
Brazil: State government incentives for the expansion of industrial tree plantations in the state of Rio de Janeiro

The government of the state of Rio de Janeiro has adopted various initiatives since 2001 to promote the expansion of large-scale monoculture tree plantations in the state. It would seem that its intention is to recreate in Rio de Janeiro the green deserts that are laying waste to the north of the state of Espírito Santo, the extreme south of the state of Bahia, the north of Minas Gerais, the states of São Paulo and Paraná, the south of Rio Grande do Sul, and more recently, different parts of the states of Maranhão, Piauí and Mato Grosso do Sul.

In 2001, the state government and the pulp and paper company Aracruz Celulose (now Fibria) signed a protocol of intent through which the government committed to supporting the extensive planting of trees to supply the company's pulp mill in the state of Espírito Santo. From that point on, Aracruz Celulose began to aggressively lobby municipal governments in the north and northwest regions of the state, and succeeded in gaining public commitments from a number of these governments to allocate areas in their municipalities for the establishment of eucalyptus plantations by the company.

The signing of this protocol of intent sparked an immediate reaction from the social movements that make up the Alert Against the Green Desert Network of Rio de Janeiro, who staged demonstrations to expose the severe social and environmental impacts caused by industrial tree plantations in the states of Espírito Santo, Bahia and Minas Gerais. This popular resistance resulted in the cancellation of the protocol of intent as well as the adoption in 2003 of State Law 4063, which imposed restrictions on the establishment of tree plantations. Nevertheless, in spite of the significant popular mobilization, in 2007 the state government adopted State Law 5067, which relaxed the rules for the expansion of industrial tree plantations, facilitating the establishment of these plantations in 90 of the 92 municipalities in the state. The bill that gave rise to Law 5067/2007 was submitted to the legislative assembly by the state governor as an "urgent" measure, which means that it was voted on without the necessary prior discussion, but with the full support of the state secretary of the environment at the time, Carlos Minc. This law linked the environmental-economic zoning process in the state to the plantation industry, and eliminated the requirement to conduct environmental impact assessments for areas of less than 400 hectares in the north and northwest regions of the state. This constituted a violation of the Federal Constitution, which stipulates that any projects that generate impacts on the environment must be preceded by an environmental evaluation. From this point on, plantation silviculture became a strategic policy of the state government, backed by its own specific legislation. As a result, more than 65% of the eucalyptus plantations in the northwest region of the state were established after the adoption of Law 5067/2007, most of them without fulfilling the environmental requirements stipulated by this law.

The financial crisis of 2008, however, slowed down the expansion of large-scale tree plantations in the state. As a means of reviving the sector, in 2011 the state government launched the Basic Plan for the Development of Sustainable Silviculture, in an unusual partnership with Petrobras, Brazil's

largest oil and gas company. Petrobras' participation in the project, according to the introduction to the plan, was intended as a means of offsetting the social and environmental impacts of its activities in the state. Under the plan, up to 1.5 million hectares of land in the state, roughly 35% of its entire territory, could potentially be used for commercial silviculture. The discourse used by the state government to promote the plan focused on the promise of jobs and income, and its supposed contribution to social inclusion, the recovery of areas of land degraded by cattle grazing, and the absorption of CO₂, in addition to the partial recovery of native forest – which would be limited to a mere 11% of the areas occupied by eucalyptus plantations.

Nevertheless, all of these incentives are apparently insufficient. Despite its relaxation, the state law regulating commercial silviculture remains complex, according to some representatives of the sector, since it requires the licensing of plantations by the State Environmental Institute. As a result, the secretary of the environment, Carlos Minc, recently announced that the state government will pass a decree that will even further facilitate the concession of environmental licences for commercial tree plantations, through the creation of “forestry districts” – large areas made up of smaller landholdings, which will no longer require individual environmental impact assessments. The goal is to establish 100,000 hectares of eucalyptus plantations in the next five years, in the south, north and northwest regions of the state, “contributing to the country’s exports and increased tax revenues.” Today, in the state of Rio de Janeiro, there are 18,000 hectares of tree plantations. The low level of local wood production is the main argument used to justify the government’s incentives for the sector. The state imports around 90% of the wood consumed by industries, being one of the country’s biggest consumers of wood-based products. Of the total consumed, 29% is wood burned for the generation of power by industries, while 23% is used in civil construction, according to the Federation of Industries of the State of Rio de Janeiro (FIRJAN). Local wood production would reduce the current dependence on wood products from Bahia, Espírito Santo, São Paulo and Minas Gerais.

The state of Rio de Janeiro now constitutes a frontier of the expansion of tree plantations in Brazil. The relaxation of state legislation regulating the sector, the establishment of charcoal-burning iron and steel foundries in the state, and the implementation of the Basic Plan for the Development of Sustainable Silviculture, combined with the potential for exports through the entry into operation of port complexes like Açu and Kennedy, will drive the expansion of production chains linked to eucalyptus plantations in the state. Added to this is the political co-optation of municipal government representatives, civil society, and public officials involved in rural extension.

In view of the above, it is obvious that the decision-making processes adopted by the state government of Rio de Janeiro have excluded the participation and disregarded the interests of those who will be primarily affected by this model of development based on industrial tree plantations: small rural communities. The government’s promotion of industrial silviculture has not been weighed against alternatives like agrarian reform and agro-ecology. These proposals have never even been discussed at the local level as a model for the development of the rural areas of the state of Rio de Janeiro. But there is something that makes the situation even worse: according to INCRA, the government agency responsible for implementing agrarian reform measures, the priority areas for the expansion of industrial tree plantations identified by the state government and its private partners are precisely the areas of social conflict in the countryside and popular struggle to demand agrarian reform.

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