
Venezuela: increasing difficulties for Smurfit

Smurfit Carton, subsidiary of Jefferson Smurfit, owns 34,000 hectares of monocultures of gmelina, eucalyptus and pine in the Venezuelan states of Portuguesa, Lara and Cojedes. 27,000 hectares are located in Portuguesa, where the company confronted the local communities of Morador and Tierra Buena, which resisted the invasion of tree plantations in their agricultural lands (see WRM Bulletins 18, 20, 22 and 23).

According to recent information, Smurfit is facing severe sanitary problems in its plantations in Portuguesa. The uniformity of monoculture tree plantations makes them very vulnerable to the attack of insects and pests. The initial advantage of the plantation of an exotic tree -the absence of its local predators- becomes a catastrophe when either a local species adapts to feed on those trees or when its natural predator eventually arrives from its original ecosystem. Whichever the case, the fact is that many trees are now dying in these plantations.

At the same time, during the dry season fires have affected plantations in Portuguesa and Cojedes. Company's spokespersons have accused local peasants of sabotage actions against plantations. Fires are also very easy to burst with dry conditions and in a uniform environment as that of tree plantations, especially in the case of eucalyptus and pines. At present local villagers and environmentalists fear that Smurfit will try to compensate the loss of planted wood by cutting down nearby forests, as it did before the successful protests of 1999.

From a political point of view things do not seem to go well for Smurfit either. The new Venezuelan constitution, approved by a referendum in December 1999, includes explicitly environmental rights, indigenous peoples rights, and condemns land tenure concentration. According to principles of social justice in the countryside and sustainable land planning, commercial plantations are not allowed on soils apt for agriculture, since this would mean a competition with food production. Smurfit's future in Venezuela now seems to be -to say the least- problematic.

Article based on information from: Alfredo Torres, 18/4/2000; Prensa Regional del Estado Portuguesa. Grupos Ecológicos de Ospino, 18/4/2000.