

An aerial photograph showing a vast landscape of tree plantations. The foreground and middle ground are dominated by dense, green rows of trees, likely pines, planted in a grid-like pattern. A dirt road or path winds through the plantation. In the background, the terrain is flatter and more open, with some distant structures and a hazy horizon under a clear sky.

**WRM BRIEFING - OCTOBER 2008**

**FSC**

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# FSC certification of tree plantations needs to be stopped

WRM Briefing, October 2008

Plantations are monocultures, created from seemingly endless rows of identical trees. They suck the water out of nearby streams and ponds and lower the water table, leaving little or no water for people living near the plantations. They deplete soils, pollute the environment with agrotoxics and eradicate biodiverse local ecosystems. Activists in Brazil call them the green desert because of the way they destroy local people's livelihoods and environments. But what's almost as bad as the plantations themselves is that this sort of plantation is given a green seal of approval by the Forest Stewardship Council.

## Misleading statements

FSC's website includes several misleading statements about the organization and its activities. On the front page of the FSC web site what calls our immediate attention is a very nice picture of an indigenous man and child with the legend "FSC supports the conservation of forests and helps people lead better lives".

What the above fails to mention is that –through their certification– FSC also supports the establishment of large scale monocultures that have resulted in severe impacts on many indigenous and other local communities, who as a result are now living in far worse conditions than before.

FSC informs us that "More than 100 million ha forest worldwide were certified to FSC standards in April 2008, distributed over 79 countries."

What this does not mention is that at least 8.5 million hectares of that certified "forest" is composed of monoculture tree plantations while an unknown area within the 37.7 million hectares grouped under the category "semi-natural & mixed plantation and natural forest", is also composed of plantations.

The "About FSC" section of FSC's website states that "FSC is an independent, non-governmental, not for profit organization established to promote the responsible management of the world's forests."

Such a definition leads the unknowing reader to think that the FSC is a normal NGO, hiding the fact that many of its members are forestry and forestry-related corporations that are part of its "economic chamber", many of which are only interested in the certification of their own plantations (in South Africa: Komatiland Forests, York Timber and Mondi; in Brazil: Klabin, Suzano, Votorantim Celulose e Papel and V & M Florestal; in Colombia: Smurfit Cartón de Colombia; in Ecuador: Profafor Face; in Ireland: Coillte Teoranta). While the social and environmental chamber members are described as "non-profit", the economic chamber is defined as including "organizations and individuals with a commercial interest." That means that while the

FSC can be described as being “non profit”, a third of the voting power in the general assembly –the economic chamber- has a clear “commercial interest.”

The same section tells us that “Products carrying the FSC label are independently certified to assure consumers that they come from forests that are managed to meet the social, economic and ecological needs of present and future generations.”

Here again, the FSC fails to clarify that many of those products do not come from forests but from highly destructive tree monocultures that put at stake the social, economic and ecological needs of present and future generations.

## **Plantations are NOT forests**

The FSC was created as a result of increased awareness by consumers about their role in forest destruction, resulting from successful NGO campaigns, particularly regarding unsustainable logging practices in the tropics. When consumers began to ask their suppliers for certified wood, a number of NGOs, together with businesses, decided to promote a process for enabling companies to offer and consumers to choose a "green" product. The FSC was thus born.

Unfortunately, instead of limiting FSC to forest management certification, organizations and businesses participating in the process decided to also include plantation management as part of its mission.

This is the original sin of the FSC. The organization's goal, according to the introduction to the Principles and Criteria, is “to promote environmentally responsible, socially beneficial and economically viable management of the world’s forests.” FSC should not certify industrial tree plantations, for the obvious reason that they are not

forests. Industrial tree plantations are neither environmentally responsible nor socially beneficial. They are often not even economically viable, at least not without generous government subsidies. FSC should therefore not certify them. Yet FSC has certified some of the most destructive industrial tree plantations in the world.

## **WRM, plantations and FSC**

At its Founding Assembly, in October 1993, FSC had two sets of Principles and Criteria. One set applied to forests and one to plantations. Both sets had nine principles. The plantations set was dropped, and reintroduced as Principle 10 in 1996.

Also in 1996, WRM produced a book titled, “Pulping the South”, which, among other things, documented the impacts of large scale tree plantations. Two years later WRM launched an international campaign against these plantations.

