

National Wild Turkey Federation Programs

Rob Keck

Rob Keck is Chief Executive Officer of the National Wild Turkey Federation, PO Box 530, Edgefield, SC 29824; telephone: 803.637.3106; e-mail: nwtf@nwtf.net

In: Dumroese, R. K.; Riley, L. E.; Landis, T. D., tech. coords. 2005. National proceedings: Forest and Conservation Nursery Associations—2004; 2004 July 12–15; Charleston, NC; and 2004 July 26–29; Medford, OR. Proc. RMRS-P-35. Fort Collins, CO: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Research Station.

Keywords—wildlife conservation, forest management, American chestnut, Operation Oak

Introduction

I recently read an article about several women who were preparing to sit 80 ft (25 m) above a forest floor in tree-sitting nets to protest a logging operation in Jefferson National Forest (Appalachia). Tree hugging is nothing new in this country. But did environmental activists know we have more forests now than we did in the 1920s? In 1920, we only had 735 million ac (297 million ha) of forest land. Today we have 749 million ac (303 million ha), or 2 ac (0.8 ha) for every single person in America thanks to you and others in the nursery industry.

Advances in forestry management have had great benefits for people and wildlife. Habitat is critical for good wild turkey populations. And trees, specifically oak trees, are an important component. The mission statement of the National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTf) makes it clear we're committed to the conservation of the wild turkey and the preservation of our hunting heritage. Habitat improvement is a big part of what we do.

Together, the NWTf and its conservation partners have spent more than U.S. \$186 million in the Wild Turkey Super Fund on over 27,000 projects to support that mission throughout North America. And we have made a difference. When the National Wild Turkey Federation was founded in 1973, there were only 1.3 million wild turkeys in North America. Today, that number has increased to more than 6.4 million birds thanks to State, Federal, and provincial wildlife agencies, and our members and partners. Our restoration efforts would not have been as successful if we hadn't worked to improve habitat.

Our nearly 525,000 members and 2,100 chapters, which are located in every State in the country as well as Canada, are passionate about making a difference on the ground. This country's sportsmen and women—hunters—have a long history of putting their money, their time, and their hearts and souls into restoring this country's wildlife and managing the land. Hunters contribute U.S. \$4.7 million every day, adding up to U.S. \$1.7 billion every year for conservation. And through this country's private groups such as the Federation, sportsmen contribute another U.S. \$300 million each year.

It's those dollars that fund wildlife management, hunter education, and research. And it's a big reason for the return of the wild turkey, whitetails, black bears, Canada geese, pronghorns, river otters, and even our nation's symbol, the bald eagle. Target shooters and hunters have been and will continue to be the most important factor in wildlife conservation this country has ever known. This country's sportsmen are connected to the land because they've dug into the earth with their hands, planted trees, created openings, and more. Their work benefits far more than wild turkeys. Many other wildlife species, including songbirds, profit as well. Because of that, we take land management pretty seriously at the Federation.

Our approach to land management occurs on many levels and in many different ways, from offering low-cost seeds and seedlings, to the expertise of our staff, and more. We have 10 regional biologists in the field and 13 biologists at headquarters who are working to improve habitat on public, private, and corporate lands.

In addition to the state-of-the-art museum at our national headquarters in Edgefield, South Carolina, we have a beautiful Outdoor Education Center. At this 100-ac (40-ha) Outdoor Education Center, we can show visitors first hand what good habitat management looks like. Our Web site, 5 national magazines, and national television shows are filled with tips and advice for improving wildlife habitat. Our new show, *Get in the Game*, is dedicated to land management. We got the message loud and clear about how interested people are in managing their lands. We did a survey last year on the economics of turkey hunting, and we found something that surprised us. While you might think turkey hunters spent most of their money on guns or trucks or hunting gear, their biggest expenditure is actually for habitat improvements, at over U.S. \$240 million per year. On average, turkey hunters spend U.S. \$105 per year on improving habitat. Hunters in the Southern region spent the most on habitat improvement at over U.S. \$170 per year.

NWTF Programs and Seedlings Planted

We've made some big strides in being able to offer quality seedlings thanks to some great partnerships. For over 5 years, we have been working with State forestry commissions in Georgia, Texas, Mississippi, and South Carolina to improve the size and quality of the oak trees produced. This year, we are growing 50,000 trees in South Carolina for planting in Iowa and 40,000 trees in Georgia for Mississippi and Georgia. These select trees produce acorns in 7 to 9 years that can provide the food and habitat wild turkeys need. Through regional habitat programs, we plant seedlings from coast to coast.

Operations

Operation Oak—Under this program, 60,000 sawtooth oaks (*Quercus acutissima*) with tree survival kits have been produced and shipped over the past 5 years. This year, 8,000 select white oaks (*Q. alba*) were provided by the South Carolina Forestry Commission. The NWTF is expanding its Operation Oak program to include more States and plant more seedlings. We plan to plant over 300,000 high quality oak seedlings during the next 3 years throughout the Southeast and Midwest.

