Chile: The worthless CERTFOR tree plantation certification label

Most Chilean forestry companies' plantations are certified, some by FSC and the majority by CERTFOR (a member of PEFC). In round figures, FSC has certified some 350,000 hectares, while CERTFOR has certified approximately 1,600,000 hectares. Given the importance of CERTFOR in Chile, it interesting to analyze it in greater detail.

The first thing to draw our attention is the total number of hectares certified by CERTFOR, equivalent to almost 80% of the total number of hectares planted in Chile. That is to say that these certified companies are mainly responsible for most of the environmental problems documented in Chile at the level of plantations: destruction of native forests, depletion and pollution of water resources, negative impacts on soils, on flora and on fauna.

At the same time, these monoculture tree plantations have resulted in serious social impacts: the occupation of Mapuche territories, repression, criminalization, migration, loss of jobs, poor working conditions and health problems linked to the use of agrochemical products.

It should be noted that it was not an easy job to find information on the certified companies. Eventually the major figures regarding plantations set out in the following paragraphs were found, but it was not possible to find details of the location and size of the various plots of land as none of these companies provide this type of information on their websites.

The fact that only one economic group – the Arauco Group – should possess over a million hectares of pine and eucalyptus plantations certified by Certfor is also noteworthy. Bosques Arauco (289.000 ha), Forestal Celco and Forestal Cholguán (550,000 ha) and Forestal Valdivia (252,000) are all companies forming part of this Group.

For its part, the other large economic group – the Matte Group, owner of Forestal Mininco- possesses between 550,000 and 600,000 hectares certified by this same certification scheme.

On top of the added impacts of these plantations (an aspect which does not seem to be of any importance to the certifying companies), these two major groups have a long track record of negative social and environmental impacts. In an article published recently in this bulletin (Chile: The short-lived lies of a "successful" forestry model), we summarized many of these impacts. For example, it was said that "during the season of the year when there is the greatest demand for labour, in the commune of Los Sauces, Province of Malleco in the South of Chile, the Mininco forestry company gives work to only 19 people from the commune and pays them very low salaries .... Like in other parts of the country, their enormous profits are expressed in a loss of quality of life for the local people. Thirty-three point eight per cent of the population live in either poverty or dire poverty."

Furthermore, "Agricultural activities declined 22 % over the past 10 years, gradually forcing over 1,400 people to migrate to towns... One of the reasons is the lack of water as the plantations have dried up the soil. Every summer the municipality has to deliver water by truck for domestic consumption."

“In addition to the lack of water is the problem of agrochemical contamination. The neighbours in the rural sectors of Porvenir Bajo and Porvenir Alto suffer from serious health problems due to plantation spraying by the Comaco forestry company. Agrochemicals, in particular herbicides (glyphosate and simazine), are mechanically or manually sprayed before plantation and at various times during the first stages of growth of the trees, polluting rivers, brooks and irrigation channels.”

Additionally, the workers that manage to obtain employment in these certified plantations face problems. An article published recently in the press (15/11/07) reported that “forestry workers in the Province of Arauco, in Curanilahue, accuse Forestal Arauco of intervention in the trade unions, of not fulfilling its commitments and obligations and of seriously impoverishing the Province.” More serious still, is the fact that a movement launched in March in the Arauco area “initiating negotiations between outsourced workers and the forestry holdings (Bosques Arauco, Forestal Mininco) ... ended with one dead worker.”

These companies are also responsible for criminalizing the opposition and for the lengthy prison sentences imposed on people who oppose their plantations. The exception happened on 15 June 2007, when for the first time a forestry company –Mininco- lost a court case lodged by a Mapuche community member, José Cariqueo. However it should be noted that for five years José Cariqueo suffered prison and persecution due to Mininco’s false accusations.

In sum, on granting its certification label to these companies, CERTFOR is granting itself a well deserved label: its death certificate.

Article based on information from:

Mapuexpresss. Trabajadores Forestales denuncian a Empresa Arauco del Grupo Angelini, 15/11/07
http://www.mapuexpress.net/?act=news&id=2185

Pehuén. Mapuche wins court case against the forestry company, Mininco, 15/6/07

http://www.pehuen.org/mapuche-gana-juicio-forestal-mininco

El Quinto Infierno. A wide range of activities in Santiago and regions in support of CUT mobilization.
http://www.elquintoinfierno.cl/2007/08/28/
amplia-gama-de-actividades-en-santiago-y-regiones-
por-movilizacion-de-cut/

Data on certified plantations, http://www.pefc.org/ y http://www.certfor.org/