
CERTIFICATION - FSC: Certified land grabbing

The certification of industrial tree plantations by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) has served as a tool to legitimize the large-scale monoculture plantation model. The FSC's internationally recognized certification scheme is supposed to ensure consumers that the companies that have been awarded its "green" label practise "environmentally appropriate, socially beneficial and economically viable" forest management.

WRM and other organizations and social movements have long denounced the sinister role played by the certification of models of production that are intrinsically unsustainable and demonstrably harmful, to both the environment and to local communities, as in the case of the FSC certification of monoculture tree plantations.

The establishment of these plantations, typically by big corporations, also represents one of the many "tentacles" of the phenomenon of land grabbing: these companies take over vast areas of land and displace local communities and their family- and community-based, diversified production practices, in order to replace them with "green deserts".

Those who work on these plantations have no stories to tell of their close, loving bonds with the land and the gifts it offers. Instead, their stories speak of exploitation and hardships. They become day labourers for the plantation companies, earning meagre salaries and enduring harsh working conditions. And nonetheless, these companies are certified.

- The case of Alto Paraná in Argentina

The tree plantation company Alto Paraná S.A. (APSA), a subsidiary of the Chilean corporation Arauco that has been operating in the province of Misiones, Argentina for more than a decade, is once again seeking FSC certification. An evaluation of the company's tree plantations, spanning 233,664 hectares, was conducted in March by consultants from the international organization Rainforest Alliance, who assessed environmental, silvicultural and socioeconomic aspects. This is the company's second attempt to obtain the FSC seal of approval, after a failed attempt in 2006.

Upon learning of this new certification bid, a group of professionals from the forestry and academic sectors, together with the Independent Producers of Puerto Piray (PIP), the Union of Producers of Puerto Libertad, researchers from Conicet, popular journalists from Misiones, and the Rural Reflection Group (GRR), prepared a report on the negative impacts of APSA's forest management practices, which they planned to submit to the certification auditors, Freddy Peña and Ariel Zorrilla.

The report (<http://nosonbosques.com.ar/noticias/abajo-el-maquillaje-verde/#more-444>) stresses that there is nothing "environmentally appropriate" about the massive use of more than 100,000 kilograms of toxic agrochemicals a year, prepared with water from the local streams of Misiones. Nor can this description be applied to the company's deforestation of tens of thousands of hectares of land for the establishment of its plantations, often in violation of the province's environmental legislation.

Nor can the replacement of the province's most fertile farmlands with endless plantations of pine and eucalyptus, managed with machines and chemicals, be considered "socially beneficial" – not only because of the unemployment generated, but also because these plantations prevent the continued cultivation of food crops on family farms, cause human health impacts as a result of pesticide spraying and pollen, lead to the disappearance of communities of small farmers, and limit the economic growth of the local population.

The report further emphasized that it is not "economically viable" for the province to depend on a single economic activity, heavily controlled by this one single company: while its pine trees grow and its sawmills and pulp mills yield ever higher profits, the people and environment of Misiones become increasingly impoverished.

Anthropologist Andrea Mastrangelo provided the auditors with information and publications she has authored, showing how labour is increasingly precarious, on cutaneous leishmaniasis as an unrecognized disease in the tree plantation sector, and on restrictions on the freedom of union organization by plantation workers. She also denounced other negative impacts of the pulp plantation industry related to land use and zoning, referring for example to a current federal court case involving the planting of pine trees within the borders of the Alecrín indigenous reservation in the department of San Pedro, and the displacement of the population caused by expansion of Arauco's industrial monoculture tree plantations, which affects not only small farmers but also forestry workers.

Mbya Guaraní indigenous communities in the province of Misiones held an Aty Ñeychyrô (Assembly of Chiefs) convened specifically to define their position on the FSC certification evaluation process. The declaration by the Mbya Guaraní communities, read before the Alto Paraná certifiers on March 13, states:

"Transforming our forest, rich in different animals, water and plants, into a green stain where there is nothing but pine trees, where silence reigns because there are no animals, birds and fish, would profoundly damage us, it would lead to our devastation. When they destroy the forest to plant pines, or when they do nothing to replant the native trees in the places where they ripped out the ones that provided shade to the grandparents of our grandparents, they silently push us towards the cities, destroying our culture which dates back much, much longer than the interests of Alto Paraná.

"This company never approached our communities, except to clear the forest around them and plant pines. Our land, which once filled our lives with joy with every step, is now a desert of pine trees. Alto Paraná does not recognize that it is in indigenous territories, it does not give back the land, it does not acknowledge the damage it causes, which is easy to see in the case of Tekoa Alecrín.

"Why has this company just decided today to introduce itself to the communities, hoping to get them to sign an agreement without explaining its contents, seeking to take advantage of our good faith and trust? Where was Alto Paraná when intruders tried to invade the territory of Tekoa Alecrín? If it considered those lands to belong to it, why didn't it defend them? But the real owners of those lands did defend them: the Mbya Guaraní communities.

