
[“The fire passed us by”: An account of a forest fire in Chile](#)

The following account gives a sense of the crisis which people who live surrounded by monoculture tree plantations face when they see fire approaching their homes, fire that is "spreading from pine tree to pine tree like giant matches". The author is Verónica Gonzalez Correa, a Chilean activist who lives in the community of Florida in the Biobío region in south-central Chile, a region with a history of plantations fires. Correa is the director of the documentary, “Llamas del Despojo: Incendios del Negocio Forestal” (Flames of Dispossession: Fires in the Forestry Business). (1) The community where she lives has recently been a victim of plantations fires. Like many people in the region, Verónica still does not have an exact idea of the scars left behind by the fire – both in the territory where she lives and within herself. But she knows, and explains, that these fires are not inevitable.

The almost three million hectares of monoculture tree plantations in Chile are a tragedy waiting to happen: pine and eucalyptus trees are fuel for recurring fires that devastate vast areas and leave people dead and injured. This flammable scenario has been violently escalating since the Pinochet dictatorship (1973-1990). Since then, with support and financing from the Chilean state, companies in the sector have expropriated vast territories and expelled Indigenous Peoples and peasants in order to plant their tree monocultures. Most of these monocultures are in the hands of two companies: Forestal Mininco, owned by the Matte Group; and Arauco, owned by the Angelini Group. (2)

This was how, for example, the Mapuche People of the region saw their territory destroyed – and their communities violently expelled – to make way for Arauco's monoculture plantations. Arauco is now one of the largest pulp companies in the world. Today, the Mapuche are fighting to recover part of their ancestral territory that was taken from them, so that they can preserve what little remains of the unfragmented forests, and cultivate land for subsistence. (3)

As Verónica makes clear in her account, it is precisely the small areas of family agriculture – islands of resistance in the middle of green deserts of eucalyptus and pine trees – that are true firewalls. And, if Verónica had not been living in one of these areas – in which the community organized to face the fires and build a network of swift support and solidarity – her experience probably would have unfolded differently. What follows is her story.

On the afternoon of Saturday, January 17, 2026, a wild fire broke out in Fundo San Lorenzo, in the municipality of Florida, Biobío region, south-central Chile. That day we awoke to the devastating news that 21 people had died in another fire in Trinitarias, the largest fire so far this season. That fire affected urban and peri-urban areas of Penco, Lirquén, and Punta de Parra, which are neighboring municipalities, very close to us. 14,187 hectares burned; 800 houses were destroyed; 20,000 people were affected. Our fire, on the other hand, was a different fire that we could see from our homes.

On Sunday, we saw the fire move northward, in a route parallel to our home, which was northeast of where the fire started and on the other side of the road. 'Luckily' for us, the wind was blowing from south to north. Last year, there had been a fire there, so we naively believed that there was little

biomass available. This time, we saw the aerial firefighting efforts, felt the heat increase, heard the crackling of the flames, and were surrounded by smoke. But the fire was over there, on the other side of the road. Nevertheless, we coordinated a neighborhood system to take shifts doing night watches.

That day, like many others before it, the Emergency Alert System went off on our phones. This is a violent intrusion into a person's mental space; it is not a normal ringtone, but a strident, monotonous and piercing noise that goes off even when your phone is on silent. It is a beep that instantly quickens your pulse. However, its indiscriminate use ends up creating a paralyzing panic and a deep exhaustion before a fire ever reaches your door. In this case, it had been going off non-stop for days due to fires in other regions.

We have not been living in the rural area of Florida for long, but we have heard many stories and warnings from people who have had to defend their homes, or who lost them due to past fires – from the 2017 or the 2023 fires, etc. Everyone warned us about the high fire risk in this territory, which has 60 percent coverage of monoculture tree plantations and very hot and dry summers. We live in Cordillera de la Costa, so there are many slopes and ravines. Taking all the precautions, and listening to those who have come before us, we built an home made from clay, we have a 20-meter perimeter around our house made of gravel or small crushed stones, with no trees; we have a lot of water available and equipment we can use to wet the house and defend ourselves. We were able to prioritize the protection of our house, materially and economically. We also have family and friends who would rush to our aid.

