



Canadian Chestnut Council
Conseil Canadien du Châtaignier



To: Dr. Andrew Newhouse, Director. The American Chestnut Project, State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry (SUNY ESF)
CC: Joanne M. Mahoney, President; Dr. Samuel B. Mukasa, Executive Vice-President and Provost.

February 20, 2024

RE: Request for SUNY ESF to withdraw its petition for deregulation of Darling 58

Dear Dr. Newhouse,

We are writing to share the concerns of the Canadian Chestnut Council (CCC) and the Canadian Biotechnology Action Network (CBAN) about the pursuit of a genetically engineered (GE) American chestnut and to ask SUNY ESF to withdraw its petition to deregulate the Darling 58 GE American chestnut.

As you know, the trials conducted by The American Chestnut Foundation and their research partners found that the Darling line has significant performance limitations. Darling progeny are not blight tolerant, and are significantly shorter and have much lower survival rates compared with OxO negative trees. While SUNY ESF maintains that Darling 58 is safe for environmental release as required by regulation, the multiple performance limitations mean that the Darling 58 is not able to function as a restoration tree as planned and that its use could actively undermine promising restoration work.

SUNY ESF has a responsibility to be responsive to the concerns of the chestnut conservation community in both the US and Canada and to defer to their expertise. In particular, as a previous close collaborative partner in the Darling project, SUNY ESF has a responsibility to respond to the concerns of The American Chestnut Foundation which now asserts that these trees should remain under permitted research status. Pursuit of deregulation betrays the goals of the research project.

SUNY ESF has stated that it will continue to prioritize rigorous science and discovery before large-scale restoration, however, deregulation of these trees opens the door to potentially harmful distribution, unintended release, and ineffective “restoration” products. Any continued pursuit of deregulation will put restoration at risk.

As Canadian organizations, we are particularly concerned about the risks that this genetically engineered tree poses to wild American chestnuts north of the border where the American chestnut has legal protection as an endangered species. If this GE American chestnut moves or is transported across the border, it could threaten decades of restoration work. The Canadian populations of American chestnuts are unique and distinct from the American populations, showing strong potential for restoration. Under our American Chestnut Stewardship Agreement under the Endangered Species Act, the CCC is charged with preserving these native populations from contamination. We are very concerned that SUNY ESF has no plan to mitigate this risk of contamination if Darling 58 is deregulated.

Continuing to seek deregulation of a controversial GE tree that does not meet the stated goals of the research and is not supported by the broader conservation community puts SUNY ESF's reputation as a trustworthy research institution at risk.

The release of genetically engineering trees is fraught with risk. We ask you to reconsider your pursuit of deregulation and withdraw the application to USDA-APHIS.

We look forward to your response and would be happy to discuss these issues at any time.

Sincerely,



Lucy Sharratt
Coordinator
Canadian Biotechnology Action Network



Ron Casier
Chair
Canadian Chestnut Council