
[Argentina: Indigenous and environmental activists sound alarm over plans to promote tree plantations](#)

The Patagonia region of Argentina accounts for only 4% of the country's tree plantations. This limited development of the sector is viewed by the Argentine authorities and forestry industry as a source of vast possibilities: four million hectares of potential plantation land divided among the provinces of Neuquén, Río Negro and Chubut.

Both the national and regional authorities are directing their efforts towards tapping this potential. After gathering in April in Esquel, Chubut for the First Coordinating Meeting of the Patagonian Regional Forestry Plan, they are now gearing up for the 2009 World Forestry Congress to be held in Buenos Aires, envisioned as a showcase that will draw foreign investors, consultants and business delegations to the country.

But the region's Mapuche indigenous communities view these developments as a threat, and warn that the government is not measuring the true costs of such an undertaking. "The goal is to place the region at the forefront of the rest of the country, no matter how they have to do it," say environmentalists and Mapuche community leaders.

According to the government of Neuquén, around 60% of the province's 1.5 million hectares of land [of which only 60,000 are now occupied by tree plantations] is private property – although in many cases, the legitimacy and legality of this ownership is disputed by the Mapuche people. The remaining 40% is public land used for transhumant or migratory cattle-raising, primarily of goats and sheep.

The question is how to reconcile traditional productive practices with plantation activities. Traditional herding systems comprise three subsystems that are indivisible: winter pastures in lowland areas, summer pastures on mountain slopes, and the migration routes between the two, which can range from a few kilometres to hundreds of kilometres, depending on the community. This is precisely where plantation activity – as it has been designed – is not compatible with the current use of the land by small producers. The fencing off of large areas of land for tree plantations [in this case, pine trees] will cut off the migration routes and diminish the area of land available for use as pasture.

Deepening conflicts

These factors have given rise to a series of land conflicts that have intensified in recent years. In 2003, faced with the decline in their livestock herds due to the reduction and deterioration of their summer pastures caused by overgrazing and the drying up of springs – a consequence of the establishment of pine plantations – the Wiñoy Folil Mapuche community moved back into the fields it had used since ancestral times in Pampa de Lonco Luan, in the department of Aluminé. They had been forced off of this land in the 1980s by the Corporación Forestal Neuquina (CORFONE).

Last November, in this same region, the Paineo and Cayupán communities called on the provincial authorities for the restitution of their summer pastures, which had also been sold to forestry companies. And in January of this year, the Central Regional Council (CZC) – which represents

Mapuche communities in the central region of the province of Neuquén – and the community of Vicente Katrunao Pincén took back a number of areas of land from which they had been forced to leave.

“While they have been turning over land to private owners, we have also begun a process of recovering summer pastures that have been illegally usurped. This process is growing, because the more they shut us in, the more they oblige us to hit back to defend ourselves against this plight and recover our territory,” said Martín Velázquez Maliqueo, the logko or traditional leader of the community of Logko Puran, which forms part of the CZC.

Although the conflict sparked by the incursion of forestry companies into Mapuche territory has been most heated in the south-central region of Neuquén – due to the degree of development of the plantation sector in this particular province – the tensions extend to the rest of the provinces of Patagonia.

In August 2004, the Italian company Ecoxilon signed a letter of intent with the government of Río Negro to lease a million hectares of public land for 30 years “for forestation and oxygen production.” While this initiative was ultimately shelved, at the time the Indigenous Advisory Council condemned the provincial authorities for agreeing to hand over this land with no regard for the land rights over it claimed by the Mapuche people.

Alien species

In addition to these land conflicts, the Mapuche people have also voiced their alarm over the introduction of alien evergreen species – *Pinus ponderosa* and *Pinus contorta*, native to western United States – which disrupt the delicate balance among the different elements of the natural ecosystem.

Environmental organizations share in this opposition to plantations of alien species, stressing that they produce changes in the acidity of the soil, take over and displace native species due to a lack of natural enemies, and disrupt hydrological systems by absorbing large quantities of water, among other factors. They are also concerned that when these plantations have “matured”, it will lead to the establishment in the region of highly polluting pulp mills as the next link in the production cycle.

Tree plantation activity was given a boost in the early 1990s by a government policy to promote the sector, crowned in 1999 by Law 25,080, which grants subsidies and tax exemptions among other incentives for the establishment of tree plantations. The economic crisis of 2001 put a brake on the sector’s rapid expansion, and by 2003 raw wood production accounted for only 0.3% of GDP, while wood processing activities represented 2%. But now the possibility of establishing tree plantations under the Kyoto Protocol’s Clean Development Mechanism and obtaining credits for carbon capture presents an extra incentive.

Of the three Patagonian provinces, Neuquén has most actively promoted plantation activity, which has also been drawn to the area by favourable soil conditions. At present, 60% of the region’s tree plantations are in Neuquén, and the area devoted to this sector is growing by 3,500 hectares a year. The 2001 Neuquén Forestry Plan set a goal of reaching a growth rate of 10,000 hectares of new plantations annually based on a sustained increase over the next 35 years. The provincial government itself is responsible for 63% of planting activity, which is carried out through CORFONE, a mixed public/private company with majority state ownership.

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