
Venezuela: A Chilean company's plantations certified by SmartWood are challenged

Here below are the conclusions submitted in a travel report (available in Spanish, at:<http://www.wrm.org.uy/paises/Venezuela/Gira2006.pdf>) on the investigation carried out recently by 4 representatives of the Latin American Network against Monoculture Tree Plantations in the area where the so called "Uverito plantations" are located. These are some 600,000 hectares of pine plantations in the States of Monagas and Anzoategui. In 2003, SmartWood certified 12 plots covering a total of 139,650 hectares, owned by Terranova de Venezuela (TDV) and which form part of those plantations. TDV belongs to the Forestal Terranova Group, with headquarters in Chile and is linked to other Chilean companies and North American capital.

"Throughout the whole of our trip around the pine plantation area we observed very poor villages with practically no services. Incredibly this is also pointed out in the SmartWood certification report which states that "most of these villages have an insecure situation regarding housing and the related water, sewage and garbage collection services, added to low levels of health care and education." Apparently these plantations have not brought significant improvements to the villages in the area or anything like what had been announced by the companies and those related with them when promoting monoculture tree plantations. Not even in villages such as Chaguaramas, where we were informed that there was practically no one left in the village because most people were working in the forestation company's nursery, could we see that the people had benefited from these jobs. In general terms it may be stated that from the social standpoint, these plantations have not been socially beneficial to the neighbouring communities.

Cracked land and continuous fires in the plantation areas are a clear sign of a dramatic change in the ecosystem that shows totally different features where it has managed to survive. The degree up to which the ecosystem and water resources of the zone have been affected, although in many cases visible to the naked eye, warrants a more intensive study. The few existing studies published in this respect mention important structural changes in the soil and affectation of water resources, although what has generally been analyzed is the degree to which these factors have had an impact on the pine trees and not on the natural ecosystem. From simple observations during the trip, it is clear that the plantations have generated a favourable environment for fires, causing serious environmental, social and economic prejudice, that the water courses largely depending on natural systems have been affected and that many of the water courses such as the Morichal River are contaminated and very probably as a consequence of the great quantity of agrochemicals used in plantation areas. From the environmental standpoint the situation warrants at least a serious study of existing impacts before continuing with large scale plantations. .

Finally, from the economic standpoint, the Uverito plantation project has been possible not only because of the 275 million dollars needed to establish it, as affirmed by the representatives of the responsible government body, CVG Proforca, but because it has also received other types of economic support from the government in facilities. Among these, as confirmed by the government, 800 million dollars already allocated for the construction of a bridge and a similar amount promised for this work and to complete the new highways. These were seen during the trip to benefit almost

exclusively the multinational companies related to the plantations. We were unable to ascertain exactly how much the Venezuelan State has received from the multinational company TDV, although we do know that the negotiations have been denounced as fraudulent and that TDV, certified by SmartWood, has replaced its trade name by the multinational company Masisa. In short, the plantations and the industrial concerns related to them would not have been possible without the Venezuelan State contributing much more than it has apparently received or will receive, in exchange.”

In spite of the fact that, as pointed out in the report, for many years we have heard say, by Government and company representatives, academics and even Venezuelan NGO representatives that “Uverito plantations” have never caused any problems and that they were established in places where there was “nothing,” this report considers such affirmations to be debatable and questions the analysis carried out by SmartWood on the ecological, economic and social sustainability of these plantations.