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## [Argentina: The community fight against contamination from sawmills](#)

Black clouds of smoke and dust force families living in Concepción, in the Argentine province of Corrientes, to regularly shut themselves inside their homes. The burning of sawdust at the seven sawmills in this town of 26,000 inhabitants causes respiratory problems and skin reactions. Children and the elderly are among the most affected. And yet, local authorities take no measures to stop this contamination—revealing an attitude that prioritizes the economic interests of the forestry sector over the well-being of the community.

Faced with this situation, the social and environmental organization, Guardians of Y'verá, decided to conduct a health survey of the households close to the sawmills. In November 2023, they surveyed households in the neighborhoods of Caaby Guazú, 30 and 36 households. "35% of the people surveyed had health problems that they associate with the sawmills, such as allergies and respiratory problems, which in some cases have developed into asthma and skin diseases," the organization reported.

"Children are the most affected," says Araceli Romero, a resident of Concepción and member of the Guardians of Y'verá, who also participated in the survey. "After they burn the sawdust, children with respiratory or skin problems end up in the hospital. The problem is very evident," says the activist, who is also a nurse.

The province of Corrientes has the largest area of monoculture tree plantations in the country, with somewhere between 434,000 and 500,000 hectares planted—mostly with pine and eucalyptus trees. The data differ depending on the source: the National Secretary of Agriculture reports that 437,803 hectares had been planted as of March 2024. Meanwhile, the Argentine Forestry Association (AFOA, by its Spanish acronym), a group that includes the leading companies in the sector, states that there are more than 500,000 hectares. According to data from the national government, 80% of the timber goes to sawmills (1).

The town of Concepción is located in the department of the same name, at the gates of the Esteros del Y'verá. The Esteros del Y'verá are one of the largest wetlands in the Americas, and they are currently threatened by monoculture tree plantations and other activities (2). There are 39,500 hectares of plantations—mostly pine—in the department of Concepción. Jobs at the plantations and sawmills are some of the few employment opportunities available to the population, but the working conditions are very precarious and dangerous.

Monoculture tree plantations in Argentina began to increase significantly in 1998, with the enactment of Law 25.080 that promoted "cultivated forests." This law grants subsidies to companies (such as access to "non-refundable economic support") as well as huge tax benefits, including tax exemptions and fiscal stability for 30-50 years (meaning no taxes can be increased or added in that period). In Corrientes, this policy has resulted in a greater than 200 percent increase in the area of pine and eucalyptus monoculture plantations from 1994 to 2019 (3).

### **Plantations and sawmills: false promises of progress**

Far from improving the economic and social situation of communities in Corrientes, the expansion of pine and eucalyptus monoculture plantations has brought serious consequences: the displacement of peasant families whose lands have been invaded, environmental contamination due to the use of agrochemicals, over-consumption of water, and an increase in fires.

In addition to these impacts, there are impacts from the sawmills—which are located in urban areas,

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and which primarily affect people living in nearby neighborhoods. Every week, the sawmills burn the mountains of sawdust that have accumulated as residue from their activities. In addition to experiencing health problems caused by the smoke and dust, families are affected by noise pollution from the mills, according to the survey conducted by the Guardians of Y'verá. Twenty-five percent of the households surveyed also reported the precarious employment situation of the sawmill workers, as well as cases of serious occupational accidents.

"The State is very absent in this town," Araceli explains. "There is no work, and, unfortunately, some children have to leave high school to go work at the sawmills—where they endanger their health with the dust they are constantly breathing in." She goes on to say: "In many cases the working situations are unsafe, and some workers suffer amputations because of the machines."

Another dangerous and polluting practice of the sawmills and the municipality is to fill the wetlands with sawdust, especially during periods of drought. During seasons of fires, which are increasingly frequent because of climate change and the tree plantation model, the presence of sawdust in wetlands next to neighborhoods increases the risk that fires will reach the homes. Far from being a firebreak, then, the wetland becomes combustible.

## The community's fight

The Guardians of Y'verá see these health surveys that community activists have carried out as a tool in their fight against monoculture tree plantations and agribusiness. Prior to this survey, they had conducted one in Mburucuyá, 50 kilometers north of Concepción. There, the use of agrochemicals in citrus and tomato plantations is causing very severe health problems. In 2017, a nine-year-old girl by the name of Rocio Pared died of poisoning, after eating a poisoned tangerine that fell off of a tractor. Seven years later, the crime still remains unpunished, and her relatives and social organizations are [demanding justice](#).

"The community surveys are an important part of our struggle, because they focus on what people living in the area are saying," explains Cristian Barrionuevo, another member of Guardians of Y'verá. In addition to gathering information to shed light on the problems, the survey process creates a safe space for residents to express other concerns; in many cases, they stay in contact with the community activists who conducted the surveys and ask them questions or denounce other cases of contamination.

In this case, the survey on the sawmills effectively showed that it is not viable for these establishments to continue operating near homes. Meanwhile, it was also proven—once again—that the tree plantation model does not bring the promised benefits to the population, but rather the opposite.

In light of this, the Guardians of Y'verá are demanding the relocation of the sawmills away from towns and cities, and they continue to denounce the impacts of the industrial forestry model: "Our organization continues to demand the removal of sawmills from towns, and we continue to denounce the industrial forestry model and its consequences—which include the aforementioned problems, as well as other serious ones. For example, in the months of extreme drought, there were large fires in Corrientes, many of them in the towns of Concepción and Santa Rosa. These fires are exacerbated by filling the wetlands with sawdust—a practice that creates a fire hazard for all the homes."

## Guardians of Y'verá, Corrientes, Argentina and the WRM International Secretariat

(1) Secretary of Agriculture, Livestock and Fisheries of the Nation. Forestry Industry Dashboard: <https://www.magyp.gob.ar/sitio/areas/desarrollo-foresto-industrial/foresto-industria/tablero.php>

(2) [WRM Bulletin, Monoculture Tree Plantations, Poverty and False Solutions: Harvard's Legacy in Argentina, July 2023](#)

(3) Baruzzo, M; Smichowski, H. and others. Plantaciones Forestales: crecimiento y expansión de la

