

Forest Health Initiative

Advancing Forest Health Through Biotechnology

News Release: New Effort Will Investigate Potential of Biotechnology to Aid in Addressing Forest Health Crisis

RESEARCH TRIANGLE PARK, N.C. Jan. 30, 2009 – Research Institutions, Government, Environmental Experts and Leading Non-profit and For-profit Corporations Launch Effort to Determine Role of Forest Biotechnology in Fight Against Forest Diseases and Pests.

Operating as the “Advancing Forest Health Through Biotechnology,” initiative and led by a steering committee comprised of representatives from the U.S. Forest Service, The U.S. Endowment for Forestry and Communities (the Endowment), Duke Energy, The Nature Conservancy and Environmental Defense Fund, 35 interested stakeholders met to develop a plan that will test the potential application of forest biotechnology as a viable tool in protecting and restoring our nation’s forests from the ravages of pests and disease.

The work is founded on the understanding that science cannot be addressed in a vacuum but rather must be developed in concert with societal understanding and needs, and the regulatory processes designed to protect them. To incorporate that ideal, there will be three separate work groups to address regulatory issues, societal and environmental implications, and scientific steps – all working in concert to address the issue as a whole.

Addressing the group, Steering Committee Chairman Carlton Owen, President of the Endowment said, “We have come to the point where we simply don’t have the luxury of time that affords using only 20th Century tools to deal with 21st Century challenges. New threats to forest health, exacerbated by climate change, and the rapid nature of their expansion call for new tools in the fight. Forest biotechnology, developed and deployed under the right circumstances, may offer opportunities to protect forest health not practical with any other technology or response.”

The initiative plans to build on the extensive research already accomplished on the American chestnut by the American Chestnut Foundation and others as a model system for how biotechnology can potentially protect trees, and restore species devastated by disease. The near-term goal is to safely and effectively develop an American chestnut that is resistant to the chestnut blight and root rot, and which can be safely restored to our forests.

“Biotechnology has become an essential tool in the fields of human medicine and agricultural health and productivity,” said Dr. Ann Bartuska, Deputy Chief of Research and Development of the U.S. Forest Service. “With the increased pressure on our forest and range ecosystems coming from introduced pests and pathogens, and increased pathogen pressure from climate change, biotechnology needs to become part of our tool-kit for resolving ecosystem health issues.”

With assistance from experienced coordinating organizations, the committees have a three-year plan to bring resources together in a way unprecedented in addressing forest health challenges. Duke Energy, the first corporate sponsor, has joined the Forest Service and the Endowment in pledges that total \$5.5 million toward the estimated \$10 million necessary to achieve success.

“Duke Energy is supporting this project for a variety of reasons, especially the early focus on the American chestnut. We see an opportunity to reintroduce a beloved native species that was once abundant in much of the area we serve and provided many environmental and economic benefits. We also see the threats to other native species, such as the impact of the Emerald Ash Borer. We hope other corporations will join us in support of this endeavor to preserve our forests and the benefits they provide,” said Mariann Quinn, Director of Environmental Policy at Duke Energy.

“This is a “Manhattan-type” project. We know what we need and have a plan to get there, but there are significant gaps in the science. We are also in uncharted territory from a regulatory standpoint. We want to develop trees that can both fight off disease and naturally reproduce – something never done before. And it all has to be done with full collaboration among public stakeholders and environmental experts. That is why the engagement of the Environmental Defense Fund, The Nature Conservancy and other groups focused on conservation, the environment, and human and social wellbeing is so critical,” said Owen.

“Identifying potential techniques – both old and new – that yield the greatest opportunity for protection and restoration of our forests and the communities that rely on them is of vital importance,” added Paul Trianosky, The Nature Conservancy’s Southern U.S. Director of Forest Conservation.

“Forest biotechnology has the potential to deliver significant environmental benefits, including the restoration of rare forest ecosystems and combating diseases and pests made worse by climate change. At the same time, in the absence of proper research, forethought and oversight, forest biotechnology could pose a significant threat by introducing species and genetic material into the environment that interfere with native ecosystems, “ said Robert Bonnie, Vice President for Land Conservation and Wildlife at Environmental Defense Fund. “Environmental Defense Fund is engaging in this effort in order to help ensure that forest biotechnology is developed, introduced and used responsibly and with appropriate safeguards, to ensure that it benefits rather than harms forests. We believe that the effort to restore the American chestnut – a once-dominant species nearly wiped out by an introduced disease -- is a suitable 'laboratory' to provide an early examination of the scientific, social, and environmental implications of forest biotechnology applications.”

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