
Meeting of the Latin American network against monoculture tree plantations

On 1 August 2009, members of the Latin American Network against Monoculture Tree Plantations (RECOMA) met in the locality of Villa Serrana, Uruguay, to examine the reasons for the alarming expansion of monoculture tree plantations aimed at the production of charcoal, pulp, timber and agrofuels (agrodiesel and ethanol derived from wood), mainly intended for export.

Representatives from Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Mexico, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Peru and Uruguay exchanged information and experiences regarding the different types of plantations: eucalyptus, pine, oil palm, teak and gmelina.

An element common to all of them is the increasing appropriation of territories by forestry companies and oil palm growers, leading to a concentration of land directly affecting local community rights and good living, as set out in the final declaration of the meeting (see the complete text at: <http://www.wrm.org.uy/plantations/RECOMA/Declaration.html>).

In the case of Chile, which has become the “model” for the expansion of timber plantations in the region, there are two and a half million hectares planted with pine and eucalyptus trees for pulp, concentrated in just a few regions. The expansion continues: over the past five years pulp production has doubled, with the introduction of mills with an annual production of over 1 million tons – 98% intended for the international market.

The expansion continues thanks to government support, although the pattern has changed. Subsidies and tax exemptions granted to companies are now directed towards small farmers and indigenous peoples, seeking to co-opt them with bridge loans that pay money in advance to establish the plantation.

In Peru, a decree known as Law of the Jungle, at the root of the recent indigenous rising, intends to establish private investment on thousands of hectares of Amazon forest. With the reasoning that “reforestation” of “deforested” zones is being promoted, the law will make it possible to introduce large-scale tree plantations on lands that are part of the traditional migratory farming model followed by peasant and indigenous farmers.

In the Peruvian sierra, plantations are promoted within plans for closing mines, while oil palm plantations advance in the forest area, displacing small farming communities. There are also 18 tree plantation projects in the coastal area.

In Colombia pine, eucalyptus and oil palm plantations cover 600,000 hectares. In the case of oil palm plantations, the rise of agrofuels has had a strong impact and there is talk of establishing 3 million hectares of plantations.

Following the Chilean model, plantation expansion has enjoyed state support under the form of subsidies and different types of tax exemptions.

At this time, policies are stepping up commercialization of the natural heritage (forests, water, fauna, etc.), promoting strategies for the certification of plantations and dismantling the Ministry of the Environment's monitoring system.

In Ecuador, tree plantations have been established in forest and paramo areas, on the lands of communities that were induced and deceived into signing 20-year contracts whereby they gave the State the right to intervene and have left themselves exposed to the application of sanctions.

In Nicaragua the cultivation of oil palm has started on the Atlantic coast, hand in hand with ferocious deforestation affecting the Bosawuas Reserve. A programme of reforestation and highway infrastructure in the west of the country - including teak and gmelina plantations - is in the pipeline.

In Mexico there are projects for 1 million hectares of oil palm plantations. The promotion is taking place at an accelerated and disorganized pace, with the rationale that this is not deforestation but occupation of degraded lands. The European Union has been an important actor in the expansion of oil palm plantations around the Lacandona Forest, with the argument that they are preventing the indigenous people from deforesting the area.

The paper-pulp and iron and steel industry sectors are behind the expansion of tree plantations in Brazil. In 2003, the government's forestry plan proposed a growth of 6 million hectares of plantations. Finally, plantation expansion mainly took place in the States of Rio Grande do Sul, Parana, Para and Bahia, in addition to Espirito Santo and Minas Gerais, although the expansion was not quite so intense in the latter states.

The first stage of expansion in Brazil was mainly on the traditional lands of indigenous, Afro-descendent and peasant farmers' lands. During the last stage, the plantations advanced on areas that were intended for the Agrarian Reform or on the lands of small farmers through rental-type contracts.

In Uruguay, the plantation promotion law established benefits leading to the establishment of one million hectares planted with trees, of which 600,000 are in the hands of just 4 foreign companies: Stora Enso (Sweden-Finland), Arauco (Chile), Weyerhaeuser (USA) and Botnia (Finland). A consortium involving Stora Enso and Arauco hold the largest landed estate in the history of Uruguay covering 253,000 hectares.

FSC certification has been an important factor in the consolidation and legitimization of the model, weakening opposition. Certification is present in all the plantations and is merely a bureaucratic process.

As set out in the RECOMA declaration "The process of tree plantation expansion is becoming more consolidated and is expanding further, hand in hand with false solutions to climate change such as agrofuels and the wrongly called 'carbon sinks' that are simply new business opportunities for transnational companies."

"Communities, movements and social organizations resisting this uncontrolled advance of monoculture plantations are undergoing persecution, harassment, criminalization and plundering of their means of living."

RECOMA affirms that "As part of our struggle we take up the defence of food sovereignty, the defence of land and territories, forests, biodiversity and water."

