Australia: Woodchipping old growth forests for "renewable energy"

In 1997 the Australian federal government issued a regulation for Tasmanian forests, abolishing export woodchip quotas. Consequently North Limited --the biggest woodchip exporter in the country-- announced plans to raise woodchip production from Tasmanian native forests, that currently reaches around 3,4 million tonnes annually. Tasmanian environmental NGOs expressed their concern that this measure would open the gate for the destruction of old-growth eucalyptus forests in the island, which constitute part of the Australian National Heritage (see WRM Bulletin 7).

A new threat is now pending on Australian already scarce primary forests: a government proposal included in the Renewable Energy Bill, which promotes electricity generation by chipping old growth forests --considered a "renewable energy source"-- with the aim of reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

The amendments proposed by other parties represented in Parliament to use other sources of renewable energy --such as solar and wind-- instead of native forests were rejected by representatives of the government and the main opposition party. The Australian Greens severely criticised the initiative, and accused both parties to be in the hands of woodchip companies and Senator Brown stated that the initiative was the result of pressures from the woodchip companies, which needed new outlets as they were facing stiff competition from South American plantations for the Japanese paper market. This shows how perverse the pulp and paper global market is: huge pulpwood plantations in South America result in extensive environmental and social impacts in that region, while at the same time they become the indirect cause for the destruction of native forests in Australia. And all this to feed the voracious Japanese paper industry.

Given the relatively small area occupied by forests in Australia such initiative appears to have no reasonable justification. Additionally, it is contradictory with Australia’s position in the recently celebrated COP6 at The Hague, where its delegates expressed their stong support for the inclusion of forests in the so-called Clean Development Mechanism to mitigate global warming. It doesn't seem to make sense to us, but it certainly does for the chipping companies, that will greatly profit from this "green" bill.