

# West Virginia Highlands Voice

Jan  
2009

## HIGHLANDS CONSERVANCY WORKING FOR BALSAM FIR CONSERVATION AND RED SPRUCE RESTORATION

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NATIVE BALSAM FIR TREE GROWING IN CANAAN VALLEY, TUCKER COUNTY.

By Dave Saville

The West Virginia Highlands Conservancy has been working for over a decade to protect, conserve and restore the spruce-fir forests in West Virginia. Beginning in the mid 1990s an effort was initiated to conserve balsam fir in West Virginia where it reaches its southern most extent in North America. This work led to further efforts which have focused on the restoration of the broader red spruce ecosystem that was once prevalent in the West Virginia Highlands.

The project initially sought to protect the genetic diversity of the various stands of balsam fir around the state that were coming under threat from the exotic insect pest the balsam woolly adelgid. Research by Ohio State University and others suggested that there were significant

genetic trait differences, genotypes, between West Virginia stands and with those of balsam fir located further north.

Conservation actions ensued to protect this diversity by fostering regeneration of existing stands of Balsam. Volunteers were organized to collect cones from each of the known stands of balsam fir in West Virginia. Seed was extracted and stored separately at the NRCS Plant Materials Center in Alderson, WV.

Stand regeneration in many areas was not occurring because of heavy deer browse. Through cooperative efforts with state and federal land managers, as well as private land owners, numerous deer exclosures are being constructed in natural balsam stands to allow both natural regeneration and careful restoration activities using seed, and seedlings grown, from the locally collected cones. Seedlings have since been grown annually for over 10 years for use in restoration projects.



**Ready to start planting seedlings**

Efforts have also been undertaken to restore the red spruce forests and the ecosystem associated with it. Once covering as much as 500,000 acres of the West Virginia Highlands they provide a unique habitat for numerous rare, threatened and endangered species. Logging, fires and development have significantly reduced and fragmented these forests.

Cones have been collected and seed banked at the NRCS Plant Materials Center. Landscape scale Restoration Plans have been developed focusing on the expansion and connection of patches of red spruce forest. Over 100,000 red spruce seedlings have been planted implementing these plans in numerous restoration and reclamation projects across the highlands.



**Little sprouts can plant little seedlings**

The Highlands Conservancy has also been working on an educational outreach program to build awareness of the historical as well as the current and future ecological importance of the high elevation red spruce forests in West Virginia.

Each year we have contract grown enough seedlings to make them available to the public. Watershed Associations, Home Owners Associations, private landowners, developers and mine reclaimers have all been using our local source seedlings for reclamation, conservation and restoration projects. We still have trees available for the Spring 2009 planting season. The trees are shipped to us for an April 1 delivery date. They are available for purchase at the Highlands Conservancy website [www.wvhighlands.org](http://www.wvhighlands.org), or by sending a check to the Highlands Conservancy at PO Box 306, Charleston, WV 25321.

Written by Administrator in: **Forestry, The Highlands Voice** |