
Chile: Rebuilding productive resistance after the forest fires

At the beginning of 2017, the south central region of Chile suffered a wave of fires that lasted for several weeks and affected around 500,000 hectares—including forests, monoculture tree plantations and small family farms.

Dozens of hot spots spread throughout a large region of the country, where the flammability of pine and eucalyptus plantations, high temperatures and wind made the fire reach uncontrollable dimensions. The town of Santa Olga of about 5,000 inhabitants was completely burned; hundreds of people lost their homes in other towns; thousands were evacuated; and 11 people lost their lives in the areas directly affected, as well as firefighters who voluntarily fought the fire.

The planting of large tracts of pine and eucalyptus trees began in Chile in the mid 1970s, during the military dictatorship. Since then, the state has promoted and encouraged them through Decree Law 701 and the so-called "forest subsidies." This has unleashed a process of destruction, and the replacement of native wet forest with large-scale eucalyptus and pine plantations. Among the numerous impacts they cause, these plantations have affected the water, diminishing its quantity and quality. Drought and water scarcity, coupled with large tracts of monoculture plantations, favor the emergence and rapid expansion of forest fires. These plantations are essentially in the hands of two large national economic groups: CMPC of the Matte family, and Arauco of the Angellini group, who together own about two million hectares of land.

After the fires, false news about "Mapuche terrorism" was rapidly disseminated, blaming this indigenous group for the disaster, even though the fires did not begin in Mapuche territory. However, this was nothing more than an attempt by the implicated plantation companies to evade their responsibility for the fires, according to some social organizations and popular movements. (1)

In this case there is an additional aggravating factor, a fact which—despite being known even by public institutions—has not been considered. And this is that most of the fire-affected areas coincide with pine and eucalyptus plantations that have been in quarantine for years, because they are affected by uncontrollable pests. This fact is even more salient when we note that the insurance companies do not cover plantations affected by pests; but they do pay for insurance for fires. (2)

After several popular demonstrations that denounced plantation companies for their responsibility and demanded that the Mapuche people not be criminalized, the Public Prosecutor—despite all evidence—dismissed the possibility of investigating the companies themselves, focusing instead on determining individual responsibilities.

In March 2017, a small international delegation, accompanied by students from the popular movement "Only the People Can Help the People" and members of the Latin American Observatory on Environmental Conflicts (OLCA, by its Spanish acronym), traveled to the Bío Bío and Araucanía regions to more deeply understand the reality of the families who are victims—not only of the impacts of tree plantations but also of the recent mega forest fires. (3)

The "Only the People Can Help the People" Movement has emerged in the city of Concepción, in response to the chaos caused by the fires, and to provide support to affected families. It is comprised of the Student Federation of the University of Concepción, and the Coordination for the Defense of the Territories, among other groups.

"The restoration of soils affected by fire is a long process. Aid is focused on family farms where there is productive resistance to tree monocultures. The idea is not to say what people should plant, but rather support the productive culture of the place, using native or non-GMO seeds whenever possible," explains one of the student members of the Movement.

"The eucalyptus or pine plantations here mostly belong to large timber companies, and some to small land-holders who planted them but who do not live on the land. This used to be an area where people planted wheat, potatoes, beans, lentils, and fruit trees. People gathered medicinal plants, and they had farm animals like chickens. As tree plantations encroach, farming and indigenous families are displaced, or they see how the lands become degraded and the water disappears," says Lucio of the OLCA.

We visited the property of Leonardo and Ruth, farmers who live on a half-hectare plot in the middle of the burned area, a few kilometers from the city of Concepción. (4)

Leonardo and Ruth warmly welcomed us into their home. After introducing us, Lira, a member of "Only the People Can Help the People" told us: "In this area, the fire came from behind, passed through here, razed everything, and continued its course, even crossing the highway. The few families who managed to save their houses did so because they remained alone fighting the fire, risking their lives, with their faces covered—constantly drenching themselves and their homes in water. It was chaos. The National Forest Corporation (CONAF, by its Spanish acronym) did not come, nor did the firefighters; it was such a state of emergency that they assumed the whole territory was destroyed. The families who evacuated the area lost everything."

"For the timber companies this is nothing," said Leonardo, "but we smallholders are the ones who are suffering. I had a very lovely cherry orchard, but everything burned down. We picked cherries for our own consumption, and to make jams and preserves to sell. We also had plum, apple and peach trees. You can still see some burned fruits. The apples were very good quality..."

Both Leonardo and Ruth are herbalists, connoisseurs, collectors and defenders of local medicinal plants. "We gather plants in the areas surrounding our property, lands that are now burned. We would collect lemon balm, mint, pennyroyal, rose hip, *palo negro*, *bauhinia*, *maqui*, and many more. We had a storage room with the whole year's harvest, and when the fire came through it burned everything—in the storage room and in the fields. There is no place to gather plants now. The fire also burned the chicken coop with chickens inside. This house was only saved because it is covered in metal plating," he said, indicating the small two-room ranch we were in.

