

Basin students reclaim mine site

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“Where there be mountains, there be chestnuts.” Early explorer to the region, Hernando De Soto, penned those words into his 1542 journal.

As many as one in four trees in early Appalachian forests were American chestnuts and there is a move to restore reclaimed mine land to the original flora and fauna, as much as possible.

Copper Basin High School ecology students planted 50 blight-resistant American chestnut hybrids on the Mary Mine land reclaimed by Copperhill Industries in honor of Arbor Day on April 17.

Teacher Ginger Montgomery said it’s amazing to think that her and the students were working the same land their grandparents or great-grandparents worked.

The students broke into three groups, hauled wheel-barrows full of rich dirt to partially refill the large pre-dug holes, loosened the potted roots and gently placed the tree into its new home, tamping the soil all around the young tree. They worked along an estimated half-mile U-shaped ridge.

A post-planting pizza party and pride were the rewards for the hard days work.

Trees and tools for the planting event were provided by the Coal Creek Watershed Foundation, Schnabel Engineering, and the U.S. Office of Surface Mining.

Barry Thacker, Professional Engineer, with Coal Creek Watershed Foundation and Schnabel Engineering said, “everything in the Basin today – schools, homes, churches, roads, and businesses – owe their existence to the copper mines.

“This is a fitting tribute to one of the mines that gave communities in the Basin their existence. Imagine the great-great-grandchildren of these



News Observer photo/Lauren Bearden

Chris Miller, inspector with the Office of Surface Mining, shared how the Forestry Reclamation Approach worked and how to best plant chestnut trees with students from Copper Basin High School. The students and representatives from Coal Creek Watershed Foundation, Schnabel Engineering and the U.S. Office of Surface Mining gathered to plant 50 American chestnut trees as a reclamation project for the inactive Mary Mine in Copperhill. Students who attended the event include Luke Placher, Virginia Chambers, Kaitlynn Cribbs, Abbygail Smith, Maggie Dobbins, Cole Fowler, Nick Gibson, Zach Womble, Seth Allen, Eric Frinkley, Kaitlin Coleman, Kendra Swinehart, Adrianna Cross, Heaven Self, Beth Woodby, Alex Schuler, Callie Cole, Ashleigh Brackett, Breeanna O’Neal, Eli Payne, Nichole Peak, Keaton Michens and Haley Phillips.

students visiting the site someday to view the breath-taking beauty of an American chestnut forest and saying, ‘My great-great-grandparents planted these trees.’”

Various agencies research and experiment to learn the best long-term methods for restoring the land. The Mary Mine has been, and continues to be, restored using the Forestry Reclamation Approach. By the end of the year, 30,000 hardwood trees will have been planted at this site.

Chris Miller, an inspector with the Office of Surface Mining said the method prepares the land like a garden, with the crop being forest trees. Not only is the land carefully prepared prior to planting but there is a very specific way to plant chestnut trees to give them the best chance of thriving.

The event was hosted by Copperhill Industries, Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation, Glenn Springs Development, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.



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Sophomore Alex Schuler holds a blight-resistant American chestnut hybrid level as fellow Copper Basin High School sophomores shovel rich dirt around the young tree. Those shoveling are, from left, Heaven Self, Beth Woodby and Nick Gibson. The Arbor day event was a part of an ongoing reclamation project which will see 30,000 hardwoods planted at this site by the end of the year. Trees and tools were provided by the Coal Creek Watershed Foundation, Schnabel Engineering and the U.S. Office of Surface Mining.



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Senior Haley Phillips steadies the wheel barrow as Keaton Michens, a senior, loads American chestnut trees to be planted along a nearly half-mile U-shaped ridge at the reclaimed Mary Mine in Copperhill. Copper Basin High School students celebrated the city’s heritage and Arbor Day by planting 50 American chestnut trees.



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Agency representatives and students from Copper Basin High School formed three teams to tackle planting 50 blight-resistant American chestnut hybrid trees in the reclaimed Mary Mine in Copperhill. The land was reclaimed by Copperhill Industries using the Forestry Reclamation Approach. One team was comprised of, from left, Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation Logan Kennedy, seniors Keaton Michens, Breeanna O’Neal, Nichole Peak, Eli Payne and Haley Phillips.



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