"This company brings only damage and suffering to our people. It only attempts to interact with us to protect its own interests. The wood that it sells is watered with the tears of our grandmothers and grandfathers who watched as the lapachos, the cedars, the timbós were toppled by chainsaws to be replaced by the foreign pine trees on our territories. We never thought of trees as money. For us, they are a very important part of our life. Without the forest, the Mbya cannot exist. The pine trees condemn our culture, and so do evil company owners."

For their part, the Independent Producers of Piray (PIP), an organization created six years ago by some 200 families in Piray Kilómetro 18, Barrio Unión and Barrio Teresa (communities in the municipality of Puerto Piray, in the department of Montecarlo) also sent a statement to the FSC certification auditors, which was released publicly as well, and which states:

“We are not in agreement with the certification of Alto Paraná (APSA), because beyond the 70 metres which we have to live on, there is an endless sea of pine trees, and we feel like we are being drowned; because beginning in August and throughout the entire [Southern hemisphere] summer, the pollen from the blooming of the pine trees pollutes our atmosphere; because we breathe the contaminated air and the yellow powder is everywhere, on our tables, on our plates, in our beds, in our water tanks; because they fumigate with toxic agrochemicals near our homes; because they are making our children and older people sick: headaches, vomiting, dizziness, stomach pains, angina, conjunctivitis, bronchitis, asthma, allergies and miscarriages; because people are dying of cancer; because our animals are dying; because they pose a danger and a threat to future generations; because they evicted seven communities from kilómetros [settlements of small farmers in the municipality of Puerto Piray] that no longer exist. Those communities live on in our memory, they are part of our history. They were well-established communities. We do not want to leave. We want to live with dignity. We want to work the land, and produce healthy food.”

The families who make up the PIP added: “We want community development where the company is involved in order to ensure that other kilómetros do not disappear, to ensure the development of family farming, to produce and sell healthy food to Montecarlo, Eldorado and our beloved Puerto Piray, to strengthen our productive projects, to keep our young people from leaving, and to defend our identity.”

- The case of Veracel Celulose in Brazil

Veracel Celulose is a joint venture of the Swedish-Finnish corporation Stora Enso and Norwegian-Brazilian company Fibria (formerly Aracruz). In March, 350 workers on its eucalyptus plantations in Eunápolis, in the state of Bahia, launched a strike to demand higher wages, which are currently below the legal minimum wage. According to the workers, the strike is the outcome of a longstanding situation of exploitation and lack of dialogue, and they have staged it to demonstrate that they are prepared to take action and demand the respect of their rights.

The workers denounced that they must travel long distances every day to work in difficult-to-reach areas on the eucalyptus plantations, which means that in some cases they must set out as early as 3:00 a.m. and do not arrive back home until 9:00 p.m. But despite these long working days, Veracel only pays them for the eight hours they spend working on the plantation.

The work they carry out also causes serious health impacts. According to the workers, chainsaw operators often suffer injuries caused by the high levels of vibrations from inadequate equipment, which must be operated on uneven terrain marked by dips and slopes. They are also forced to fulfil “excessive production quotas, 31 m² per hour, which means cutting around 120 trees an hour,” reported one of the workers.

In the meantime, the long distances they must travel in vehicles with no air conditioning along dusty unpaved roads give rise to a high incidence of allergies and respiratory disorders.

Yet neither the poor working conditions, nor the low wages, nor the concentration of land ownership entailed by the business of monoculture tree plantations for pulp production have prevented Veracel

from obtaining the FSC “green” label that eases the conscience of its customers.

For those who live with the reality of the eucalyptus plantation and pulp mill companies in the state of Bahia, the FSC label is like a bad joke. It is a farce. It is a guarantee for the impunity of rights violations. It represents the certification of cruelty, of social, environmental and cultural injustices. As for those who purchase products with this label, are they victims of deception, or are they accomplices?

FSC certification also supports land grabbing by these companies, which use the “green” label to obtain the licenses and permits they need to expand their operations – and thus the negative impacts of their activities – from government authorities. For all these reasons, there is an urgent need for a large-scale campaign against FSC certification and other false seals of “sustainability” for industrial tree plantations.

The case of Argentina is based on reporting by journalists Sebastián Korol of Revista Superficie, a publication based in the province of Misiones, and María Inés Aiuto, a member of the anti-tree plantation campaign by Grupo de Reflexión Rural (Rural Reflection Group), an organization in the province of Corrientes.

The case of Brazil is based on information provided by CEPEDES, email cepedes@cepedes.org.br, and the article “Trabalhadores da Veracel em greve alegam que recebem salários abaixo do mínimo regido pela CLT”, by Irlete Gomes, 22/03/2013, available at <http://www.girodenoticias.com/noticias/geral/3019/trabalhadores-da-veracel-em-greve-alegam-que-recebem-salarios-abaixo-do-minimo-regido-pela-clt-22-03-2013/>