Time after time, we found that FSC was a problem, because it was certifying the very plantations that local people were struggling against. The problem was heightened by the fact that environmental and social organizations were providing credibility to the label, thus disempowering local people and their supporting organizations.

In January 2001 WRM produced a detailed critique of FSC’s Principle 10 (Plantations), which concluded that “Principle 10 does not seem to offer nearly enough guarantees to end-consumers that wood from industrial plantations is produced in a socially equitable and environmentally-friendly manner. Neither is the principle very useful for people struggling against plantations at the local or national levels. The main issue (large-scale monocrops) is not taken into account. The problem is not the tree species (eucalyptus, pines, acacias, etc.) but the overall plantation model, which the FSC unjustifiably accepts without

discussion. We believe that this principle is clearly insufficient and needs to be substantially modified before it can be said to be appropriate to the reality of large scale industrial tree monocrops.”

In 2001 WRM published “FSC: Unsustainable Certification of Large Scale Tree Plantations”, which brought together a number of articles proving the impacts of FSC-certified plantations.

In 2003 WRM produced a book which provided detailed evidence about the problems of three FSC-certified plantations. The book “Certifying the Uncertifiable. FSC Certification of Tree Plantations in Thailand and Brazil” eventually resulted in the de-certification of the Forest Industry Organization in Thailand. In Brazil, Plantar, one of the companies studied, still holds its certificate, while V&M Florestal withdrew from FSC after armed guards from the company killed a villager in February 2007.

WRM has continued carrying out research on this issue in a range of countries, including case studies of FSC-certified plantations in Ecuador (2005, 2006), South Africa (2005), Uruguay (2006), Swaziland (2007), providing more than sufficient evidence on the inappropriateness of their certification. More information is available on WRM's website (<http://www.wrm.org.uy/actors/FSC/index.html>).

More recently, the problems concerning FSC certification in general – including both plantations and forests- resulted in the creation of the website [fsc-watch.org](http://fsc-watch.org) by a group of people, very concerned about the constant and serious erosion of FSC's reliability and thus credibility. They state that “As with many other activists working on forests worldwide, we share the frustration that whilst the structural problems within the FSC system have been known for many years, the formal mechanisms of governance and control, including the elected Board, the General Assembly, and the Complaints Procedures have been highly ineffective in addressing these problems. The possibility of

reforming - and thus 'saving' - the FSC through these mechanisms is, we feel, declining, as power within the FSC is increasingly captured by vested commercial interest.”

## **A failed sign of hope: the plantations review**

FSC has for many years been aware of the problems with the certification of plantations. In 2001, FSC's secretariat included the organization's position on plantations in a list of issues needing clarification. Subsequently, Tim Synnott, then-FSC's Policy Director, wrote a draft FSC Plantation Policy. Synnott's draft paper acknowledged that “Disputes have arisen around plantation certification, with reports of infraction of FSC guidelines. Some of the disagreements and disputes have been caused by different interpretations of the FSC Principles and Criteria and other policies.”

At FSC's General Assembly in 2002, a motion was passed for FSC to carry out a “Plantations Review”. The motion stated that “The current version of the FSC Plantation Policy Draft (30 May 2002) is not clear enough and needs improvement.” The motion continued to state that FSC should produce a revised plantation policy “after a broad consultation with the membership” to give “concrete guidance on the interpretation of P10 [Principle 10]”.

Two years later, in September 2004, the review was finally launched. WRM was invited to make a presentation, and after providing examples of some of the problems created by plantations and by their certification, ended up with several recommendations for the process, the main one being that the FSC should suspend further certification of large-scale industrial tree plantations until the review was finalized. The reason for calling for a suspension was that if the FSC recognized the existence of important problems regarding plantation certification,

a temporary moratorium on further certification would appear to be the most sensible thing to do.

For the review itself, we put forward a number of specific recommendations, organized under three broad headings:

- 1) To carry out a general assessment of plantation certification
- 2) To carry out in-depth research on the social and environmental impacts of large-scale tree plantations
- 3) To carry out independent studies on certified plantations challenged by local NGOs and local communities.

In October 2005, WRM wrote to FSC demanding a “moratorium on the certification and re-certification of industrial timber plantations”, until the Plantations Review was completed. FSC’s board responded that “The main reason for deciding not to seek a moratorium on the certification of large-scale (or ‘industrial’) tree plantations was that we were not convinced this would be supported by the broad majority of the FSC membership.”

