

**REPORT RECAPS SUCCESSFUL “BRAIDED” APPROACH TO SCIENTIFIC ADVANCES FOR FOREST HEALTH
-Gains in biotechnology research could someday aid in restoring the iconic American chestnut; provides
solid foundation for protecting additional species at risk-**

U.S. Endowment for Forestry and Communities, Greenville, SC
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The report [“Forest Health Initiative: A Retrospective Look”](#) released today by the [Forest Health Initiative \(FHI\)](#) provides insight into and describes outcomes of a ground-breaking multi-year project that set out to better understand the potential, value and role of modern biotechnology in addressing some of today’s most pressing forest health issues. Launched in 2009, FHI is a collaborative effort sponsored by the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service (USFS), the U.S. Endowment for Forestry and Communities (Endowment), and Duke Energy designed to plumb the potential of genetically modifying trees to make them more resistant to threats, while concurrently assessing relevant societal and regulatory issues.

“Forests are being lost at an alarming rate due to devastating insect and disease infestations and we don’t have the luxury of time that affords using only 20th century tools to deal with 21st century challenges,” said Endowment President and CEO Carlton Owen. “FHI allowed us to bring together public and private scientists, conservationists, non-profits and the private sector to confront these threats and advance systemic, transformative and sustainable change for America’s forests.”

All funding for FHI came from partners outside the for-profit biotechnology and forest sectors to ensure the program’s objectives of transparency, independence and maximizing societal benefit. Three committees – Science, Policy & Regulatory, and Social & Environmental – worked together on the project using a “braided” approach where scientific study operated openly in collaboration with social, environmental, and regulatory communities.

The Steering Committee – comprised of representatives from the three sponsors, environmental organizations (The Environmental Defense Fund and The Nature Conservancy), and an independent scientist – hand-selected top scientists and institutions to collaborate on FHI. Clemson University, Penn State University, SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry, University of Georgia and Virginia Tech joined with the USDA Forest Service lab in Mississippi to conduct the scientific work.

Similarly, all three federal biotechnology regulatory agencies were engaged: the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS). In addition, dozens of business, conservation and environmental interests were involved to ensure rigorous social and environmental input.

The first three-year phase (Phase I) focused on developing a range of potentially blight-resistant chestnut trees and tools for early detection of infection. In the first half of the 20th Century, the American chestnut

– the test organism for the work -- was driven to near extinction in the wild by chestnut blight and root rot, both caused by exotic fungi. Phase II addressed field-testing of modified trees, understanding public views on use of biotechnology, and work to understand regulatory hurdles. In addition, a National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) study has been initiated to consider the state of the science and understanding for the use of biotechnology in addressing forest health challenges. This study started in fall 2017 and will be completed in 18 months.

As noted in the forward to the report by the lead sponsors, “The FHI process is a powerful example of what can be achieved in a relatively short period of time with highly motivated people who are the best in their field, operating transparently with all interests and needs being considered concurrently. By any number of measures this has been a successful effort that laid the groundwork for a new model that can be used with other threatened forest tree species.”

Owen noted, “We are releasing this report today in keeping with our commitment from the outset to do this work openly and to share all results freely with the scientific community as well as anyone with interest. To our knowledge this is the first and only work to consider the use of biotechnology solely to address forest health issues for the greater good of public interest.”

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The **U.S. Endowment for Forestry and Communities** (the Endowment) is a not-for-profit public charity working collaboratively with partners in the public and private sectors to advance systemic, transformative, and sustainable change for the health and vitality of the nation’s working forests and forest-reliant communities – www.usendowment.org