

‘Redwood of the East’ rebounds from blight

The Associated Press

Washington – The chestnut tree that once faced the same fate as Longfellow’s village smithy is spreading again along Appalachia’s strip-mined mountainsides.

A bit of tree-growing globalization has helped, officials said at a ceremony Thursday led by Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne, who called the chestnut “a tree so majestic that it is called the ‘Redwood of the East’”.

Scientists are producing blight-resistant trees by crossing American and Chinese chestnuts. The Chinese variety can withstand the Asian fungus that first infected the nation’s 4 billion American chestnuts around 1904 in New York City, and nearly wiped all of them out.

“After a period of up to 30 years, this leads to trees that are 100 percent blight resistant and 94 percent American,” said Marshal Case, president of the American Chestnut Foundation in Bennington, Vt.

Kempthorne and Case each hefted a shovelful of dirt to help plant a sprightly American-Chinese tree Thursday outside the Interior Department. The occasion was the 30th anniversary of the Surface Mining Control and Reclamation Act of 1977, through which the government has tried to turn former coal mining sites into grasslands and hardwood forests.

The American chestnut once flourished among 200 million acres of eastern woodlands – about the size of California and Maine combined. The woodlands stretched from Main to Florida, and as far west as the Ohio Valley. Now, few tree-size chestnuts remain; the tallest, at 60 feet, is found in Kentucky, the foundation says.

Coal-mining industry employees, university researchers, schoolchildren and other volunteers led by Case’s foundation have planted more than 3,000 chestnuts in seven Appalachian states, Kempthorne said.

That’s helping turn around the fate of the “spreading chestnut tree” in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s 1840 paean to the village blacksmith.