The West Virginia Chapter of The American Chestnut Foundation NEWSLETTER

In the heart of American chestnut's natural range

April 2026

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WVU 'Meet and Greet'

Earlier this spring, West Virginia University's Davis College of Agriculture and Natural Resources held a 'meet and greet' with students, an event sponsored by WVU Career Services. The WV chapter was invited to participate to inform students about TACF's goal for restoration. There were 20-25 organizations present. Students rotated every 6-8 minutes from table to table; it was like speed dating! WV chapter board member **Amy Metheny** and newsletter editor **Mark Double** represented the chapter. While the WV chapter did not have any positions to offer the students, many of them were interested in our story.

WV chapter Board Member, Amy Metheny, welcomes students at WVU's Davis College 'Meet and Greet.

MOU for Summit Bechtel Reserve

Sam Muncy and **Cassie Stark** (TACF's Director of Science Implementation) agreed to put together a Memorandum of Understanding for the chestnut sites at the Summit Bechtel Reserve (SBR). The goals are to reintroduce trial plantings with signage, plant a demonstration orchard with American, Chinese and hybrid trees (10 each), and develop an education program for the scouts that may become part of an ecology merit badge. Sam indicated that the proposed Antoline Conservation Building plans are not moving forward. Groups like the Order of the Arrow might adopt some of the chestnut plantings at the SBR. Plans to fence a 2-acre chestnut planting may not be in the works, since a fenced site is considered permanent, and that does not coincide with the Scouting plans. A fenced area will need to be approved.

WV Chapter Summer Intern

The WV chapter has hired a summer intern to visit many of the 100 chestnut sites around the state. We had three excellent applicants, and **Will Simpson** was chosen over the other two candidates. Will is a senior at West Virginia University working toward a B.S. in Environmental, Soil and Water Science with a minor in Environmental Microbiology. Will has course work relative to trees (plant pathology, GIS, forest ecology and mycology), and work experience with *Adventure West Virginia* (zipline and aerial high ropes specialist) and Bartlett Tree Experts (arborist intern). His course work coupled with his customer service experience will make him well suited for the summer internship.

Will Simpson, the WV chapter summer intern

Chestnut sites in West Virginia range from Ohio County in the northern panhandle to Jefferson County in the eastern panhandle to the southern coal fields. Will will visit as many of the sites as possible to assess the trees, take inventory and pictures. He will document if there is evidence of the chestnut blight fungus, flowering trees and provide a detailed description as how to find the sites. The chestnut sites range from a few years-old to those that are more than 30 years-old. Some sites have an associated GPS location many do not. Locating some of the sites may prove difficult. Will is scheduled to work 11 weeks beginning in mid-May. Some chapter members may be asked to help Will locate chestnut sites, and accompany him to the trees.

Science Article

TACF's Director of Research, **Dr. Jared Westbrook** was the lead author of an article that was published in the prestigious *Science* Journal. *Science* is leading multidisciplinary international journal of peer-reviewed research. The title of the article is: **Genomic approaches to accelerate American chestnut restoration.**

Jared demonstrates that recurrent genomic selection (RGS), a method long used in agriculture and animal breeding, can predict blight resistance in chestnut trees using DNA data alone. The result is substantially shorter breeding cycles and greater precision in developing resistant trees. The scale of the article is reflected in the fact that there are 64 authors on this paper, from molecular biologists, to *Phytophthora* experts to TACF staff, to TACF chapter members to collaborators all across the country from California to Connecticut. One of the authors works in Germany This comprehensive article reflects the efforts that hundreds of people have assisted with as we work toward restoration of American chestnut.

A published paper in *Science* reflects the dedication and scientific rigor behind TACF's mission. It also affirms the decades-long commitment of our grassroots supporters, whose investment has played a major role in this achievement. Together, we have shown that sustained effort and belief in a bold mission and vision can lead to measurable progress.

This breakthrough signals that chestnut restoration is not only possible, but that it's advancing with powerful new tools. Beyond the American chestnut, this

work offers a model for conserving other threatened tree species worldwide.

Monarch Data Center in Mason County

The vast majority of chestnuts that are collected each fall for seedling production come from the former WV state tree nursery in Mason County. For several years, there has been discussion that a Houston, TX-based company, Fidelis purchased the land surrounding the tree nursery to build a large data center. Several attempts on the part of the WV chapter to find out if these trees will be affected, no one from the WV Secretary of Commerce office nor the office of the Governor ever responded.

