U.S. Endowment for Forestry and Communities

NEWS

NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES STUDY TO REVIEW GENETIC TECHNOLOGIES AND FOREST HEALTH
-- Call for Experts to Join Study Team --

U.S. Endowment for Forestry and Communities, Greenville, SC
For IMMEDIATE RELEASE (**July 10, 2017**)

The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NAS) is set to conduct a study to examine the potential use of biotechnology for mitigating threats to forest health; identify the potential ecological and economic consequences of deploying biotechnology in forests; and develop a research agenda to address knowledge gaps about its application.

The project is the next step in a nearly decade-long effort called the Forest Health Initiative (FHI) created to study the potential of modern biotechnology to address burgeoning threats to tree and forest health from endemic as well as exotic pests and diseases. Using the tree once dominant in forests of the eastern U.S.—the American chestnut—as the test organisms, university scientists, environmental not-for-profits, and federal natural resources and regulatory agencies have collaborated to determine if "big tent/open" approaches could yield positive results.

FHI's primary financial sponsors—the U.S. Endowment for Forestry and Communities (Endowment), USDA Forest Service, and Duke Energy—set as an objective at the outset to determine if modern science could produce a "plantable" disease-resistant American chestnut in three years. American chestnuts were essentially eliminated from the American landscape in the first half of the 20th Century due to attacks from two exotic agents – the Chestnut blight and root rot disease.

"When we launched FHI in 2009 we had as our primary objective not to save the American chestnut, rather, to test new approaches to plumb the potential of modern science in addressing forest health. That work began along three pathways that were braided into a rare collaboration of interests and sharing of information," said Endowment President & CEO Carlton Owen. "We believed from the outset that the science pathway—i.e., could modern biotechnology provide a useful tool—would perhaps be the easiest of the challenges. But, could something done with relatively limited funding and only to benefit the public domain clear regulatory hurdles and gain public support, were seen as greater hurdles," he noted.

The NAS study will describe measures or characteristics of forest health (and threats to forest health) as a context for evaluating the risk of releasing trees protected from pests and pathogens using biotechnology as compared to other approaches to address forest health. In addition to reviewing the literature on ecological risks and economic impacts, the study will draw on existing public opinion research for insights into the social, philosophical, and other dimensions of using biotechnology in trees. To read the full statement of task and to nominate an expert, visit Call for Nominations.

Funders of the NAS study include: four U.S. Department of Agriculture agencies (Agricultural Research Service; Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service; National Institute of Food and Agriculture; and the U.S. Forest Service) along with the Environmental Protection Agency, and the Endowment. The study is expected to be completed in the fall of 2018.

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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