Contacts:
Meghan Jordan
The American Chestnut Foundation
(828) 281-0047
meghan@acf.org

Caroline Dufour
Appalachian Trail Conservancy
(304) 535-6331 ext. 102
cdufour@appalachiantrail.org

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
January 23, 2008

Cooperative study of American chestnut trees on the Appalachian Trail begins

Harpers Ferry, WV -- The American Chestnut Foundation (TACF), The Appalachian Trail Conservancy (ATC), and the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club (PATC) have partnered to study the remaining American chestnut trees along the Appalachian Trail.

To study the remaining American chestnut along the AT, scientists from TACF are preparing a training program, a guide to American chestnut identification and a data-collection protocol, with ATC staff and PATC volunteer support. PATC volunteers will be recruited to participate in the training program and to collect data along a portion of the Trail with which they are familiar. The data will help scientists estimate the population densities of American chestnut in the variety of conditions that exist along the studied portion of the Trail. The data will also help scientists locate and document populations of trees that produce flowers, whose genetic material might potentially be incorporated into the TACF breeding program to enhance the genetic diversity of the blight-resistant trees that will eventually result from that program.

ATC will include information resulting from this study in its A.T. MEGA-Transect program, which brings together multiple partners with a shared interest in the environmental health of the Appalachian Region. These partners are engaging volunteers in a variety of citizen science projects to improve understanding of environmental health issues along the AT. ATC, TACF and

PATC will work together to promote public awareness of the study of the American chestnut. TACF plans to celebrate its 25th Anniversary in cooperation with ATC by participating in a series of events along the AT during the 2008 hiking season. ATC and TACF’s presence at these
events will include a focus on identification of American chestnuts by members of the public along the A.T. by members of the public, as well as information about the cooperative scientific study of the trees.

An estimated four billion American chestnut trees grew in the Appalachian region at the start of the 20th century, when a deadly Asian blight fungus was first discovered in New York City. Sometimes characterized as “Redwoods of the East”, these trees often reached giant proportions, and routinely grew to 100-foot heights and three to four foot diameters. By 1950 virtually all of those trees were gone—reduced to struggling stump shoots that quickly succumbed to the blight.

Although stump shoots are still fairly common along the A.T., the tree’s limited reproductive ability and environmental factors such as intensive deer browsing are moving the species toward true extinction. A recent study by Dr. Henry Wilbur of the University of Virginia Department of Environmental Science, found that the number of genetically distinct American chestnut trees had declined by half over a period of only seven years.

Genetic diversity is an important factor in species survival because it gives the species its ability to adapt to the wide range of conditions encountered in different geographic and ecological regions and through changing climatic conditions over time. When a species is reduced to a relatively few individuals, the adaptive abilities of the species are greatly reduced. Scientific evidence suggests that the American chestnut tree has lived for many thousands of years, through ice ages and global warming. This remarkable adaptive ability now appears to be imperiled.

The ATC works with the National Park Service Appalachian Trail Park Office, the U.S. Forest Service, 30 maintaining clubs and multiple other partners to engage the public in conserving the AT, a 250,000-acre greenway extending from Maine to Georgia. TACF and its network of 15 state chapters carry out a backcross breeding strategy and other scientific and educational efforts directed toward restoring the American chestnut, TACF’s breeding program is now in its 25th year and has begun to produce sixth-generation seed that will be field tested for both blight resistance and American character.

For more information on this partnership and its programs contact the following:
Appalachian Trail Conservancy:
http://www.appalachiantrail.org
The American Chestnut Foundation:
http://www.acf.org
Potomac Appalachian Trail Club:
http://potomacappalachian.org/MEGA

Appalachian Trail MEGA-Transect
http://www.appalachiantrail.org/site/c.jkLXJ8MQKtH/b.3079393/k.82D4/megatransect.htm

###