
Growing concern over plantations in Australia

For many years the Australian environmental movement has chosen to "lay off" plantations as an issue, as it was seen that in the Australian context, they could be a useful alternative to native forest logging. This situation has now changed with the Tasmanian Greens, for instance, opposing the establishment of any further plantations.

This is as a result of the "Regional Forest Agreement" process, which seeks to remove the Federal Government from forestry conflicts with the states, by allowing for unlimited woodchip exports in exchange for a so-called "comprehensive, adequate and representative reserve system" (CAR reserve). Needless to say the RFAs signed to date have produced inadequate and unscientific reserves, while chip exports are rising dramatically.

In Tasmania, massive native forest clearance and replacement by plantations is well underway, with state government targets of 10,000 hectares per annum. Australian mining giant NORTH Ltd has entered into a joint venture with Mitsubishi to alienate 23,000 hectares over a 10 year period. US giant Weyerhaeuser has just bought in to the state of Victoria's recently privatised plantation estate and is looking at investing in Tasmania.

On a government policy level, there is much to be concerned about. A number of schemes have been established to increase native forest clearance under the guise of plantation establishment, particularly the so-called "Plantations Vision 2020" program, which seeks to double plantations by 2020 --with significant Federal support.

The Federal government is now trying to use the Kyoto Protocol as another means of supporting the timber industry by encouraging "carbon sequestration" through plantation establishment. The federal environment minister Robert Hill has been very vague about ensuring that no plantations are established --and exchanged for credits-- at the expense of native forests.

Few people are aware that Australia has a voracious and destructive forest industry that has been granted open slather to export woodchips - currently about 7,000,000 tonnes annually to Japan (Mitsubishi, Daishowa, New Oji, etc.) --or about 40% of Japan's hardwood chip imports-- all from a continent which is only 5% forested. NORTH Ltd is a very large player in the national industry and a large owner of plantation lands (about 150,000 hectares in Tasmania). It is logging oldgrowth forest for plantation substitution.

There is growing concern that the kind of references to "sustainable" native forest management and plantation establishment in the Intergovernmental Panel on Forests' documents will encourage countries like Australia to continue their current rate of clearance and substitution. "Native" trees could still mean that monocultures may proliferate, given that Eucalyptus globulus is "native" to Tasmania, though it has been genetically engineered and established beyond its original range.

Source: Tim Cadman, Native Forest Network, Australia

