
Brazil: The power of Aracruz Celulose

On March 23rd the Government of the State of Espirito Santo, Brazil, issued Decree 4428 with new regulations related to "reforestation" (plantations) in that state. Plantations occupying an area of more than 100 hectares will require a permit from the Agriculture and Forestry Defence Institute (IDAF), while plantations of less than that area will not need a permit. Additionally, the decree establishes maximum percentages for plantations in different zones, which can reach 50% in the central hilly, extreme northern and north-western regions. According to the text, the aim of the norm is that the area of "planted forests" in the state increase from 3 to 6%. High priority is given to eucalyptus, that already represents 97,8% of existing plantations.

The following day, State Parliamentarian Claudio Vereza presented a draft bill proposing the cancellation of the above referred decree. To his view, the decree elaborated by the Secretary for Agriculture contravenes the Environmental Law of Espirito Santo, which establishes that an environmental impact assessment is to be performed in the following cases: plantations that exceed 100 hectares, plantations that occupy a significant percentage of land area regardless of their extension, and plantations established in environmentally sensitive areas. According to the new decree, a plantation company can even set up, for example, 100 different plantations of 50 hectares each --reaching a total of 5000 hectares-- without needing a permit! Additionally, according to Mr Vereza, the Constitution of the State establishes that every activity of exploitation of forest resources involving areas of more than 100 hectares need a permit from the Agriculture and Environment Commission of the Legislative Assembly. Biologists and environmentalists have also expressed their concern for the expressed objective of promoting eucalyptus plantations in the extreme northern region of the state to cover 50% of its total area, considering that this region is prone to intense droughts.

It is important to highlight that the main plantation company in Espirito Santo is Aracruz Celulose, which owns 70% of the plantations in the state. It is also remarkable that the Secretary for Agriculture, Mr. Pedro de Faria Burnier, responsible for Decree 4428/99, is former executive of Aracruz Celulose. He efficiently served the company in that position and now continues to do so!

Aracruz Celulose launched an aggressive media campaign trying to show that there is no doubt that eucalyptus do not cause any negative impact on the environment. According to one of the company's foresters, the opposite is true: eucalyptus can be a solution for the northern region, highly affected by drought and could even "improve rain distribution in the region, that would become constant instead of being concentrated only during some months of the year". Additionally, to the company's view, producing eucalyptus is much more profitable than growing traditional crops.

Following an initiative from Member of Parliament Vereza, on April 15th a public audience of the Legislative Assembly of the State was held. During the audience, both Mr Vereza and members of civil society strongly criticized the new decree. The Federation of Rural Farmers of Espirito Santo also condemned the norm. They consider that the production of food for the market should be given priority to the production of eucalyptus for Aracruz. The Attorney General also expressed criticism to the decree considering it unconstitutional. As only three representatives of civil society were given the

opportunity to speak during the event, Mr Vereza requested a new audience.

It seems difficult that the opposition to the decree will be able to achieve its cancellation, considering the close relationship existing between Aracruz Celulose, the government of the state, the Legislative Assembly, industry, the Association of Foresters and the media. The power of the company is so strong, that the media decided to boycott the public audience of April 15th, which went practically unnoticed in the newspapers. In short, the power of Aracruz Celulose now extends itself all over the state of Espirito Santo. This explains the difficulties which the local indigenous Tupinikim and Guarani peoples have faced in trying to get their lands back from this company, whose struggle has been highlighted in numerous articles in the WRM bulletin (for an overview on the issue, see WRM Bulletin 13).

Source: Conselho Indigenista Missionário - Espírito Santo