
Brazil: The countless problems surrounding the Suzano corporation

In late 2013, the international organization Biofuelwatch, in conjunction with WRM and the Brazilian NGO CEPEDES, published a case study on the eucalyptus plantations of the Brazilian company “Suzano Papel e Celulose” in the northeastern Brazilian state of Maranhão for the export of wood pellets as a source of biomass energy (1). This article presents updated information on the context of this project, one of the first – not only in Brazil, but also in Latin America – to promote eucalyptus plantations specifically for biomass production. The European Union, in its search for energy alternatives to its high consumption of fossil fuels, will likely be the destination of Suzano’s wood pellets.

The 2013 study on Suzano’s eucalyptus plantations revealed, among other things, serious land conflicts between the company and traditional communities in the Baixo Parnaíba region, in the state of Maranhão. The study also showed that Suzano had practised deforestation in a transitional area between the Amazon rainforest and the Cerrado or Brazilian savannah, which is characterized by highly unique biodiversity and immeasurable importance for the survival of local traditional communities.

Since then, a particularly striking piece of news related to Suzano and its eucalyptus plantations was the company’s request to the Brazilian authorities to authorize the planting, on a commercial scale, of genetically engineered (GE) eucalyptus trees, developed by the biotech firm FuturaGene, which is owned by Suzano. If approved, this will be the first authorization for the commercial planting of GE trees for the purpose of harvesting wood, not only in Brazil but in all of Latin America, and the second in the world after China (see more on the main problems with GE trees in [WRM Bulletin 206](#) and on the [WRM website](#)).

In September 2014, at a public hearing in Brasilia on Suzano’s request, two letters opposing the authorization were submitted to the National Technical Commission on Biosecurity (CTNBio). The letters were signed by hundreds of Brazilian and international organizations and social movements (2). CTNBio is to adopt its final decision in 2015, after Suzano has completed its report on field trials. In the meantime, the global Campaign to Stop GE Trees has sent an open letter to the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), challenging once again the already highly criticized FSC label of certification. The letter calls on the FSC to apply one of the few criteria that do not favour industrial tree plantation companies – the prohibition of the use of genetically modified organisms, including trees – recalling that a large portion of Suzano’s 350,000 hectares of plantations have already been certified by the FSC (3).

Suzano claims that the main objective of promoting the planting of GE trees is to increase productivity, that is, competitiveness. This makes sense within a context in which the growing demand for wood biomass (in the form of wood pellets) for energy production in Europe is still primarily supplied by companies in the southern US, where there are large available stocks of wood from tree plantations. The rest of the pellets come from countries like Canada and Russia. Between 2012 and 2013 alone, European wood pellet imports rose from 8.5 million to 11.3 million tons, while

US exports to Europe grew by 50%, from 1.9 million to 2.9 million tons (4).

Another recently uncovered problem in relation to Suzano is the aerial spraying of agrotoxics. In the 2013 case study mentioned above, there were indications of the use of this method – highly uncommon until now – on the company's tree plantations. On that occasion, a plane was seen landing in one of Suzano's plantations, after working and apparently spraying products over the eucalyptus. More recently, a local newspaper in the state of Bahia reported the aerial spraying of agrotoxics by Suzano in the region of Mucuri, highlighting the risks that this poses for human health. The article cites a research study from a Brazilian federal university to demonstrate the serious impacts of this method, which companies consider "more efficient": the contamination of rivers, lakes and lagoons near the areas sprayed, the contamination of rainwater through the evaporation of the toxins, and the chronic poisoning of people who live in the region where the spraying takes place, resulting in various diseases, above all cancer (5).

Another noteworthy piece of news is the opening in March 2014 of the new Suzano pulp mill in Maranhão, with a production capacity of 1.5 million tons a year (6). To facilitate the export of this pulp production, as well as the future production of pellets through the biomass plantations project, Suzano sought to build its own port near the city of São Luís. However, as the port project began moving forward, it became evident that it would seriously affect the families of the community of Cajueiro, who have lived in the area for years, earning a livelihood from fishing and shellfish harvesting. Faced with the threat of expulsion, local residents mobilized to oppose the port and defend their rights, proposing the creation of a reserve area for local extraction which would permanently benefit local communities (7).

In October 2014, the State Ombudsman's Office successfully filed for a precautionary measure that blocked the environmental licensing of the port project. The Ombudsman's Office defined the removal of people by the private company responsible for the port's construction as a forced eviction, which is a violation of the law. Nevertheless, the company has continued to terrorize the members of the community, who denounce the constant threats they receive from armed militia in the attempt to get them to leave the area. Due to the resistance put up by the local residents, the Secretary of the Environment cancelled the public hearing on the licensing of the project, scheduled for October 2014 (8). In November, Suzano tried to distance itself from the conflict that had emerged around the port project, claiming that it had no connection whatsoever with the company carrying out the construction and that it had abandoned its plans for building a port. However, in 2011 the governor of the state had expropriated an area in the community of Cajueiro specifically for the benefit of Suzano. Meanwhile, the violence continues, and as of the end of December 2014, 16 houses had been demolished in the community (9).

New problems and conflicts involving Suzano continue to arise in Maranhão and other states in Brazil. With yet another pulp mill in operation, the company aims to keep growing, and as a consequence, to expand its plantations into territories inhabited and used by communities. The logic of business, with its insatiable "hunger" for land, will forever generate conflicts with local communities who depend on their territories for survival, while provoking deforestation, contamination and environmental degradation in the region.

But not all of the news related to Suzano's activities in the state of Maranhão is bad news. In late 2014, the Federal Institute for Agrarian Reform (INCRA) expropriated two areas in the municipality of Chapadinha, and the Land Institute of Maranhão (ITERMA) regularized two others in the municipalities of Santa Quitéria and Urbano Santos. All of these were areas that belong to traditional communities and were in Suzano's sights. It should be noted that these areas were the subject of

land claims made by local communities that were supported by a global solidarity action, namely a petition launched on the occasion of September 21, 2013, the International Day of Struggle Against Tree Plantations. The petition was internationally coordinated by the WRM and its support network, and signed as well by the German organization “Rainforest Rescue” and its network, resulting in thousands of signatures in defence of the communities in Maranhão and their legitimate fight for the regularization of their territory.

This good news motivates us to continue supporting the struggle for the lands and livelihoods of local communities. In 2015, we hope that other communities will also successfully claim their territorial rights, in order to continue to use and protect their territories forever, instead of seeing them degraded by industrial plantations of GE trees that are merely aimed at profit-seeking and threaten the survival of local communities and biodiversity.

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http://wrm.org.uy/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Plantacoes_de_eucalipto_para_energia_O_Caso_da_Suzano.pdf

(2)

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(4) <http://faostat3.fao.org>

(5)

(6) <http://www.suzano.com.br/portal/suzano-papel-e-celulose/suzano-na-imprensa-detahes-216.htm>

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