
Uruguay: No transgenic trees ... for the time being

For more than 10 years Uruguay has been implementing an unsustainable forestry model, substituting its natural prairie ecosystems with large-scale eucalyptus and pine tree plantations.

Apart from the already proven environmental and social impacts, the country could soon be confronting new impacts generated by the use of genetically modified trees in commercial plantations. Genetic engineering seeks to increase the commercial efficiency of plantations, "producing" trees that will grow faster, resistant to herbicides, more uniform and with less lignin content, thus making their industrial processing into pulp and paper cheaper.

Forestal Oriental (owned by Shell and UPM/Kymmene) is one of the most important forestry corporations in the country. According to the available information, this company has until now been the only one that carried out --during a period of two years-- field tests with transgenic trees. The aim of those trials was to test resistance to herbicides and the reduction of the lignin content in wood. Apparently the company abandoned those trials in 1999 and destroyed those trees. The reason for such change in policy seems to be that the company is currently seeking certification from the Forest Stewardship Council, whose principles exclude the possibility of certifying plantations with transgenic trees.

It was also possible to establish that the governmental National Agricultural Research Institute (INIA) is not carrying out trials with transgenic trees. However, the inexistence of such trials is not the result of a position against genetic engineering, but of the lack of economic resources to carry them out. In fact, genetic engineering is by and large supported by the national scientific community, which in general terms has opted to ignore its possible health and environmental impacts.

In fact, not a single government agency is involved in any research on the impacts that plantations with transgenic trees might have if implemented at an industrial level. This attitude is in line with the one which characterized the promotion of the current forestry model, which was implemented at a large scale without having carried out the necessary environmental impact studies.

Some years ago, Uruguay launched an important campaign aimed at being considered a "Natural Country." If it had been implemented, it would have been an intelligent policy. Unfortunately, it appears to have only been a mistake by one of the ministers at the time, given that all government policies seem to be aimed at an increasingly unnatural country. This was apparent in the words of the President of Uruguay, who some days ago publicly expressed his total and unconditional support to the development of transgenic crops in the country.

There are no transgenic trees in the country ... for the time being. However, taking into account the forestry development model being implemented in Uruguay and the government's support to genetic engineering, it appears that this situation will not last for long. Within such context, Uruguayan society must be on the alert to prevent the invasion of the Uruguayan grasslands with this new threat, which could bring unpredictable consequences for the country.

