
Chile: Monoculture tree plantations on Mapuche territory, certified by the FSC?

Since 1974, industrial monoculture tree plantations have spread throughout Chile, and are particularly concentrated in the regions of Bío-Bío and Araucanía, although they are also found in the regions of Maule, Los Ríos and Los Lagos.

Decree Law 701, passed by the Pinochet military dictatorship and still in force today, granted state subsidies to private companies as a means of promoting the forestry industry. Large tracts of land and state-owned plantations were privatized and gradually ended up in the hands of powerful economic groups, like the Matte and Angelini Groups, effectively dismantling the advances achieved by Agrarian Reform in the redistribution of land ownership. Of the 10 million hectares of land that had been expropriated, three million were sold at low prices and under highly favourable conditions. (1) Private companies obtained financing for up to 75% of the costs of planting pine and eucalyptus trees on Mapuche indigenous territory for 37 years.

Since then, forestry sector exports have been given high priority by successive Chilean governments, which have continued to support and promote the sector. The drastic expansion of industrial tree plantations has not only infringed on agricultural land and native ecosystems like forests, but also on the traditional territory of the Mapuche people, which provides the material and spiritual support for their very existence.

Throughout this time, territorial conflicts between Mapuche communities and plantation companies, especially Forestal Mininco and the companies grouped under Bosques Arauco, have been a constant occurrence. As explained by Alfredo Seguel of the Konapewman Mapuche Association, “for Mapuche organizations, the conflict with forestry companies is not merely a dispute over land.” According to the forestry commission of the Coordinating Committee of Mapuche Territorial Organizations and Identities, “the territorial conflict with the forestry companies is a fight for survival, for rights, dignity, recognition, and the possibility of autonomous development. For the coordinating committee, stopping the expansion of the forestry sector is also a means of preventing this activity from provoking even greater impoverishment, environmental damage and cultural deterioration for the Mapuche people and vast sectors of society.” (2)

These ongoing conflicts have resulted in a long list of Mapuche people wounded, killed, harassed, arrested, tried and sentenced with the full weight of the law in civilian and military courts, often under laws created during the military dictatorship which remain in force, for their participation in protests in urban and rural areas aimed at recovering their land and halting the further spread of tree plantations.

In the meantime, as revealed by a recent report on independent forestry monitoring of river basins in the Los Ríos region, “the increase in the emigration of the rural population to cities is a consequence of the new land ownership regime in rural areas, with the expansion of tree plantations being a significant factor in this process.” (3)

Another ongoing problem is the growing scarcity of water in rural areas in south-central Chile, where

“the vast areas of tree plantations and the methods of harvesting used alter the normal levels and water quality of rivers, which means that the decisions adopted by the forestry companies on the land where their assets are located affect all of the area’s inhabitants.” This is particularly true for the Mapuche people, “who have lived in these territories since time immemorial, and maintained a harmonious interrelation with the water and land until the European invasion.” The companies do not consider the effects of the huge volumes of water consumed by fast-growing tree species in areas where water is scarce, which prevent water from being used for other productive activities, among other impacts. This problem is also ignored by the government policies that promote the spread of tree plantations.” (4)

The water shortages provoked by monoculture plantations of fast-growing exotic tree species have worsened the conditions faced by Mapuche communities, who organized a massive march against the expansion of tree plantations in Araucanía, among other regions, in 2006. The Ñancuichew Association of Lumaco, together with Mapuche communities in Lumaco, Purén, Los Sauces, Traiguén, Victoria and Ercilla, declared that the reason behind the protest march was “the presence of privately owned pine and eucalyptus plantations on their territory, among other problems.” They also described the plantation companies’ actions as “environmental terrorism.” (5)

Recently, the mayor of the commune of Antuco, in the province of Bío-Bío, blamed monoculture pine and eucalyptus plantations for aggravating the drought currently affecting peasant farming communities in the region. The mayor stated that intensive cultivation of these trees is “using up the water sources in rural areas, which is further accentuated in the summer season in the Precordillera region.” (6)

Despite the well-documented impacts of the industrial and intensive cultivation of trees, forestry sector companies are now attempting to obtain the “green label” of FSC certification for their plantations. During a recent visit to a number of communes in Araucanía (Nueva Imperial, Chol Chol, Galvarino, Traiguén, Lumaco, Los Sauces, Purén, Angol and Renaico), Claudio Donoso Hiriart told WRM about the “devastation and desolation” caused by pine and eucalyptus plantations, which “have replaced native forests and highly fertile agriculture land and are finishing off the water and land.” He commented that “the most striking commune is Lumaco, where plantations occupy 52.5% of the total land area of what is the poorest commune in the region (Mininco is the largest landowner).” He also showed us a video of a eucalyptus plantation established on what was once prime agricultural land in the commune of Chol Chol, which is now facing severe water shortages, and where there is a sign posted with the FSC certification label.