In March 2026, a new announcement was made by WV **Governor Patrick Morrisey** that NVIDIA was now the owner of the Mason County property. From a news report, the following article appeared:

A new West Virginia campus is targeting 1.35GW AI compute with microgrid power and NVIDIA systems, built to support large-scale data centre workloads. Nscale has set out plans to build and operate a large-scale AI data centre campus in West Virginia, supported by a letter of intent with Microsoft for 1.35 gigawatts of AI compute capacity.

The Monarch AI campus is positioned as a flagship deployment of NVIDIA's Vera Rubin GPUs, using NVL72 systems engineered with the NVIDIA Vera Rubin DSX AI Factory reference design.

The new data centre, called the Monarch Compute Campus in Mason County, will be constructed on a site covering up to 2,250 acres. Nscale secured the site through its acquisition of AIP Corp (American Intelligence & Power Corporation). The location includes what is described as the US's first state-certified AI microgrid, with a power runway that scales beyond eight gigawatts.

Under the agreement, Nscale is responsible for constructing and operating the data centre infrastructure required to host the GPU deployment. The delivery is structured in phases beginning in late 2027, forming one of the largest dedicated AI compute environments globally. The campus operates under a long-term framework that combines a multi-year compute services term with a long-term data centre lease structure.

"This collaboration with Microsoft marks a pivotal milestone both for Nscale and the development of the Monarch Campus," says Josh Payne, CEO of Nscale. "By integrating our specialized AI infrastructure with Microsoft's global platform, we are creating a foundation for innovation that can scale alongside the most ambitious AI models in the world".

While the WV governor and legislature are fully supportive of this initiative as a major economic development driver, local citizens are opposed to the projected plant. A group identified as "We are Mason County" is opposing the data center due to the conversion of thousands of acres of farmland. This group has concerns about the environmental impact and the shift away from agricultural land use. Local landowners are worried about everything from power demand and water use to noise and health impacts.

WV chapter member, **David King**, with the Youth Leadership Association, wrote an informative letter to **Rick Handley**, President of the Mason County Commission. David provided historic information on the American chestnut and the role the Clements nursery chestnut trees play in TACF's goal of species restoration. David asked that as Monarch moves forward with their facility, the one-of-a-kind chestnut orchard might be included in an environmental partnership with TACF.

The loss of 200 American chestnuts at this Mason County site will significantly impact the WV chapter to deliver seedlings to its members and to state and local agencies.

WV Spring Chapter Meeting

A group of twenty attended the WV chapter spring meeting at the Mineral County Health Department in Keyser on 21 March. WV chapter president, **Bernie Coyle**, led the meeting that began at 1:00 pm. Coffee, tea and water were provided by Bernie and Linda Coyle. After introductions of those in attendance, Bernie provided an overview of the history of the American chestnut, and the aftermath of eastern forests following the introduction of the chestnut blight fungus (*Cryphonectria parasitica*) from Japan. Several in attendance were appreciative of the information provided by Bernie, as they are new members. In addition to Bernie and Linda, five other WV chapter board members were in attendance: **Dr. Melissa Thomas-Van Gundy; Carla Kesling; Robert Sypolt, Dr. William MacDonald,** and **Jeff Kochenderfer.**

WV chapter president, Bernie Coyle

Mark Double highlighted some of the chapter activities from 2025-2026 as seen below

Talks/Presentations:

Elkins Tree Board, March 2025
WVU Horticulture Class, April 2025
WV Master Gardeners Conference, April 2025
Central Preston Middle School, April 2025
TCEnergy, Charleston, April 2025
Maryland Native Plant Festival, May 2025
Hampshire County Fair, July 2025
Apple Butter Festival, September 2025
New Creek Homeowner's Assoc., October 2025
Fort New Salem Spirit of Christmas, November 2025
WAJR Radio Interview, November 2025
WVU Horticulture Class, April 2026
Master Naturalist Conference, July 2026

Work Days:

Summit Bechtel Reserve, April 2025
St. George Planting Assessment, April 2025
Parsons Orchard, June 2025
Mountwood Park, April 2026

Meeting participants listen to WV chapter president, Bernie Coyle.

Some of the participants at the WV chapter spring meeting.

