary administrative services (e.g., financial) to merged state chapters as well as other chapters. **STRATEGY 2.1.** National administrative staff to work with affiliated chapters to explore merger potential. **2.2.** Launch, test, and continually maintain the revised TACF website.

GOAL 3. All TACF National staff and chapter leadership remain responsive, diverse, and flexible in all aspects of operations, administration, and communication, with safety and wellbeing emphasized as the core of all actions. **STRATEGY 3.1.** Conduct a periodic assessment through a scorecard, 360 feedback, or similar instrument across all entities of TACF. **3.2.** Maintain and strengthen a talent retention strategy to ensure we recruit and retain the best possible staff members. Use strong performance criteria when recruiting and retaining staff and volunteer leaders. **3.3.** Monitor and evaluate implementation of this strategic plan. **3.4.** Develop new field safety standards at Meadowview and disseminate to chapters.

GOAL 4. An incrementally stronger and more diverse board is effective in all aspects of TACF science, business, operations, and development. **STRATEGY 4.1.** The full TACF board of directors prepares for a significant and comprehensive capital campaign to achieve the strategies, actions, and outcomes identified in this strategic plan. **4.2.** As vacancies occur on the TACF board of directors, the Executive and Governance Committees will assess the range and identify gaps of skills, knowledge, and expertise of the existing board.

GOAL 5. TACF maintains its fiscal responsibility and leverages resources to the extent appropriate and possible. **STRATEGY 5.1.** TACF staff and board of directors prepare three-year budget projections, anticipating all aspects of operations and growth, identifying financial needs for research, restoration, promotion and outreach. **5.2.** To the extent possible, partners are sought to collaborate

and contribute to mutual successes while leveraging financial resources of both parties.

Next Steps. This strategic plan for The American Chestnut Foundation will guide all aspects of Foundation work. Actions for each strategy are identified in an accompanying implementation plan, to be used as guidelines for development of annual work plans for TACF staff, the board and its committees, and state chapters. The actions will be evaluated through annual reviews of progress, challenges, and completions.

Acknowledgements and Timeline

The American Chestnut Foundation was profoundly shaped in the development of this strategic plan. The process invited important dialogue, honest assessment, and significant points of disagreement and convergence. The result is a refreshed clarity of focus and a working document to be assessed annually for accountability and future program guidance

Copied from TACF's 2017-2027 Strategic Plan

Fall Planting in Pocahontas County

Preston County natives, **Robert Sypolt** and **Darrell Dean**, continued their travels across the state on behalf of the WV chapter. In October, Robert and Darrell planted chestnut seedlings on the property of **Steve McClain** in Pocahontas County. They were accompanied by a **Steve Carruth**, a neighbor of Steve McClain and a retired forester. Carruth has been instrumental in connecting Sypolt and Dean with landowner McClain. It takes a network of people to help with chestnut restoration.



Landowner Steve McClain (left), Robert Sypolt (middle) and retired forester Steve Carruth (right) standing behind a newly planted chestnut seedling. Photo taken by Darrell Dean.

Unexpected Find

WV chapter member **Valerie LaPolla**, a resident of Lewisburg, was out checking a potential Pawpaw along the stream behind her house when she stumbled across a chestnut. The Pawpaw venture ended up being a bust, but fortunately, Valerie was looking down and spotted chestnut leaves. No live branches were accessible, but she was able to find some leaves, pictured below.



Leaves from the Lewisburg tree have American characteristics.



LaPolla's tree is >5" inches in diameter.

Valerie's first thought was the tree was probably Chinese as there are many Chinese chestnuts in town. However, the leaves were long and narrow, an American chestnut characteristic. It took Valerie a good 5 minutes to find the actual tree. She couldn't believe it was almost literally in her own backyard which is actually in the city limits of Lewisburg.

Chestnut Identification

Unlike the finding from Valerie LaPolla whose tree turned out to be American chestnut, there are scores of other inquiries from around the state that turn out not to be American chestnut. I received a number of emails this summer/fall from the general public who assured me that they have an American chestnut tree. This is welcome news since the WV chapter hopes to install several American chestnut orchards (germplasm conservation orchards or GCOs) in the spring of 2021. Since each GCO requires 10 different sources of American chestnut from the state, new sources are always welcome. Unfortunately, all the general public leads turned out to be Chinese chestnut. Below is an example of a tree from Hancock County. The picture is clear enough

that the tan twigs with hairs can be seen, along with the shiny leaves, both characteristics of Chinese chestnut. While it is disappointing that the trees were identified as Chinese, I am grateful that individuals still reach out to the chapter. There is always the chance that one of these findings will turn out to be American chestnut. And the chapter is always looking for additional wild American trees with nuts to add to our GCOs. Keep looking as every new tree helps!



Chinese chestnut leaves from Hancock County have shiny leaves and stem hairs, Chinese characteristics.

News from the Summit Bechtel Reserve

The national Boy Scout Camp at the Summit Bechtel Reserve (SBR) is a jewel in the cap of West Virginia. Not only is the camp a showcase for our state, but it exposes youth from all over the world to the beauty of West Virginia. The advocate for a chestnut presence at the camp is WV-TACF treasurer, **Sam Muncy** from Philippi.



Sam Muncy with chestnut seedlings.

Sam is a tireless worker on behalf of the WV chapter as he has taken on the responsibility for not only chestnut plantings, but he has organized chestnut booths at several Boy Scout Jamborees held at the SBR.

Sam started a program for scouts who find wild chestnut trees at the SBR and document the tree on TreeSnap. The scout is then allowed to name the tree. Sam has wooden blanks and a camp ranger will allow the scout to hang the name on the tree. Sam initiated this program to get scouts interested in looking for American chestnuts when they are hiking. Sam also organized a workday on 24 October to take care of the chestnuts that have been planted at the SBR. Sam is planning on the establishment of a germplasm conservation orchard at the SBR. The chapter thanks Sam for all his efforts at the SBR.

WV-TACF Officers

(Elected in October 2020)

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Vice President—Dr. Don Kines
Treasurer—Sam Muncy
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