
No to Monsanto! No to Poisons! Industrial Tree Plantations and Agrotoxics

-

For decades, The World Rainforest Movement has been denouncing the many ways in which industrial tree plantations directly cause continued destruction of vegetation, biodiversity and forests. Industrial tree plantations also lead to the loss of food sovereignty, livelihoods, cultures, and even the existence of many forest-dependent communities. **We denounce the devastating poisoning that—without exception—these plantations produce in the soil, air, water and health of affected communities; due to their indiscriminate use of agrotoxics.**

In this context, the US agribusiness and chemical company Monsanto, together with its industry counterparts, is a key target in the fight against tree plantations. Its famous glyphosate-based Roundup, the most widely used herbicide in the world, is causing health and environmental catastrophes worldwide. This highly toxic herbicide is used in tree plantations to kill any other plant that might compete with or affect the tree grown. There are also high risks associated with the increased use of agrotoxics in genetically modified tree plantations, which have already been approved in Brazil and the United States.

For these reasons, **WRM supports the International Tribunal against Monsanto which will take place October 14-16 in The Hague, Netherlands.** This initiative seeks to hold the agrochemical giant accountable for its human rights violations, crimes against humanity and ecocides. (<http://www.monsanto-tribunal.org/>).

Plantations are not forests!

We now share an interview with Ivonete Gonçalves de Souza, Executive Coordinator of the Center for Studies and Research for the Development of Southern Bahia (CEPEDES) and member of the Permanent Campaign against Agrotoxics and for Life in Brazil.

1. It is increasingly widespread and public knowledge that agrotoxics are used in agriculture. However there is little dissemination, and therefore little public knowledge, about how poisons are also used in industrial tree plantations. Why is this?

It's very simple. When we talk about poisons and agrotoxics, people associate them with food, because that has been well-publicized. Even the biggest Brazilian TV station has broadcast on this subject. But because soybeans, coffee and eucalyptus are not considered food, the issue is invisible for much of the population; especially when it comes to tree plantations. The use of chemical substances in eucalyptus has not been disclosed, and that is very serious. Substances are used in large amounts, as are many mixtures. Studies on individual chemicals indicate that there are serious consequences. However, no clear studies have been widely circulated on the effects of mixing different products. There has been large-scale eucalyptus production in the southern tip of Bahia, Brazil since the 1980s. Imagine nearly four decades of poison. What does that mean? What we know is that the people, soil, water sources and vegetation are increasingly exposed, and therefore poisoned!

2. Companies that promote tree plantations often say they apply "low toxicity" products that are "agricultural defenses," and not poisons. They also say they use fewer agrotoxics compared to coffee or soybean crops, and that they are within legal "standards." Companies claim that if the products are "correctly" applied, there are no negative impacts. Since you have studied the impacts produced by agrotoxics in eucalyptus plantations, what do you think about this company discourse?

We're talking about ideological manipulation spread by big industries like Monsanto, who are responsible for the chemical substances. There is no such thing as a low toxicity poison, much less agricultural defenses. These chemicals were initially created to kill. They were used in wars, and were only later called "agricultural defenses" in order to be sold in subaltern countries like Brazil. And also because ants, and the few plant species that manage to break the solitude of eucalyptus, are persistent and therefore considered obstacles to tree plantations. The constant presence of ants in large numbers is a signal from nature alerting us that an ecosystem is out of balance. Ants feed on the abundant new leaves of eucalyptus trees in a "sea" of thousands of hectares, with no natural enemies to control their population—since no other insects can survive in a degraded and poisoned environment. These facts are consistent, and monoculture is surely one of the most violent practices that produces imbalance in nature. Is there a "correct" use of poison? What is really happening is the poisoning of the population through water, air and soil—in homeopathic doses, in silence.

3. One of the agrochemical groups most used on eucalyptus are herbicides, including glyphosate—known as Roundup and produced by Monsanto. What are the impacts of applying this product, especially on the health of plantation workers and neighboring communities, their territories and water sources?

