
Brazil: Political confrontation in Espírito Santo over eucalyptus plantations

Large-scale eucalyptus plantations in the State of Espírito Santo --and their related pulp production activities-- have generated opposition since the very beginning. They were first opposed by the people more directly affected by them: the Tupinikim and Guaraní indigenous peoples, AfroBrazilian communities (quilombos) and local farmers, whose lands were appropriated to give way to the plantations. They were later joined by supportive NGOs, whose research findings on the social and environmental impacts led them to initiate campaigns to halt the further spread of plantations and to join forces with local peoples, environmental NGOs and academics to achieve that aim. This later resulted in the creation of a network called the Forum Alert Against the Green Desert, which has been campaigning very effectively during the past years.

The increasing awareness --to a large extent resulting from the above mentioned activities-- about the negative impacts of plantations has recently led the State Parliament to pass a law banning the further expansion of eucalyptus plantations until the agro-ecological mapping of the state --which would define where eucalyptus could and could not be planted-- is carried out. The law was clearly aimed at Aracruz Celulose's plans for further expansion. This company is the world's largest producer of bleached eucalyptus pulp, and already owns 88,000 hectares of plantations in Espírito Santo --having further plantations in the neighbouring state of Bahia-- and aims at planting 17,000 hectares more plus some additional 30,000 hectares as outgrower schemes.

Nasser Youssef, the author of the law, expressed the feelings of many local people about Aracruz when he stated that the company "does not benefit the state, does not pay taxes and treats Espírito Santo as if it were a colony. We demand to be treated with respect", he added. It is interesting to note that Aracruz expects to invest US\$ 222 millions for its new plantations in Espírito Santo and Bahia and that about half of that amount would be provided by the National Social and Economic Development Bank (BNDES). More importantly, it is necessary to underscore that this would take place in a context where family-based agriculture does not receive any funding from the BNDES to support this alternative type for development.

According to Marcelo Calazans --member of the Forum Alert Against the Green Desert-- Aracruz is one of the largest landowners in the state but only provides 1689 direct jobs, while on the other hand some 70,000 families live on small-scale agriculture, each having only some ten hectares of land. Within that context, the law banning further plantations makes absolute sense from a social point of view, where land concentration by mega-companies is necessarily made at the expense of land available for local farmers, which form the vast majority of the rural population.

The law was perceived by many people throughout the world as a very positive step, which could serve as an example to be followed in other places where this type of plantations are impacting on people and the environment. Having received news about the possibility that the Governor of the state, José Ignácio Ferreira, might veto the law, many organizations sent messages in support of the law. In response a local journalist, who declared that "Aracruz does not need me to defend it" immediately reacted in defence of Aracruz, under the argument that the messages came from countries such as Colombia, Argentina, Ecuador, Uruguay, Guatemala, Nicaragua, etc. described as

"underdeveloped and wanting us to remain in extreme misery such as them, without any prospects for the future."

Proving that Aracruz's influence is as strong as local organizations claim it is, the Governor swiftly reacted to defend the company's interests and vetoed the law, informed the public about his decision in a "solemn session." According to a local member of parliament, this is the first time --as far as he can remember-- that the state government organizes a "solemn session" to sign and publish a veto. Now the State Parliament will meet again at the end of August to either overrule the Governor's veto or to accept it and open the doors to further green deserts of eucalyptus.

In the meantime, the proponent of the law and the commission he presides in the State Parliament --the Commission for Environment and Agriculture-- have organized an international seminar on the issue of monoculture eucalyptus plantations which will take place on 21-23 August in Vitoria, the capital city of the state. Much will depend on the presentations and conclusions of this seminar, but much will also depend on the capacity of organized civil society to confront the enormous economic and political power of a company such as Aracruz.

Article based on information from: Ubervalter Coimbra, "Eucalipto: adiamento do veto pode ampliar debate sobre lei", *Século Diário*, 3/7/2001; Uchôa de Mendonça, "De volta ao passado", *Jornal A GAZETA*, 22/6/2001; "Seminário sobre eucalipto em agosto", *Jornal A GAZETA*, 5/7/2001; "Ignácio autoriza plantio de eucalipto", *Jornal A GAZETA*, 3/7/2001; CIMI-ES,