

New life at old strip mine: Students plant trees as part of reclamation effort

By Bob Fowler

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Lake City Middle School students Ceirra Grisham, left, and Ally Pyles, right, help Coal Creek Co. General Manager Brent Galloway, center, plant a tree at an old strip mine site in Anderson County.

LAKE CITY - An army of children wearing bright-green bandanas planted a forest worth of trees atop an old strip mine site Monday.

Carrying shovels and orange digging dibbles, 110 children from four schools traded books for buckets of tree seedlings.

They planted hundreds of American chestnuts that they'd grown since February in pots in their classrooms.

White oak, yellow poplar, white pine and black walnut tree seedlings were also plopped into holes between rough furrows plowed on mountain slopes.

"We're doing this so it will become a forest," said Barry Thacker, president of the nonprofit Coal Creek Watershed Foundation.

For Thacker, Monday's trek was part of a years-long effort to bring back American chestnuts and improve the area in and around the Coal Creek watershed.

The chestnut, once king of Eastern forests, was decimated by blight and all but vanished.

Some of the seedlings planted Monday should survive and give clues on growing special blight-resistant chestnut hybrids, said Carol Moore, also with the foundation.

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The freshly plowed sites at the base of Cross Mountain - up a steep gravel road at the end of Beech Grove Lane in Anderson County - was former grassland on compacted soil.

That was standard procedure for strip mine restoration until recently, Thacker said. Now, the trend is to disc up soil and plant trees as part of the reclamation effort.

That's fine with landowner The Coal Creek Co., which was founded in 1872 and now owns 72,000 acres in Anderson, Campbell, Roane and Morgan counties.

While timbering and strip-mining once reigned on those mountainous lands, the company now leases some of its property for oil and natural gas drilling and sells permits for off-road enthusiasts to explore 250 miles of trails.

Still, years from now, some of the trees planted Monday will likely be harvested as part of the company's sustainable forestry practice, company General Manager Brent Galloway said.

The students who planted the 1,500 trees Monday attend Lake City Middle, Briceville Elementary, Elk Valley School in Campbell County, and Anderson County's alternative school called the Learn Center.

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