In addition to the herbicide glyphosate, patented by Monsanto until 2000 and used in various forms, other substances such as oxyfluorfen are used in combination to kill vegetation. As plants and insects develop resistance to these products, it is necessary to use higher doses and more mixtures of products. It is the natural order of things. This translates into global economic gain, since one item of the global economy strongly affects another. In this case, companies growing eucalyptus positively impact the agrochemical industry, and vice versa. And at the same time that they use chemicals to kill vegetation, companies are undoubtedly applying a sulfluramide-based substance to kill ants. This product is also dangerous, because as it breaks down in the environment, it turns into another much more dangerous substance: perfluorooctane sulfonate (PFOS). The imbalance causes other pests to appear. For example, in the southern tip of Bahía, with nearly one million hectares of eucalyptus trees belonging to four companies (FIBRIA – formerly Aracruz Celulosa, Suzano Bahía Sur, Arcelor Mittal and Veracel Celulosa), there was an infestation of the brown eucalyptus caterpillar, leading to company losses. This caterpillar becomes a butterfly that invades cities, settlements, villages and communities. So then other products are used, including aerial spraying of various toxic products. Several impacted workers have testified to the impacts of these poisons. There are statements about workers' deaths due to agrotoxics poisoning. Nevertheless, the subject has been studied and disseminated very little, especially the impacts that these substances cause in communities. The Permanent Campaign Against Agrotoxics in Brazil published an excellent dossier on this topic, which I recommend everyone read. (<http://abrasco.org.br/dossieagrotoxicos/>)

4. Today, Brazil is the first country in Latin America to approve commercial planting of genetically modified eucalyptus. In the case of GM crops such as soybeans, Monsanto promised they would need less glyphosate than conventional soybeans. However, studies have shown that in practice the opposite has occurred. What should we expect from genetically modified eucalyptus as it relates to agrotoxics application?

Surely the same thing will happen. These companies are based on lies, with the security of impunity and the strength of economic powers. They rely on the State, but also on dominant science. All over the world there are independent studies that show that glyphosate is dangerous, yet the companies continue saying that this is a myth. One only has to look at their websites. Look at Monsanto's website: <http://www.monsanto.com/global/br/produtos/pages/mitos-verdades-glifosato.aspx>

Genetically modified eucalyptus will require more poison, as this is a vicious strategy to feed the industries and increase profit. As I said before, one sector benefits the other. That is, one sector can only survive because it feeds the other. Notice how Monsanto, which became a giant by selling glyphosate to the world, is now joining up with German pharmaceutical and chemical company, Bayer. A perfect marriage! Before, Monsanto sold and profited from the poison used in monoculture, and Bayer earned money selling the pharmaceutical "remedies" to treat the diseases that these poisons caused. Now they've joined together. Genetically modified eucalyptus is yet another market strategy to feed the hunger for more capital. The more poison produced and sold, the greater the production and sale of pulp.

5. Monoculture tree plantations that are certified, with labels such as the FSC, state that the management of their plantations is "sustainable." Yet these certified plantations also apply agrottoxics. How then can they be considered "sustainable"?

I am sure that those certifications only serve to deceive people, especially people in Northern countries! Because the FSC is aware of the whole chain of damage caused by tree plantations. We have proof of that. One example is that the FSC has a list of products that should not be allowed in certified plantations, such as sulfluramid. Yet feigning distraction, they certify companies that plant trees using one or more of those products. The environmental and social crimes caused by eucalyptus companies have been reported to the FSC several times. And what does the FSC do? It maintains the companies' certification. It is like "sustainability" makeup. That is, certification only means "sustainable" for the FSC and for the company that has gone through the certification process.

6. Finally, how can we break what you define in your study as a "deafening silence" about the use of agrottoxics in eucalyptus plantations?

The first step is to put this issue on the agenda. Spread the word as much as possible. Because there are many different products used, and they are applied continuously, in large quantities, and spread over great distances—mainly through the air and water. So we are all exposed to the harm caused by these poisons, regardless of where we are, because water and air have no borders. We must carry out a fierce campaign in this sense. And not only for us, but for future generations. It is not fair for them to receive a poisoned planet as their inheritance.

The second step, in the case of Brazil, is to allocate areas with eucalyptus plantations, which are mostly unoccupied state lands, for agrarian reform; these lands should be used to grow food agroecologically, to produce life and health for all species on the planet.