
[Argentina: New law promotes tree plantations in Cordoba Province](#)

Photo: Ecos Córdoba.

Located in the central region of Argentina, Cordoba is one of the five largest provinces in the country. Between 1904 and 2004, it lost 95 percent of its native forest, mainly as a result of the expansion of large-scale agriculture. Its annual deforestation rates are among the highest in the world, bringing serious consequences for the environment, health and food sovereignty of the population, according to researchers at the National University of Cordoba (1).

Deforestation in Cordoba has continued over the last decade, and today only three percent of its forest remains, according to data from the Paraguayan NGO, Guyra (2). As a consequence of the destruction of the forest, serious flooding has occurred in recent years in both the central and southern parts of the state.

In this context, the Government and Legislature of Cordoba decided to create the Provincial Agroforestry Plan (3), a law that promotes exotic tree plantations and the development of the forestry industry. In August 2017, they announced that they aim to reforest 150,000 hectares over the next ten years.

Cordoba's Agroforestry Plan is part of agribusiness's ongoing encroachment onto native forests and farming and indigenous lands in Argentina. The serious consequences of this extractive model have become more acute in the last 20 years, with the displacement of rural communities to poor urban neighborhoods, the increase in diseases caused by agrochemicals, floods caused by changes in land use, fires, and the loss of food sovereignty.

This new law was presented by authorities as a solution to environmental and social problems. However, the Provincial Native Forest Defense Coordinator—which brings together over 80 civil society, peasant and indigenous organizations from the province—opposed the law. Its members understood that this initiative is a false solution to the problem of deforestation, and only seeks to promote business for industrial plantations.

"It is an economic instrument to encourage the installation of pine and eucalyptus plantations, through which the State subsidizes the planting of these exotic species (...) and benefits agribusiness economic groups," the Coordinator stated in a public letter (4). "A law in the environmental sector must be designed to protect the environment. And pine and eucalyptus monoculture is not the way to achieve that objective," they asserted.

The law mandates that farmers plant trees on at least two percent of their farmland over the next ten years. However, it gives landowners the choice of not planting trees on their property, and instead buying a "share" of a plantation in what will be called "aggregated forests." These "aggregated forests" are plantations that will pool the mandatory area percentages that producers in the same region must meet.

The Government argues that this is an environmental protection policy because, it claims, tree plantations will regulate water levels, help soil conservation and capture carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. However, at least three central issues have not been clearly communicated to the public:

Promotion of monoculture plantations: The State of Cordoba makes no distinction between a rural producer planting native species on a small scale in order to regenerate the forest, and developing commercial plantations of exotic species—with all the impacts the latter entails.

Impacts of tree plantations: Industrial tree plantations exhaust the groundwater, deteriorate soils and cause damages to health and the environment, due to the use of agrottoxins. Furthermore, they contribute to greenhouse gas emissions because of the carbon dioxide released when trees are cut down. This is compounded by the increased risk of fires, which are already a serious problem in mountainous areas of Cordoba.

Subsidies (and thus greater benefits) to those who have deforested: Through tax exemptions and non-refundable contributions, the State will subsidize the reforestation of fields, without taking into account whether their owners logged illegally years ago. In Argentina, these benefits have existed since 1999, through the Cultivated Forest Investment Act (5). In May 2017, the national government announced it will extend these benefits until 2030, in order to expand the country's plantations by 800,000 hectares, according to the local press (6). According to official data, there are 1.2 million hectares planted with commercial monocultures in Argentina today—mainly conifers and eucalyptus trees (7).

The wolf guarding the sheep

The implementing authority for Cordoba's Agroforestry Plan will be the state's Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock, which presented the bill with the support of state agencies and agribusiness chambers of commerce. The Native Forest Defense Coordinator identifies these groups and entities as being responsible for the deforestation that has taken place in recent decades.

"The alleged enrichment of the forest that they say the agroforestry law promotes will be in the hands of the Ministry of Agriculture. Yet the Ministry of Agriculture allowed the province to be devastated by plantations and pesticide fumigations near peoples' homes," said Laura Dos Santos, a member of the Coordinator. "They are responsible for the flooding of the territory, which occurred because they destroyed the forest; now they are going to be in charge of the agroforestry plan."

Four months before approving the Plan, the Government of Cordoba had announced it signed a \$1 million agreement with Misiones Province to buy technology to develop plantations (8). The company, Biofábrica Misiones S.A., which develops biotechnology for commercial forestry species, will provide these services to Cordoba (9).

Misiones is one of the provinces with the greatest timber production in Argentina. In recent decades, forestry companies in Misiones—mainly the Chilean company Celulosa Arauco—have overtaken farming and indigenous lands and territories in a dramatic way, through the installation of plantations (10).

Absence of a forest land-use plan

In addition to denouncing that the Agroforestry Plan is tailor-made for agribusiness companies,

organizations defending the forest wonder where the trees will be planted, when there is no land-use map that accurately depicts the current situation.

Since 2007, Argentina has had a law mandating that provinces draw up a Native Forest Land-Use map, and that they update it every five years (11). In it, different regions with plant cover are identified and classified according to their level of protection. According to the law, this map must be drawn up through a participatory process that involves the whole society.

However, since December 2016, the Government of Cordoba has tried to move forward on updating its map and reforming the provincial forestry law without a citizen participation process (12). Moreover, the changes it proposed enabled more deforestation to take place.

This caused a huge social backlash. It was at that time that citizen assemblies defending health and the environment, together with peasant, indigenous and environmental groups, organized to form the Native Forest Defense Coordinator. They began to share information and raise awareness among the population. As a result, in December 2016, and in March and June 2017, mass marches took place in the state capital, forcing the Government back off on its attempts to push through a land-use plan without citizen participation.

Unable to continue with the forest law reforms, the provincial government decided to expedite sanctioning of the Agroforestry Plan. The presentation of the bill and the political agreement reached in the Legislature was so swift, that there was no time for organizations to carry out the same information and awareness-raising process they had done so months earlier.

Nonetheless, due to popular pressure, some lawmakers proposed a change in the concept of "native forest enrichment." The original text of the project spoke of enriching forest with "native or exotic forest species of high commercial value." The modified text established that this could only be done with native plants.

Furthermore, an article was included that forces the regulating authority to develop and maintain an updated list of tree species recommended for each region, and a list of prohibited invasive exotic species. This list has yet to be distributed.

On the path of struggle

The prompt formation of the Native Forest Defense Coordinator in late 2016, in the face of the new threat, showed once again that it is Cordoba's organized society that defends the forest from the onslaught of extractive, State-endorsed companies.

The speed which this organization took place reflects years of experience with struggle and resistance in the state of Cordoba. Among the most recent examples are the historic triumph of the community of Malvinas Argentinas, which in 2016—after four years of resistance—prevented multinational Monsanto from installing one of the largest corn seed factories in Latin America. Additionally, there have been struggles against fumigation, mining and real estate development in the forest.

With experience, and bolstered by the victories achieved, organizations in Cordoba are determined to continue defending the three percent of forest that is still standing.

Lucía Guadagno, luciag [at] wrm.org.uy

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