
Uruguay-Argentina: Joint struggle against a pulp-mill

Like so many other countries in the South, Uruguay has been convinced (by FAO, the World Bank and the Japanese International Cooperation Agency, among others) that it should promote large-scale tree plantations. From the start, it was very clear that the objective was to produce sufficient raw material for pulp production and for this reason, fundamentally, the plantation of eucalyptus was promoted.

The abundant direct and indirect subsidies that were channelled to the plantation sector (estimated at over 400 million dollars), had the expected result: over 600,000 hectares were planted. Now the time has come to start harvesting the wood and the country has no plan for the development of the timber sector. It is in this context that the Spanish National Cellulose Company (Empresa Nacional de Celulosa de España – ENCE) arrived with a project for a pulp-mill to be installed on the River Uruguay and the Government has received it with open arms.

ENCE is not a new actor on the Uruguayan stage. The company installed itself in 1990 in Uruguay, purchasing land and planting 50,000 hectares of eucalyptus to supply their pulp-mills in Spain, where in turn they have 100,000 hectares of eucalyptus. Their history is shady, both in Uruguay where it is registered as Eufores, and in its country of origin.

In Spain it was taken to court for crimes against the environment after decades of contaminating the Ria de Pontevedra. After many years, it was finally condemned and its executives sentenced to fines and prison sentences. However, its environmental “legacy” is still being suffered by those who live near its three pulp-mills. It is interesting to highlight that in Pontevedra (where there was and still is, greatest opposition to ENCE) it now produces TCF (totally chlorine free) cellulose, while in Huelva and Navia it applies the ECF process (using chlorine-dioxide). Of course, the process it intends using in Uruguay is not the cleanest, but the one using chlorine-dioxide.

In Uruguay, Eufores (ENCE) has never been fined or sentenced, not because of insufficient merit, but due to the lack of controls, in particular regarding compliance with labour regulations. Those who work or who have worked for Eufores tell terrible stories about the working conditions in force among the outsourcing companies that work for the company.

With this background, it is not surprising that a movement has arisen to resist the installation of the pulp-mill, to be located on the River Uruguay, up-river from the city of Fray Bentos, in the Department of Rio Negro. What is a novelty is that the resistance movement is not limited to Uruguay, but also includes environmentalists from Argentina, a country sharing the River Uruguay and that might therefore be affected by contamination from the mill.

On 4 October, environmentalists from both countries carried out a joint action, originally to take place in the middle of the international bridge joining both countries near Fray Bentos. The Uruguayan citizens were prevented from crossing the bridge by the security forces, while on the Argentine side, only a small delegation was authorized to cross (headed by the mayor of the neighbouring city of Gualeguaychú, Emilio Martínez Garbino), preventing more than 800 people who had congregated

there from taking part in the demonstration.

Once they had crossed the bridge, they joined the Uruguayan activists and all marched to Fray Bentos, where mayor Martinez Garbino gave the mayor of Rio Negro, Francisco Centurion, the “Gualeguaychu Declaration,” prepared by a citizen assembly of bodies from that city, stating their opposition to the installation of the pulp-mill.

The action became so notorious that the main Uruguayan governmental actors (from the Vice-President to the Minister of Foreign Affairs) found themselves obliged to forestall criticism by appealing to the traditional “defence of sovereignty” and “non-interference in internal affairs,” that are never applied when dealing with the United States ambassador or the representatives of the International Monetary Fund. On the Argentine side, President Nestor Kirchner entrusted his Minister of Foreign Affairs, Rafael Bielsa, with formally stating his concern to the Uruguayan government over the possible contamination of a shared watercourse, which he did a few days later at a meeting with the Uruguayan President, Jorge Batlle.

The commotion caused by the “crusade” opened up doors that hitherto had been closed to the Uruguayan environmentalist movement. For the first time, radios, newspapers and even television newsreels gave citizens the opportunity to be informed by the mass media of the reasons of those who oppose large-scale monoculture tree plantations (and the associated pulp-mills) and who struggle for an environmentally healthy and socially just country. The official schizophrenia caused by the “crusade” of a group of citizens from a sister country had the opposite result from that sought: the mass media opened up on this so far silenced issue.

The crusade was a success and the struggle goes on. Environmentalists from both countries, grouped in the Socio-Environmental Network since 2001 are now considering the implementation of further joint actions to prevent the installation of the ENCE plant. While the governments talk about integration, the people have effectively started to integrate.

Further information (in Spanish) is available at:
<http://www.wrm.org.uy/guayubira/mbopicua/index.html>