Mark then discussed the two Recurrent Genomic Selection (RGS) plantings that will be established this spring at Burnsville and Parsons. The power of the RGS model is compounding improvement. Each generation becomes stronger than the last because we are not restarting. We are learning, and field data feeds the next breeding cycle. That feedback loop turns breeding into an engine instead of a static program. This is how restoration becomes durable.

Chestnut is the proving ground. If we can build a genomic restoration system for one of the hardest cases in North America, we now have a platform that can extend to ash, pine, hemlock, and eventually global forest restoration efforts. The significance of this work is architectural. We are building infrastructure conservation that has lacked historically. Using the RGS model, TACF aims to double population-average resistance and increase forest competitiveness in the next decade.

Bernie then showed pictures of American chestnuts on the Allegheny Front at Keyser. Many of the American chestnuts that Bernie collected nuts from last fall are beneath giant wind. There are hundreds of American chestnuts near Keyser as American chestnut grows well on rocky, steep slopes. Historically, American chestnut was the dominant species in this area of West Virginia. Bernie collected chestnuts from eight trees with as many as 90 nuts from just one tree.

There was discussion about the purpose of germplasm conservation orchards (GCOs), orchards of native American chestnut trees. The reasons to plant GCOs are many:

- Propagate the species
- Preserve local genomes
- Display demonstration plantings
- Personal satisfaction-- a sense of doing something to help with reforestation
- Potentially find trees with some inherent resistance.

Discussion of other activities for 2026 included:

- A GCO at Mountwood Park outside Parkersburg was planted in April--an effort led by **Brian Smith** from Tyler County.
- TACF hired a new mid-Atlantic Regional Science Coordinator, **Kaitlyn Harless**. She takes over for Cassie Stark who was promoted to Director of Science Implementation. Kaitlyn stated on 23 March 2026. We hope she will join us for the two RSG plantings this spring.

Kaitlyn obtained her B.S. in Biology in 2019 from James Madison University and later earned a M.S. in Biology in 2025 from Virginia Commonwealth University. Prior to joining TACF, she worked for the Virginia Department of Forestry as both an Invasive Species Technician and Research Technician. Kaitlyn will be working out of the Charlottesville, VA office.

Mountwood Park Planting

WV chapter member, **Brian Smith** provided a summary of the Mountwood Planting. As scheduled, a chapter work day was held on 4 April 2026. Chapter member **Gary Flinchbaugh** made the cross-state trip from Green Spring (Hampshire County) to join the local folks and complete an eight-person crew. We worked for four hours and planted 107 nuts from six different mother trees. After planting, the group installed a pvc sleeve to protect against voles, a Blue X tube to promote quick vertical growth, and a wire cage to protect against the deer. Gary Flinchbaugh and **Olivia Roberts** (a Tyler County Consolidated High School student) each won the drawing for two American chestnut Seedlings.

After the work was completed, the group enjoyed a cookout with burgers, hot dogs, and a little comradery. During the five different days that Brian was present at the planting site, tens of hikers and bikers passed by and a majority politely inquired about our goals and thanked us for volunteering to improve the area.

Jeremy Cross, the Wood County Parks Commissioner, gave thanks to the work team and the whole chapter. The park employees have agreed to mow the rows leaving only the trimming as the Chapter's responsibility. In addition, there is room to expand if we wish in the future. Many thanks to all who worked on this planting. A few pictures of the event are seen below.

Gary Flinchbaugh and Jackson Smith add a Blue X tube to a direct-seeded chestnut.

Tyler Consolidated High School Student, Olivia Roberts, gives a thumbs up after a successful planting.

Brian Smith and Sydney Smith install wire caging to protect the seedlings from deer.

Brian and his family members have planted chestnuts over the past 20 years on the family farm in Friendly. Their planting numbers are as follows:

- 2005 10 trees
- 2014 1 tree
- 2024 7 trees
- 2025 178 trees
- 2026 533 trees
- **Total** **729 trees**

That is a very impressive total, making the Smith plantings one of the largest chestnut plantings in the state.

Brian wrote to the Superintendent at North Bend State Park to see if the park might be interested in a GCO in 2027. The WV chapter needs more enthusiastic members like Brian!

Chapter Flash Talks

The American Chestnut Foundation held a spring board meeting for the national staff in Abingdon, VA on April 9-11. One of the items on the agenda was the opportunity for each of the 16 state chapter to give a 5-minute presentation (Flash Talk) regarding their chapter's activities. Below is a brief recap of each presentation.

