
Brazil: Sugarcane for agrofuel poses a growing threat to highly biodiverse ecosystem

Agrofuels are increasingly drawing words of warning, protest and condemnation from such disparate voices as high-level United Nations representatives like FAO Director-General Jacques Diouf and Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food Jean Ziegler, statesmen like Fidel Castro, and social organizations in both the North and South (see notes 1 and 2). Nevertheless, plantations of crops raised specifically to produce fuel continue to spread.

In Latin America, Brazil is undoubtedly at the forefront of this trend. Energy agreements signed with the United States and Chile last year and recently with Germany have consolidated Brazil's position as an ethanol producer.

Plantations of sugarcane for fuel production now occupy some six million hectares of land in Brazil, primarily in the southeast, in the states of Sao Paulo, Minas Gerais and Goiás, and also in the central states of Mato Grosso and Mato Grosso do Sul.

The region where sugarcane monoculture is now exerting the greatest pressure is the Cerrado, a sprawling woodland savannah biome that is home to a vast wealth of biodiversity. The Cerrado covers two million square kilometres of land and is bordered by the Amazon, Atlantic Forest and Pantanal regions. It was traditionally used for large-scale cattle farming, but in recent decades sugarcane plantations have been gradually taking over and converting large areas of the Cerrado into sugarcane fields. According to figures from a study to be published in June by the Brazilian NGO Instituto Sociedade, População e Natureza (Society, Population and Nature Institute, ISPN), there are 152,000 hectares of the Cerrado designated as conservation areas by the government that are currently covered by monoculture sugarcane plantations.

"Any monoculture provokes a loss of biodiversity," stresses Nilo D'Avila, the coordinator of the study, adding: "Sugarcane plantations alter the biochemical composition of the Cerrado, especially the acidity of the soil, which is very high in the region." Thus, on top of the deforestation that results when land is taken over to establish plantations, sugarcane monoculture techniques attempt to "correct" this acidity with lime, which has killed off numerous fruit species that had adapted to the Cerrado's highly acidic soil.

The greatest tragedy of the Cerrado is the fact that its rapid destruction has been largely ignored. It is the second most threatened biome after the Amazon region, but ranks first in terms of the threat posed by sugarcane plantations.

A report published by the Latin American regional office of the IUF trade union federation (3) reveals that in the last 40 years, the Cerrado has lost one half of its surface area as a consequence of the spread of sugarcane plantations, among other activities. If this trend continues, this ecosystem will have disappeared by the year 2030.

Big agribusiness has attempted to build an "eco-friendly" façade around the commodity of sugarcane

by using the term “biofuels”. But that façade is crumbling, and there are now some who have begun to call these products what they really are: necrofuels, the fuels of death.

(1) Position Paper of the Global South, at:

http://www.wrm.org.uy/subjects/agrofuels/Quito_Manifest.html

(2) Call for a Moratorium, at:

http://www.wrm.org.uy/actors/BDC/SBSTTA/Press_Release_26_6.html

(3) Caña de azúcar devasta el “cerrado”, Silvia Adoue, Radioagencia NP, at: <http://www.rel-uita.org/agricultura/cerrado.htm>