Forestal Mininco is currently seeking FSC certification for a total of 666,581 hectares of plantations spread across the regions of El Maule, Bío-Bío, Araucanía, Los Ríos and Los Lagos.

In response, this past January in Temuco, the Mapuche organizations and communities gathered together in the Wallmapu Futa Trawun – an autonomous and self-organized body made up by ancestral community authorities, group leaders, community members, young people and students from throughout the Mapuche nation – addressed the national and international public through a press release in which they declared:

“Today, January 25, we held a meeting with Mr. Freddy Peña, the head of the auditing commission from the United States (FSC) certifying body Smartwood, who is gathering information and background for the certification of the wood produced by the company Forestal Mininco.

“This certification is very important in order for Forestal Mininco to sell its products in vital markets,

mainly in Europe, Asia and the United States. The company must fulfil a series of requirements related to the protection of the environment, good relations with local communities, respect for laws, conventions and the culture of indigenous peoples, not infringing directly or indirectly on the resources and land rights of indigenous peoples, respect for sacred places, compensation for damages, respecting traditional knowledge, providing nearby communities with skilled employment and training opportunities, respect for labour legislation in accordance with ILO conventions, etc.

“The Lonko, Machi and Werken participants and Mapuche leaders and community members from different territories wish to express our profound concern to this auditing commission with regard to all of the damage that this company has caused in our territories. The cultural and environmental genocide and criminalization of our social demands which it has carried out against our nation, and all of the suffering caused to thousands of our families. At the same time, we have submitted to them a file of background material gathered by our leadership and professionals, which provides evidence of all the environmental, cultural, social and economic impacts, as well as the criminalization, sentencing, imprisonment and murder of community members fighting to recover their territory, for which Forestal Mininco is responsible.”

The Wallmapu Futa Trawun stresses that the “predatory company Forestal Mininco” should not be certified, and calls on the different Mapuche communities to “be aware and informed of events that have a bearing on our individual rights and the customary rights of the Mapuche nation and the intentions of these companies that destroy our territory, our Itrofilmongén, with all of the life forms that our nation has defended and protected throughout the thousands of years of our history.” (7)

The plantation companies could try to improve the way they carry out their business, but they have no intention of changing their model of production: large-scale, monoculture, expansive and exclusive. This model is uncertifiable, as well as incompatible with a policy of territorial sustainability for Mapuche communities in La Araucanía.

- (1) “Modelo forestal chileno y Movimiento autónomo Mapuche: Las posiciones irreconciliables de un conflicto territorial”, Alfredo Seguel, 2005, http://www.wrm.org.uy/paises/Chile/modelo_forestal_chileno.html
- (2) “Conflicto público de tierras y Recursos naturales”: Expansión forestal y territorialidad Mapuche (Chile), Alfredo Seguel, Agrupación Mapuche Konapewman, <http://www.mapuche.nl/doc/seguel0906.pdf>
- (3) “Informe Nacional, Monitoreo Forestal Independiente en Cuencas Hidrográficas Abastecedoras de Agua de la XIV Región de Los Ríos”; ONG-Forestales por el Bosque Nativo.
- (4) “Gran marcha mapuche en contra de expansión forestal en La Araucanía”, Aldea Comunicaciones, <http://www.olca.cl/oca/chile/region08/forestales01.htm>
- (5) Ibid.
- (6) “Antuco: Alcalde considera que plantaciones de pino y eucaliptos agudizan la sequía”, Bío-Bío La Radio, <http://www.radiobiobio.cl/2011/02/01/antuco-alcalde-considera-que-plantaciones-de-pino-y-eucaliptos-agudizan-la-sequia/>
- (7) “Declaración de Fvta Xawun Mapuche por certificación de Forestal Mininco”, national and international press release, <http://www.observatorio.cl/node/1326>

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