Image

Protection to cut fire around the house (Photo: Verónica González Correa)

On Monday the 19th, the fire changed directions and was literally coming towards our house. So, the fire was literally coming towards our house. Access to our property is from the north. We had established a boundary point where, if the fire reached it, we would have to leave – or at least get the car out with our belongings. These belongings do not include anything of great value, except work equipment, documents and a few things that one loves and takes care of – such as seeds from the garden. I saw the fire get so close that I felt terrified. Adrenaline and stress coursed through my whole body, my legs were shaking, and I couldn't take the anxiety anymore. I heard and saw the roar of the fire, the heat, and the wind that it brought. We decided that some of us would stay and wait for the right moment to wet the house; this can't happen too early, otherwise the house dries out instantly in the extreme heat. I got on the road with our belongings, and I saw other families with their cars loaded with their belongings and animals. We gave each other mutual encouragement. I saw firefighters, brigade members with tools, and people with water tanks in their trucks who were all eager to help. We also saw the aerial combat begin, as more and more firefighters arrived; this was surprising because in the Biobío region alone, there were 12 fires being fought simultaneously. That day we were spared. As the neighborhood women and I said: we had the luxury of sleeping in our homes.

On Tuesday, January 20th the forecast was discouraging. In the afternoon, there would be strong winds blowing from west to east, and it was clear that we would not escape it. Around 5 o'clock in the afternoon, we saw the fire come from the highway towards us. 'Luckily' for us, the neighbor between our property and the highway is a farmer. He keeps his land clear for cultivation and does not have pine or eucalyptus trees. The neighbor next to him does have pine and eucalyptus trees along the road; therefore, this man's property was the gateway through which the fire entered.

There is a natural boundary between our neighbor's pine trees and our property, which we call a gully in this area – a deep ditch or trench with an average depth of 3 meters, which forms on the land due to water erosion (from the impact of water hitting it). They say it is caused by the overexploitation of wheat in the past and by clear-cutting of monoculture plantations in the present. The gully was overgrown with giant pine trees and covered with a carpet of pine needles that had accumulated over time. Once they fall, these needle-shaped, evergreen leaves from pine trees take a long time to decompose due to their high content of resins and waxes. This prevents any other vegetation from growing, making the ground ready to burn. When fire passes along the gully, it creates 'vertical propagation corridors'. Being a deep depression in the land, the gully acts as a natural chimney. Hot air rises more forcefully there, and the walls of the gully concentrate the heat, causing the fire to advance at an explosive speed, 'sucking' upwards. In other words, the fire was coming in with a height of at least 30 meters. Moving from tree to tree as if the pines were gigantic matches, a huge wave of fire was rapidly heading straight for our property. It was a Dantean scene. The fire exploded from one pine tree to the next, but right in front of our house there were native trees that did not burn; only those closest to the pine trees suffered.

Thank goodness that the firefighters arrived when the fire did. They told us: "You have to let it pass; your house is not in danger; it is isolated and wet". Our cellar, the fruit trees, and the garden were not in danger. We managed to coordinate via radio to make sure our neighbors were okay and receiving assistance from the firefighters. Family and friends came back to check on every possible hotspot. That night we fell asleep after putting out hotspots and small fires; but our house was there, where we had built it.

After the fire passed, we spent 22 days putting out hot spots. In this time, there were several episodes of significant flare-ups that were successfully controlled. The final toll of the Fundo San Lorenzo fire was 4,300 hectares burned, 30 houses destroyed and perhaps a few farmers who lost their crops due to the fire or to the inability to irrigate. In our immediate neighbourhood, nobody's home burned down. I think this is because our homes are relatively close together, and although we are surrounded by monoculture plantations, they are not on our land. However, what I am sure of is that nobody is completely fine. My family, our animals, and nature in general were all affected. The colors of our environment changed – from diverse shades of green to a layer of dark, burnt sepia. Emotionally, we were devastated, and I don't think any human being could endure this every summer.

Now that the emergency is over, it is urgent that we identify the causes, as well as those responsible for putting the flammable material there and for authorizing or bankrolling it. Three million hectares of pine and eucalyptus trees create the conditions for fire to expand extremely rapidly– as we saw – and to devastate the area. Those primarily responsible for this are the Chilean state – which has promoted and financed the forestry model – and two families that have benefitted greatly from it: the Angelini family, controlling 1,100,000 hectares of pine and eucalyptus plantations, and 50 percent of the pulp production capacity in the country; and the Matte family, with 700,000 hectares of monoculture plantations.