Georgia Chapter--Dr. Martin Chipollini

The Georgia chapter held their second Chestnut Oberfest, an outreach opportunity that included a chestnut beer (a seasonal 7% red ale), provided by the River Remedy Brewing Company in Rome, GA. The chapter purchased chestnut chips from a firm in Michigan. This outreach opportunity included seedlings sales. Another highlight of the chapter was a production by **Chuck Leavell**, keyboardist for the Allman Brothers Band, and musical director for the Rolling Stones. Chuck also toured and recorded with Eric Clapton, George Harrison and John Mayer. Chuck is a dedicated spokesperson for TACF, and he is an active member of the GA-TACF. He has hosted research plots, including planting some blight-resistant chestnut trees at his Twiggs County, GA farm. Chuck appeared on Georgia Public Broadcasting with Martin Chipollini, highlighting forest restoration on his show, *America's Forests*. The Georgia chapter was also involved with ***Food and the Soul of America***--a 250th American Celebration. This organization features nationally known experts, authors and television personalities in an effort to reconnect people to traditions and collected legacies brought to us by food and drink. Finally, the Georgia chapter partnered with *Trees Atlanta* where chestnut seedlings were distributed to 100 individuals.

Carolinas Chapter--Peggy McDonald

Peggy stated that having the national office in Asheville is a huge benefit to their chapter, and she commented that the Asheville staff is always willing to assist when needed. Peggy noted the Carolinas chapter involvement with the Mountain Science Expo in Asheville. The Expo is a part of the larger NC Science Festival, a state-wide and month-long event dedicated to celebrating the impact of science educationally, culturally, and economically on the State of NC. The hope is to inspire children to pursue, and adults to support the sciences. The Expo features exhibitors from across the region, special interactive activities and more. Peggy also reported on American chestnut seedling sales at the NC Arboretum in Buncombe County.

Tennessee Chapter--Zach Anderson, the new Southern Regional Science Coordinator

Zach was tasked by TACF to grow Recurrent Genomic Selection trees. This was done in conjunction with Small Stem Assays (SSAs). This is a technique where small 1"-diameter chestnut seedlings are inoculated with

a plug of the chestnut blight fungus to ascertain, at a young age, their resistance or susceptibility. Zach featured the research at Tennessee Tech chestnut orchard in Cookeville, TN. Tennessee Tech plays a key role in the research and recovery of American chestnut, a species often referred to as 'ghosts' due to the blight that reduced massive, towering trees into shrubby remnants. Zach indicated the TN chapter harvested 9,000 open-pollinated nuts.

Kentucky Chapter--Dave Jackson
Dave highlighted the volunteers and partnerships that are now participating due to the efforts of the KY chapter president, **Ken Darnell**. The KY chapter is increasing its footprint, as they have 1,100 Facebook followers. President Darnell is constantly recruiting and inviting volunteers. At the Daniel Boone National Forest in Winchester, KY, 300, three-foot chestnuts were planted. Dave commented that the chapter has challenges with maintaining plantings, especially on private property. Sometimes, trees are planted on private land, and maintained for years, only to find out that the land was sold to parties who are not interested in chestnuts. The KY chapter has many partners: U.S. Forest Service; KY Division of Forestry; KY National Guard; Eastern KY University; U.S. Army Corps of Engineers; University of KY Forestry School; and Berea College to name a few. Dave stated that having partners such as these is much more beneficial than private property owners.

Maryland Chapter--Jeff White
The MD chapter rents space from the Baltimore County Agricultural Center. This space affords them the ability to raise 1,000 chestnut seedlings, with the option to expand if needed. Students from Loyola University volunteered with the chestnut potting. Leaf samples from the Monocacy orchard were collected for genetic testing. The trees in this orchard were hand-pollinated, so they are hoping for good genetic results. The Washington Sewer and Sanitary Commission helps with the mowing of this orchard. Jeff also highlighted orchards at the University of Maryland, Western Maryland Research and Education Center in Keedysville and the Izaak Walton League in Rockville, MD. Jeff talked about the work on a MD-TACF member, **Dean Yap** from Garrett County who is very helpful in locating surviving American chestnuts in western MD. The MD chapter partnered with the Milkhouse Brewing Company to produce a chestnut lager for their chestnut festival that was held on 19 Oct 2025. Like the GA chapter, the MD chapter purchased chestnut chips from Michigan. A 25-pound bag of chips cost $300. At the festival, fresh chestnuts ($8/bag) and seedlings were sold.

