
Chile: Environmental organisation questions FSC standards for plantations

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According to information available in FSC's web page, seven companies in Chile have certified "forests" covering a total area of 262,168 hectares. However, only one of these companies (Las Cruces S.A.) is actually managing a forest, covering an area of only 3,588 hectares. The rest (258,580 hectares) are monoculture tree plantations, which unfortunately continue to be considered as "forests" by FSC.

In its own web page (in the section "why we do it,") FSC establishes its objective of "providing a truly independent, international and credible labelling scheme on timber and timber products. This will provide the consumer with a guarantee that the product has come from a forest which has been evaluated and certified as being managed according to agreed social, economic and environmental standards." This affirmation is clearly false in the case of Chile, for the simple reason that FSC cannot give any guarantee to the consumer that the product being acquired comes from a soundly managed "forest" given that the forest does not exist, unless monoculture plantations of alien trees can be considered as forests.

It is important to stress that FSC promotes the establishment of national standards for certification, in conformity with its general principles and criteria. Chile is one of the countries where a "national initiative" exists (involving forestry companies and NGOs), aiming at this objective. However, the adoption of national standards is not an easy task, as will be seen from the following paragraphs, written by a Chilean activist, defender of forests (Malú Sierra) who has been deeply involved in the process. Malú describes a visit paid recently to one of the certified plantations (the El Guanaco holding: 4,138 hectares) that belongs to the Terranova Group's Forestal Millalemu company, in the Commune of Quirihue in the south of Chile, related to her perception of the problems concerning certification of plantations.

"After many months, indeed years, of discussions around the working table, with papers and slides projected, always in the cities of the South or in Santiago, Forestal Millalemu (with over 120,000 hectares of certified plantations in Chile) invited us to pay a field visit to one of its plantations, certified by FSC. The courteous company manager in Chile, Jorge López, sacrificed his beautiful maps so that the Plantation Committee knew where we were exactly. The rain did not stop, each time we climbed out of the 4X4 vehicles, full in the month of November --the 7th to be exact-- the El Niño phenomenon gave the present of rain to this zone of inland drylands, wetting us who were not entirely prepared. Neither were we prepared to see the hills shorn of trees in the Quirihue Cordillera.

The principle owner of Forestal Millalemu is the Swiss businessman, Stephan Shmidheiny, one of the first to join the sustainable development concept, and supposedly his plantations in Chile are the ultimate expression of the sustainable concept, from an economic, social and environmental standpoint. Supposedly...

The FSC green label ensures that Millalemu does not substitute native forest with plantations, but does not demand that where the forest is re-growing, it should be left to grow, making a more careful

harvest of its plantations. We saw oak shoots under pine trees, planted 20 years ago and ready to be harvested. With the harvest, the oak trees testifying that in this location, long before 1994, forests had been substituted by plantations will also disappear. The FSC label also demands that measures be taken to mitigate the damage to the soil: they no longer burn the litter after the harvest --this is progress-- but grind it and leave it on the ground so that eight or ten years later it becomes soil.

FSC also imposes social conditions and we saw old buses go by, transporting the workers back from their tasks. In the old days, they used to travel in open lorries. In this zone, there are no indigenous communities, so the company has no problems over claims to the land by its original owners. They do have problems with the Mapuche in another property, and therefore it has not been possible to certify the plantations there.

So far, FSC has not recommended the method of harvesting. The method used in the Chilean plantations is clear-cutting, the same as in the United States, where the alien tree most used in Chilean plantations also come from. This is the Monterey pine (*Pinus radiata*). Among its principles, FSC establishes general criteria that must be developed in each country to adapt them to each situation. These have not yet been defined in Chile, due to the position of already certified forestry companies, some of which consider that there should be no limits, not even on the dimensions of clear-cutting. One of the justifications is that the large companies such as Mininco (which is not certified), harvest up to 2,000 continuous hectares.

It is important to note that Chile is a mountainous country and therefore clear-cutting, which always has a negative impact on soils, is twice as serious here, because most of the plantations are installed on slopes of over 35 degrees. In fact, it is precisely for this reason that clear-cutting of native forests is prohibited. Therefore, it is clear that from the environmental standpoint, that the clear-cutting method of harvesting is not acceptable in any plantation, and much less in a certified one.

In Chile discussions can go on for a long while yet, but the Defenders of the Chilean Forests (Defensores del Bosque Chileno) have resigned from the Technical Committee for Plantations but not from the board of directors of the Chilean Initiative for Independent Forest Certification (Iniciativa Chilena de Certificación Forestal Independiente - ICEFI), nor from FSC. It is now irrelevant whether it is fifty or five hundred hectares that are clear-cut. We are absolutely against clear-cutting, and we have not seen any significant progress being made at the meetings. And what is more serious, and left to future precisions, is how the new forestry plantations that want environmental certification should be installed in order to ensure that the soil is covered, especially in sloping zones where in spite of all the mitigations, erosion continues to take place.

The consumer trusting in the FSC seal would not like to see these pictures. Unfortunately I saw them and still hold them in my memory."

Article based on the report by Malú Sierra, Defensores del Bosque Chileno: "Visita al Predio El Guanaco, Forestal Millalemu, Comuna de Quirihue". E-mail: gondwana@adsl.tie.cl