It is not due to a lack of firefighters (we saw hundreds arrive, even from Mexico); it is not just due to climate change, because this territory has always been hot in the summer. It is the excess of fuel. The forestry model has created a landscape in which corporate profitability is sustained by threatening communities' survival. When the fire entered our land with flames 30 meters high, it was not 'nature' that was attacking; it was the result of decades of commercial tree plantation waste being left behind, the lack of real firewalls, and corporate and state evasion of responsibilities.

We learned about the Declaration of the Organizations of Biobío, which is categorical: "Our life, water and the territories are being devastated". (4) We strongly support the 15 points outlined in the Declaration, and we draw attention to the allegation that "(...) the government has insisted on favoring the forestry model. One example of this is the 2024 Industrial Strengthening Plan for the Biobío region, which involves a strategy of 32 measures to 'accelerate' investments from, and for, public and private projects, so that they are 'implemented as swiftly as possible'. This includes a 'strategy to increase tree plantations in the territory'. In other words, the State continues to deepen its predatory extractivism, without considering life in the territories.

The experience I had with my farmer neighbor, on the one hand, and my neighbor who planted pine trees, on the other hand, demonstrates that small-scale agriculture is a true firewall. However, the model creates pressure to leave the countryside, so that only trees for export remain. Many people in my neighborhood are now suffering from living here. To face this real threat every summer takes away the desire to live in the peaceful countryside.

The Keule Foundation (5) makes a point about the forestry business: "If an activity exists to generate profits, it must also wholly assume the costs and risks that it generates (...) From a legal standpoint, the principle of responsibility establishes that whoever undertakes a risky activity must be liable for the damage it causes. The precautionary principle requires that the responsible party anticipate and mitigate foreseeable risks, not react only once the damage has occurred. The 'polluter pays' principle intend to prevent passing the costs of a private activity onto society.' If damage occurs, the responsibility lies with whoever designed, managed, and profited from the productive system". (6) Under this logic, it is not the wind, bad luck, or the neighbor who bears responsibility for the fire

having entered that pine-invaded gully; it is the responsibility of those who designed that landscape for profit and not for life. To demand that these actors bear the costs is not only an economic demand; it is an affirmation of the basic right not to live in fear every time it gets very hot.

22 days later, we were still putting out fires. But who puts out the fear? The article "The invisible grief after the fire: mental health in the midst of the fire crisis in Chile" talks on this subject (6). It is the exhaustion from not being able to sleep, from watching the wind warily, from knowing that your refuge – your home, your fruit trees – hangs by a thread every summer. This trauma is not individual; it is socio-territorial. We have been forced to live in a fire corridor. Our grief is not just for the burned houses or for the people who died in Lirquén and Penco; it is not just due to solastalgia (the chronic pain caused by the destruction of one's familiar, everyday landscape). It is also the loss of biodiversity and the loss of the water that no longer flows through the estuaries. It is the loss of peace of mind, which extractivism has taken from us.

After the fire, the path forward continues to be community organization and collective actions to improve the resilience of the landscape. We will not wait for solutions to come from those who designed the disaster; today, we are moving forward and managing our land with tools such as strategic goat grazing, implementing more water and soil conservation projects, and transforming biomass into life rather than fuel. (7) It is no longer necessary to convince our neighbor about the danger of his plantations; the evidence is etched into the Earth. For him, and for all of us, it has become clear that we are living on a powder keg that only needs one spark to blow up. Our response is, and will continue to be, community-led reconstruction of a livable territory.

Verónica González Correa is Chilean and has been involved in various socio-environmental projects for 15 years. She has worked closely with local communities and native peoples to defend territories and ecosystems. She is the director of the documentary, "Llamas del despojo" (Flames of Dispossession), among other films.

References:

- (1) Resumen TV, 2022. [Llamas del Despojo: Incendios del Negocio Forestal](#)
- (2) WRM, 2018. [Chile: Mega forest fires, corporate crime and impunity](#)
- (3) WRM, 2023. [Chile: Resistance to the forestry model in Wallmapu, Mapuche territory](#)
- (4) Organizations from the Biobío region, 2026. [La vida, el agua y los territorios están siendo devastados](#)
- (5) The Keule Foundation is an organization that works in south-central Chile and is dedicated to protecting the ecosystem and endangered species, such as the Queule tree (Gomortega keule) – a Natural Monument.
- (6) Periódico Resumen, 2026. [El duelo invisible tras el fuego: salud mental en medio de la crisis de los incendios en Chile](#)
- (7) Buena Cabra. [Prevención ecológica de incendios forestales](#)