"I managed to free some birds," added Ruth, "but others were burned. The birds were what fed us; they provided us with eggs and meat. Eucalyptus is to blame for the fact that everything burned here. The fire came from the timber plantations. We lost everything we had on our land."

Leonardo showed us the adjacent field where one could see the rows of burned eucalyptus trees. "I always argued with my neighbor, to try to get him not to plant eucalyptus or pine trees, but it was the first thing he did. That is why I lost everything here. When they received the state subsidy to plant, there were native trees, but the eucalyptus killed everything; and the same thing happened with pine.

Also, when they spray 'the liquid' [agrochemicals] on the plantations, they would kill all of the plants that we gathered. They kill everything in the ground, and also the bees. Imagine how many liters of water each eucalyptus tree uses every day, and look at how many eucalyptus trees are here. Nowadays we have a lot of problems with water. My parcel used to have a lot of water, but not anymore; we have to give the animals water from the tap."

"I believe the fault lies with the timber companies, who have lost nothing with this disaster. They get paid even if the trees burn down, because they have insurance. They are taking out the timber anyway; they will use it to make wood chips or whatever. The companies work to profit, they never lose. We want to know how to fight the timber companies. We don't want them planting any more trees."

"The fire lasted about four days here. I didn't want to leave my house. When I finally decided to leave in my car, I had to go under the flames...I thought I would burst into flames, but I just dove in." After the fire they returned to their land, and they are trying to restore the soil. "Now we're going to have to keep fighting. I'm going to plant my orchard and fruit trees again," said Leonardo, convinced. "It is going to cost a lot to recover what we had. Some people say that I won't be able to plant anything here for a year, but I can't wait a year. I'm going to try it anyway."

The government provides 1,000,000 Chilean pesos in aid (US 1,800 dollars) to each affected family to help them resettle, but this amount is a pittance for those who lost everything. Under these circumstances, popular solidarity through donations and volunteer work is essential. "We are very grateful to the volunteers who brought us wire, screens, nylon and stakes, and who helped us a lot," admitted Leonardo, moved.

"The voluntary brigades worked on fencing the properties, studying the soil, and seeing what each family's needs were; but at the same time we learned from these families about life in the country. And most of all we accompanied each other in this grief, a painful process for these families," said Lira.

Leonardo and Ruth's situation is just one example of the hundreds of families who were victims of the consequences of a forestry model based on monoculture plantations. This model only benefits those who have the most, and impacts those who don't have a voice or the means to stand up to large companies.

As if this were not enough, in June an international Tree Biotechnology Conference was held in Concepción (organized by the International Union of Forest Research Organizations - IUFRO), to promote advancements in research on transgenic trees, with a view to improving their "productivity." In laboratories throughout the world and also in Chile, research and experiments on transgenic trees continue, in order to make trees resistant to cold, agrochemicals, drought and pests; that is, to most of the problems which the plantations themselves have caused and exacerbated.

If transgenic pine and eucalyptus plantations are authorized in Chile, more forest areas, indigenous territories, and fertile lands will be overtaken by these monocultures. That is why organizations and social movements took to the streets and demonstrated in front of the Conference headquarters: to demand the repeal of Decree Law 701, to denounce the impacts of exotic tree plantations, to denounce the recent forest fires, and to say "We don't want transgenic trees in Chile." (5)

It is time for the Chilean government to stop and listen to the voices of people affected by tree plantations, and to stop benefitting large economic groups to the detriment of farming and indigenous

communities and territories.

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1.- "El 'Terrorismo Mapuche': La campaña de desinformación para desviar responsabilidades en mega incendios forestales" – Alfredo Seguel

<http://www.mapuexpress.org/?p=16499>

2.- "Revuelo caso incendios e 'intencionalidad': zonas devastadas estaban infestadas por plagas en plantaciones forestales" - Network for the Defense of the Territories

<http://www.mapuexpress.org/?p=15847>

3.- The delegation was composed of the following organizations: Biofuelwatch; the *Center for Studies and Research for the Development of the Extreme South of Bahia* (CEPEDES by its Portuguese acronym); Carajás – Maranhão Forum; International Campaign to STOP Genetically Engineered Trees; GE Free New Zealand; Global Justice Ecology Project; Landless Workers Movement (MST by its Portuguese acronym); Latin American Network Against Tree Plantations (RECOMA, by its Spanish acronym); World Rainforest Movement (WRM). This delegation also exchanged knowledge and experiences on the impacts of transgenic trees. See videos at: National and international researchers and activists against transgenic trees and the Chilean forestry model

<http://olca.cl/articulo/nota.php?id=106830>

4.- See photo report here <http://wrm.org.uy/es/files/2017/06/chile-territorio-post-incendios.pdf>

5.- Public declaration against the Chilean forestry model <http://olca.cl/articulo/nota.php?id=106817>

International Campaign to STOP Genetically Engineered Trees denounces the violence of the forestry industry: <https://stopgetrees.org/iufro-campaign-denounces-violence-timber-industry-declaracion-de-la-campana-internacional-alto-los-arboles-transgenicos/>