
Brazil: Mato Grosso do Sul - The new eucalyptus frontier

The region of Brazil, and perhaps the world, where monoculture eucalyptus plantations and pulp production are expanding most rapidly is in the state of Mato Grosso do Sul, and specifically the micro-region of Três Lagoas.

This micro-region is currently home to a pulp mill owned by Fibria – a joint venture formed by the Brazilian companies Aracruz and Votorantim – and a paper mill controlled by US-based International Paper. The Fibria mill produces 1.3 million tons of pulp a year, and there are plans for the investment of BRL 3.6 billion (more than two million dollars) in a second mill, scheduled to open in 2014. This would raise the company's pulp production to three million tons a year. Fibria currently owns 150,000 hectares of eucalyptus plantations and plans to double this area.

In addition to these activities, a company called Eldorado Brasil is building a pulp mill in this same micro-region with a production capacity of 1.5 million tons of pulp annually, scheduled to enter into operation in November 2012. The company also owns 150,000 hectares of eucalyptus plantations.

The Chilean company Arauco and Portuguese company Portucel have also shown interest in investing in eucalyptus plantations and producing pulp in Mato Grosso do Sul.

This uncontrolled expansion – for which the state government has waived the normal requirements for environmental impact assessments and reports – led the Federal University of Mato Grosso (UFMS) to organize, in conjunction with other universities and social organizations, a symposium on “The Formation of the Pulp and Paper Complex in Mato Grosso do Sul: Limits and Prospects”, which took place from June 30 to July 2 in Três Lagoas.

According to a study presented during the seminar, the region experienced a major expansion of livestock ranching in the 1970s, which led to a significant concentration of land ownership and numerous conflicts. In the state of Mato Grosso do Sul, landholdings of more than 1,000 hectares represent 10% of properties yet occupy 77% of the land area (according to 2006 figures). Also in the 1970s, an area of the state was taken over by plantations of eucalyptus trees, which were used to produce charcoal. By the 1990s, there were 8,000 workers subjected to slave labour conditions in the state, in addition to cases of child labour.

More recently, monoculture tree plantations have undergone further expansion, this time for the purpose of pulp production. Between 2005 and 2009, the area occupied by tree plantations in the micro-region of Três Lagoas doubled from 152,000 hectares to 308,000 hectares of plantations, almost entirely of eucalyptus. This area is expected to increase to one million hectares by 2020.

This expansion has been associated with a series of significant changes in rural and urban areas. Milk production on small dairy farms in Três Lagoas fell from 11 million litres to five million litres annually between 1996 and 2006. The production of food crops has also decreased considerably. For example, there are now practically no beans grown in this area, now dominated by large landholdings. Today, small landholdings account for a mere 30,000 hectares of the total of four

million hectares encompassed by the micro-region.

Meanwhile, with the uncontrolled rise in property values, large landholders are able to take greater advantage of the eucalyptus boom by selling or leasing out their lands, thus further entrenching the major concentration of land ownership and hindering the process of agrarian reform. There are reports of deforestation and the bankruptcy of local businesses. The ten agrarian reform settlements in the area, home to 1,147 families, are becoming completely hemmed in by eucalyptus plantations. In urban areas, the huge influx of workers for mill construction has led to problems of overcrowding in housing.

There has also been an increase in rates of violence; for example, the incidence of domestic violence against women has tripled in recent years.

A field visit and conversations with the local inhabitants reveal that the greatest concern of farmers who live near the plantations is the use of toxic agrochemicals. The companies' widespread use of aerial spraying has also led to complaints about the resulting unpleasant odour. They reported as well that numerous water sources have dried up. Another concern is the exodus of people from the countryside due to the sale and lease of large landholdings, which has made the large landowners wealthy but deprived local inhabitants and farm workers of land. Some have begun to fight for agrarian reform, since the National Institute of Colonization and Agrarian Reform (INCRA) has not made resources available for new settlements in the area for several years, making life even more difficult for settled farmers. Other families driven off the land have been forced to look for employment and housing in the city, where the cost of living has increased drastically due to real estate speculation.

What is particularly striking in the plantation areas is the presence of a few isolated trees, of species native to the Cerrado ecosystem, in the midst of the eucalyptus. According to a local inhabitant, these trees tend to die when they are surrounded by eucalyptus. In addition, these few native trees are exposed to toxic agrochemicals and isolated from the flora and fauna of the region, which are non-existent in monoculture plantations, and thus seem like exhibits in an "outdoor museum".

Whether they die or manage to survive, the presence of these trees aptly symbolizes the people of the micro-region of Três Lagoas, where there is no room for alternatives to the pulp-plantation model in the midst of a growing sea of eucalyptus. The trees of the Cerrado, like the area and its people, have been "occupied" by this model which continues to expand with the full support of the state and federal authorities, creating wealth for a small few and an uncertain future for the majority of the population.

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