South Africa: Renewed call for a moratorium on timber plantations

Timberwatch, a coalition of environmental NGOs and individuals, has renewed an appeal made during the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002, calling on the South African government, as well as on the timber industry, to halt the planting of new industrial timber plantations in naturally vegetated areas, especially grasslands.

Existing industrial timber plantations in South Africa cover more than 1,500,000 hectares concentrated in the higher rainfall areas of the provinces of Kwazulu-Natal and Mpumalanga (see WRM Bulletin 44). There is a further estimated 1,700,000 hectares which have been invaded by alien plantation trees, mainly Pine, Eucalyptus and Wattle, in a country which is home to unique and endemic species.

In a large-scale commercial pattern of monoculture which is being applied worldwide, extensive woodlots related to pulp and paper mills are established on communal or public lands, displacing communities. In the search of cheap wood, typically with the support of public money (direct and indirect subsidies) under the guise of helping to uplift rural people, huge corporations take over land and water resources.

And the rule is that, failing to the promises, as timber plantations expand, rural people are impoverished, and are forced to leave their traditional homes in search of underpaid work in cities, or settle in sensitive natural areas such as the Dukuduku forest near Lake St Lucia.

Timberwatch denounces that the timber industry in South Africa is viable only because it fails to take responsibility for all the costs and impacts that arise from its activities. The Coalition demands a full investigation of the industry to show how it is artificially subsidised at the expense of other far less harmful, established and sustainable traditional land uses. The cost borne by society of controlling the invasion of alien trees from plantations, in particular species such as Wattle is one example of how the timber industry is subsidised.

In line with the above and with the call for a moratorium on new industrial tree plantations, Timberwatch demands that before more industrial timber plantations are allowed on virgin land, unmanaged stands of trees must be felled and used to supply the timber industry.

Article based on information from: “Renewal of NGO Call for a Moratorium on New Timber Plantations”, October 15, 2003, issued on behalf of the Timberwatch coalition by Wally Menne, e-mail: plantnet@iafrica.com , http://www.timberwatch.org.za