
Uruguay: citizens' network challenges official "research" on plantations

Growing opposition to monoculture tree plantations has forced the forestry sector to respond to NGO claims that this type of forestry model is detrimental to the environment and that it does not benefit the country or its people. They chose to use "science" as a weapon to counteract such claims. In spite of the fact that no governmental institution has carried out research on the impacts on soils, water or biodiversity of large scale eucalyptus plantations, the forestry lobby managed to produce --through the National Institute of Agricultural Research, INIA-- a short booklet titled "Forestry development with eucalyptus: its impacts on natural resources and the environment in Uruguay."

The alleged "scientific" study was produced by four researchers, three of whom work directly for plantation companies (one is even President of the Society of Forestry Producers and at the same time member of INIA's Managing Committee), while the background of the fourth is tree genetics aimed at the achievement of a faster growth rate of eucalyptus and pine trees. The findings of such "research" were obvious even before they started writing: eucalyptus have no negative impacts of importance. And that's all they did: writing. No field studies were carried out, no interviews to people who claim that negative impacts exist and not even a comprehensive review of the existing bibliography, most of which underscores the impacts of plantations.

The Guayubira Group --a citizens' network opposed to large-scale tree monocultures and supporting the protection of native forests-- reacted to this publication. The group produced a detailed critique on the study, highlighting the fact that none of the conclusions can be considered as being "scientific" and that it can only be considered as a public relations exercise to reassure an increasingly concerned public. The critique, accompanied by a letter addressed to INIA's President was widely circulated within the country (to INIA's researchers, academics, parliamentarians, government officials, journalists) to expose the unethical use of science to favour large plantation companies. The objective is also to force the government into conducting real research on the impacts of plantations and to support an ongoing campaign aimed primarily at the elimination of all the subsidies which currently promote the spread of these plantations.