
Venezuela: Smurfit forced to halt deforestation

The Venezuelan subsidiary of the Dublin-based Jefferson Smurfit pulp, paperboard and packaging transnational has been finally forced to halt its deforestation activities in the State of Portuguesa. Although the company has huge plantations of fast growing tree species (see WRM Bulletin 18), it had been extensively using wood from the few remaining tropical forests, both from its own land holdings and from third party woodlands. The reason for this illegal - in some cases "legalized"- activity is simple: raw material from forests is cheaper than from plantations.

The decision to change such policy was not the result of the company's stated commitment to environmental protection nor the result of the action of law-enforcement government agencies, but the success of a long struggle carried out jointly by local peasants and environmentalists, with support from some parliamentarians and international organizations, among which the WRM. After years trying to prevent deforestation by this company, more than a hundred peasants, students and environmentalists finally decided to blockade the highway through which Smurfit's lorries transported tropical forest wood to its industrial plant. The action resulted in the intervention of the National Guard, which was put into a situation where it had to proceed against the company by at least detaining a dozen trucks loaded with more than 200 tonnes of tropical forest wood.

In spite of the results obtained with this action, local organizations have expressed moderate optimism regarding the company's statement that it will not use any more tropical wood in the future. They say that these declarations have been made by lower ranking company officials and that they await more information from both the company and the National Guard. Carlos Molina, from the Morador Environmental Group said that "for the time being, our forests will not be converted to corrugated cardboard", while Angel Marin --president of the Ospino Environmental Committee-- declared that the National Guard "had simply implemented what it had not implemented for years: the enforcement of the Forest Law. What's important is that there has been a gesture of sovereignty over so much impunity".

In his analysis of the situation, Marin expressed that "Smurfit is an important agent of deforestation in a region with low forest cover which needs to be preserved." He stressed the importance of the international coverage which this case has received and attributed the company's decision to "international pressure, social protests and demonstrations and the work of national and regional parliamentarians."

Dr. Rafael Gonzalez, lawyer of the Land Committee of Morador commented that "this is the beginning of the fall of an organized network of environmental transgressions. The social cost of deforestation can never be compensated with temporary and badly paid jobs within an activity which involves the destruction of wildlife, flora and water courses."

Professor Raul Lugo, a well-known regional environmentalist, added that the issue of the illegal use of agricultural land by Smurfit is still pending and that a "national front" is being organized to halt the colonization of the country by predatory companies which impose an anti-development model."

Sources: Grupo Ecologico Morador.- Optimismo por paralizacion de deforestaciones anunciado por Smurfit. Boletin de Prensa 17/2/99; Ultimas Noticias 27/1/99; El Regional 31/1/99; El Nuevo Pais 28/1/99