Operation Heartland—This program has provided 300,000 oaks (white, southern red [*Q. falcata*], bur [*Q. macrocarpa*], and pin [*Q. palustris*]), and mast-producing shrubs (crabapple [*Malus spp.*]).

Operation Applesed—Over—50,000 crabapples with tree survival kits have been planted during this program.

Operation SOS—Approximately 600,000 northern red oak (*Q. rubra*), cranberry (*Vaccinium spp.*), crabapple, and hawthorn (*Crataegus spp.*) have been produced for this operation.

Michigan Winter Habitat Project—Approximately 50,000 crabapples with tree survival kits have been produced for this project.

Operation Big Sky—This operation has provided 200,000 assorted mast-producing seedlings for outplanting.

Guzzlers for Gobblers—Approximately 100,000 cottonwood and assorted mast-producing seedlings have been produced and outplanted.

The Scoop on Our Seedlings

We've planted seedlings in every State (except Alaska), and in Ontario and Manitoba. All are bareroot seedlings (white, red, pin, and bur oaks, cranberry, crabapple, hawthorn). The NWTF strives to provide the highest quality seedlings available. We prefer seedlings that are 24 to 36 in (60 to 90 cm) in height with good lateral roots.

The following organizations, companies, and partners are involved in the implementation of the various seedling programs: USDA Forest Service, South Carolina Forestry Commission, Georgia Forestry Commission, University of Georgia, Iowa Forestry Commission, Texas Forestry Commission,

MeadWestvaco Company, International Paper Company, Lee Nursery, Musser Farms, and NWTF volunteers.

Programs Geared to the Private Landowner

Much of this country's forests are owned by individual landowners. In fact, these landowners account for 220 million ac (89 million ha). Individual property owners have typically owned the land for less than 15 years and don't actively manage their forests. The success of managing forests for wildlife depends on our ability to market forest management to these folks. Recognizing that, the Federation has developed several programs designed to help the individual landowner.

Wild Turkey Woodlands is the Federation's program that encourages management on private lands. Through this program, we recognize landowners for the good wildlife work they are doing. In addition, landowners get the latest information about wild turkey management.

Project HELP® (Habitat Enhancement Land Program) is a Federation program developed to help landowners manage their land by providing guidance and offering seeds and seedlings at competitive prices.

We offer lots of information in the form of videos, manuals, bulletins, CDs, and more.

Research to Save the American Chestnut

Since 1977, the NWTF has provided U.S. \$3.4 million in national project research grants to many State agencies and universities. While these grants fund different projects, they all share the common goal of "Working for the wild turkey." We're currently funding a project to develop chestnut trees (*Castanea dentata*) that are resistant to blight.

Prior to the 20th century, chestnuts were a major food source in the Appalachian Mountains. Today, few remain. To bring the chestnuts back, the USDA Forest Service, the American Chestnut Cooperators' Foundation, Virginia Polytechnic Institute, and the NWTF are combining their research and resources to fight the blight in the Jefferson National Forest in Virginia. These organizations are working to breed blight-resistant chestnut trees. They inoculate these trees with a weak strain of the blight that contains a virus that attacks the nastier wild strain. They cut away parts of the most successful trees and graft them onto root systems of trees that have already gotten the disease. This grafting allows healthy, blight-resistant sprouts to use already established root systems to grow more quickly into nut-producing chestnuts. The NWTF helped support the Chestnut Foundation's research and helped locate good potential chestnut habitat in the Jefferson National Forest. Because of these efforts, the American chestnut may once again become an established food source for wildlife.

While groups such as Save America's Forests are waving chainsaws at the White House warning that loss of forests is at a crisis level in this country, we're really enjoying the "good old days" of forestry. We have genetic improvements and new techniques that will help us produce healthier

trees faster than ever before. While we do cut lots of timber, you help us make sure we grow more than we cut.

As we look to the future, it will be our responsibility to balance people's need for forest products with the needs of wildlife. There are a great many people out there who don't understand that active management of our forests is good. They are convinced that any tree removal is cause for heading for the nearest tree-sitting net. They want to set aside land that nobody can use and prevent us from using our renewable natural resources.

I'm sure we all recognize the need to conserve old forests. However, young forest habitats created today, almost solely through forest management practices, are important to many species of wildlife—from whitetails to warblers. The Federation endorses a balanced approach to forest management. We realize commercial forest management is far more than harvesting trees. It's an important tool that allows us to improve wildlife habitat. No single forest, young or old,

pine or hardwood, can provide suitable habitat for all forest wildlife. Ideally, we want a diverse forest landscape, supporting young and old stands of all native forest types to sustain wildlife populations.

By using a common sense approach to management, we'll be leaving our forests in better shape than we found them, for our children and beyond.

For more information on the Wild Turkey Super Fund, contact:

Tammy Sapp, VP of Communications
National Wild Turkey Federation
Office phone: 803.637.3106
Cell phone: 803.480.1841
E-mail: tsapp@nwtf.net

Visit www.nwtf.org today—your source for all things wild turkey!