The other recommendations were not taken on board by the Working Group established for the review, which ended its work in 2006 and presented its report and recommendations to the FSC board.

In its final report, the Plantations Review Policy Working Group recommended that “FSC develops one integrated set of common Principles and Criteria for all types of management units rather than the current structure with a common set of nine principles and an additional Principle 10 for Plantations.” In other words, in October 2008, six years after the plantations review motion was passed at the General Assembly, no concrete proposals have been made for any amendments to the most problematic of FSC’s Principles.

FSC has now started a separate process to revise its Principles and Criteria, which is supposed to incorporate, among other things, the recommendations from the Plantations Review. The first draft of the revised Principles and Criteria, produced by FSC's Board, ignores the recommendation from the Plantations Review Policy Working Group to do away with Principle 10, in order to allow FSC members and “stakeholders” to “be given the opportunity to comment on this proposal before embarking on such a restructuring of the P&C” [Principles and Criteria]. FSC currently anticipates that its Review of the Principles and Criteria will be completed by the end of 2009. Meanwhile, as the Plantations Review and the Review of the Principles and Criteria continue, so do the problems with FSC certification of industrial tree plantations.

FSC’s Plantations Review has been a colossal waste of time, at least for anyone who thought that it might change the way that FSC certified industrial tree plantations. The Plantations Review process has made no difference whatsoever to the way FSC certificates are issued, as the certification of Veracel in March 2008 dramatically illustrates.

## **The final straw: certification of Veracel**

Veracel, a joint venture between Swedish-Finnish Stora Enso and Norwegian-Brazilian Aracruz Cellulose, occupies an area of around 164,600 hectares of land in the Brazilian State of Bahia. Approximately half of the land is occupied by monoculture eucalyptus plantations.

In 2007, when civil society organizations from Brazil and from the rest of the world became aware of the fact that Veracel was applying for the FSC label, it generated a strong reaction. The company has a very well known record of harmful actions, including violating local

communities' rights over land, to environmental pollution, water depletion and ecosystem destruction.

These impacts have been well documented and all the relevant information was sent to the FSC International Secretariat. FSC's board was invited to visit the area, to gain first hand information about the problem. Although there was sufficient evidence to show that certifying Veracel would result in FSC's complete loss of credibility, the board declined the invitation.

The certifying company itself (SGS) has a long record of certifying uncertifiable large scale industrial tree plantations. FSC announced that its Accreditation Services (ASI) would be "conducting a Forest [sic] Management surveillance audit of SGS at Veracel in Brazil between the 26th-28th of March 2008". The fact that SGS decided to certify Veracel a few days before the arrival of the ASI team was a slap in the face, not only for local communities, but for ASI and the FSC themselves.

Immediately after the certification was granted, WRM reacted saying that "The certification of Veracel is not an isolated fact, but the last piece in a chain of failures. WRM has been campaigning for many years against the certification of large scale tree plantations on the grounds that they have proven to be environmentally irresponsible and socially non-beneficial, therefore not complying with FSC's mandate. We have also highlighted that in those cases, FSC certification undermines local peoples struggles against the impacts of industrial tree plantations. March 13, 2008, the date when SGS gave FSC certification to Veracel, will be remembered as the date of FSC's death certificate."

## **The end of the road**

The FSC as an institution, as well as FSC members –particularly from the environmental and social chambers- must realize that this is the end of the road. They should by now be aware that certification of monoculture tree plantations has been a huge mistake.

The original reason for creating the FSC was to protect forests and forest peoples' rights and not the "rights" of corporations to destroy the environment and local peoples' livelihoods.

They must know that large-scale tree monocultures have already proven that they can never be awarded the FSC label and that whenever they receive certification, this is done through the violation of some or all of FSC principles.

By allowing this to continue, FSC members are not only playing to the hands of large plantation companies but are also undermining local peoples' struggles against them.

The time has now arrived for FSC members to push for the only possible solution: to agree that plantations are not forests, to acknowledge that tree monocultures are uncertifiable from a social and environmental perspective and to decide to exclude industrial tree plantations from FSC certification.

Until such decision is taken, the FSC will continue to be a problem, instead of a solution, for local communities and the environment.