
FSC and Veracel Celulose: Certification that is neither reliable nor independent

In 2007, FSC certifying body SGS began the certification process for Veracel Celulose in Bahia, Brazil, in accordance with the FSC's principles and criteria. Veracel is a joint venture between the Swedish-Finnish transnational Stora Enso and Brazilian-based Fibria (formerly Aracruz). It controls some 100,000 hectares of monoculture eucalyptus plantations geared to the production of pulp for export, within a total area of over 200,000 hectares. It is currently working on doubling its pulp mill production capacity and plantations.

Back in 2004, the FSC had initiated a review of its practice of certifying monoculture tree plantations, a practice that was harshly criticized by social movements and NGOs, including the WRM. This opposition was based on the fact that these plantations cause serious negative impacts, as demonstrated for years by the testimony of communities living near plantations and research and studies in all of the countries where monoculture tree plantations have been established. As a result, the 2007 certification process involving Veracel, a leading company in the plantation sector, was viewed as a "test case" by these social movements and NGOs to determine whether the FSC had changed its practice.

But the FSC had not changed. In 2008, SGS granted Veracel FSC certification, ignoring the various demonstrations and protests waged by social movements and NGOs in Bahia, the rest of the Brazil and around the world, before, during and after the certification. This opposition was spurred by Veracel's well-documented violation of FSC principles and criteria. (1) Nevertheless, through the certifying body SGS, which according to the FSC is an "independent" organization, Veracel obtained the FSC label and has consequently been able to export millions of tons of FSC-certified pulp since 2008.

In 2010, two Belgian journalists, Leopold Broers and An-Katrien Lecluyse, decided to undertake three months of fieldwork in the areas surrounding Veracel plantations. Their goal was to determine whether or not the company genuinely deserved the FSC label. Unlike SGS and many journalists who devote only a few days to fieldwork, these two journalists spent several months visiting the communities and talking with local inhabitants, in addition to listening to the company's side.

The result of this extensive fieldwork was an article in the Belgian socio-environmental publication MO-Magazine and a 40-minute documentary that was premiered this January in the Belgian city of Gand. The premiere was attended by 250 people. The screening of the documentary was followed by a debate, with the participation of the FSC and WWF-Belgium, among others.

Both the article and the film represented a major contribution to the communities and social movements who resist and/or struggle against the power and the impacts of Veracel. Representatives of these communities and social movements were given a voice in both the film and the article, which is very different from the way they are normally treated by the authorities, and even by the FSC certifying body SGS. Through the work of these journalists, they have been able to make themselves heard in Europe. And their message to consumers is very clear: you are being duped.

What those who were present at the debate following the documentary screening found particularly striking was that the representatives who spoke out in defence of the FSC talked about the “independence” of the certifying body, in this case SGS, and the reliability of the label, even though the serious denunciations presented by the film had very clearly demonstrated that the label is far from reliable. As a result, it is difficult to consider the SGS as an “independent” organization, especially knowing that it is the company seeking certification – in this case, Veracel – that hires the certifying body. In other words, Veracel paid SGS for this service.

The certifying body’s lack of independence was made even more evident after the journalists submitted an official complaint to the FSC based on the denunciations they had documented. In response, the FSC ordered an audit of the work done by SGS. The findings of the audit were released in January 2011, curiously coinciding with the premiere of the journalists’ film. The audit recommended the suspension of SGS accreditation to conduct FSC certifications in Brazil, due to its “unsatisfactory” performance.

In spite of this positive outcome for the communities and movements involved, a number of questions remain unanswered. Will Veracel be able to keep the FSC label? And why is it only now, after Veracel has already been certified for almost three years, that an FSC audit has finally declared that SGS did its job incorrectly, indicating as well that this FSC certifying body does not in fact comply with FSC principles and standards? Did it take a magazine article, a film, and a complaint lodged in Europe to make this happen? How much longer will the FSC continue to let organizations like SGS carry out certification assessments, while being paid by the companies seeking certification? And what does the FSC plan to do in the cases of other certified plantations where local communities have no possibility of making their voices heard internationally?

All of this leads to the conclusion that revoking the FSC label from Veracel and all other FSC-certified companies that operate large-scale tree plantations is crucial in order for the FSC to genuinely differentiate itself from the various other labels of “sustainability”. On the contrary, if Veracel Celulose and other companies like it are able to maintain the FSC label, this will merely prove to the world that the FSC partakes in “greenwashing” and is therefore not reliable.

(1) http://www.wrm.org.uy/actores/FSC/Veracel_Certidao_Obito.html