Virginia Chapter--Clint Morris
Clint talked about the beginning of an Adventure Breeding program in Grayson County (southwestern VA) where volunteers look for large, surviving American (LSAs) chestnuts. The search is on Whitetop Mountain, Virginia's second-highest peak (5,520') located near Mount Rogers. Whitetop Mountain was named for the white catkins from American chestnuts that covered the mountain in June, prior to the devastation by the chestnut blight fungus. Some of the LSAs are magical in size. They are also finding LSAs in the Meadows of Dan, an unincorporated community in Patrick County near the intersection of the Blue Ridge Parkway. The VA chapter is collecting leaf tissues and pollen from these large trees. The best time to find LSAs is in June when the chestnuts are flowering. The goal is to eventually plant orchards of progeny from LSAs.

Pennsylvania/New Jersey Chapter--Dan O'Keefe
One of the highlights of this chapter was the partnership with the Brandywine Conservancy and Museum of Art in Chadds Ford, PA. This is a non-profit organization dedicated to preserving the natural and cultural resources of the Brandywine-Christina watershed through land conservation, water protection and sustainable planning. The art museum is in conjunction with the Wyeth family. American painter and illustrator, N.C. Wyeth (1882-1945) painted, '***The Last of the Chestnuts***' in 1916. It is an oil-on-canvas painting depicting the impact of the chestnut blight on the American landscape. The 1916 painting features cut American chestnuts and stumps near a barn. The chapter located the barn in 2026 and found two remnant chestnut stumps that were in the painting. This painting is currently in the Brandywine Museum of Art.

'The Last of the Chestnuts' by N.C. Wyeth

Maine Chapter--Mark McCollough

Their chapter has increased it membership from 197 in 2022 to 331 in 2025. They have recruited members by offering two chestnut seedlings for a $40 membership in TACF. Mark stated that members need to be: seen; heard; valued; contribute; and belong. They found that getting a TACF magazine three times per year is not enough. The ME chapter puts out two newsletter a year through Mail Chimp, but only 40% of those receiving the newsletter even open it. Young members don't bother with a message if it cannot fit on a cellphone screen. The ME chapter wants to develop partnerships to restore a community approach. To do this, they developed two programs: *Chestnuts Across Maine*; and *Chestnut Chasers*. Young members want to be outdoors, not in meetings. The objective is to get 60 small groups across ME to find and document 10-20 native American chestnuts. These programs have been very successful.

Volunteers from TACF and the Maine Coast Heritage Trust plant a grove of chestnut trees at the Cousins River Fields and Marsh Preserve in Yarmouth, Maine.

Chestnut Chasers gather around a chestnut near Bridgton, Maine.

Connecticut--Jack Swatt

Jack reported on the Recurrent Genomic Selection orchards that were planted in 2025. The have a number of backcross orchards in CT where they hand-pollinated and harvested nuts. They are still finding Large Surviving American chestnuts in CT. The chapter has 12 germplasm conservation orchards. Members set up booths at the Hartford Flower and Garden show. The CT chapter is strengthening their relationship with the CT Agricultural Experiment Station (CAES) in New Haven with **Dr. Susanna Keriö**. The CT chapter has hired an intern to get the chestnut trees from Lockwood and Sleeping Giant into Dentatabase, a repository for all chestnuts known to TACF, whether orchards or native trees. The New England region recently hired a new Regional Science Coordinator, and they have set up an office at the Griswold Research Lab in Griswold, a research farm operated by CAES.

Following the chapter presentations, there was some discussion about Deer Buster fencing, an option for a 100-200-tree orchard. A typical wire fence can cost $14,000 but the Deer Buster nylon fence is only a few thousand dollars. The options are 6', 7.5' and 8' fencing. The fencing is easy-to-install and includes no-dig line posts, lightweight polypropylene material that creates a barrier against deer and is nearly invisible from as little as 20'. The fence has self-locking ties, kinked to ground stakes and warning banners to let people know there is a fence in place.

TACF President and CEO, **Michael Goergen** commented that we are experiencing both the past and the present. We are learning from the past while working toward the future.

Four-week-old chestnut seedlings in the West Virginia University greenhouse