

Weyerhaeuser's Industrial Tree Farms

Overview

Weyerhaeuser is increasingly relying on industrial tree plantations in order to meet growing demand for wood products in the world's largest markets: Japan, Europe and North America.

Plantations are areas where trees are managed like crops; plantations use short timber rotations, consist of only one or two species, and rely on intensive use of herbicides, pesticides and fertilizers. Industrial plantations currently account for about 15-30 percent of world demand for pulpwood, and that percentage is rising.

A significant majority of Weyerhaeuser's 2.5 million acres in the Pacific Northwest and 5 million acres in the Southeast have been converted from native forests to industrial tree plantations. Weyerhaeuser also operates plantations on its land in China, Uruguay, Australia and New Zealand.



Nothing but stumps remain after Weyerhaeuser logs in its Millicoma tree farm in Oregon. Weyerhaeuser will replace its clearcut with a tree farm. Credit: Francis Eatherington

Native Forest Conversion

Weyerhaeuser's system of converting native forests into industrial tree plantations turns biologically diverse regions into toxic, ecologically-starved monocultures. After the native forest is cut, the land is bulldozed and burned to eliminate all native fauna, including trees, shrubs, vines, fungi, grasses and wildflowers. Hybridized, genetically identical trees, such as radiata pine, eucalyptus, or acacia, are then planted in evenly spaced rows.

Any native vegetation that returns is cut or sprayed with herbicides; the plantation is regularly sprayed with pesticides to limit insect infestations, and chemical fertilizers are applied to the plantation trees to encourage growth. A mature plantation commonly has almost no undergrowth. Approximately 15 to 20 years after they are planted, the trees are clear-cut with feller bunchers - heavy machinery that mows down forests swiftly and efficiently - and the process begins anew.

Forest creatures cannot survive in such an inhospitable environment. According to E.O. Wilson, Harvard biologist and Pulitzer Prize winner, a single species pine plantation contains 90 to 95 percent fewer species than the forest that preceded it.

Since tree plantations are such simple ecosystems, they are ecologically unstable and susceptible to extreme weather, pests and pathogens. Such vulnerability is reflected in Weyerhaeuser's logging operations in Arkansas' Ouachita region: the company's decision to replace some of the most biologically diverse forests in the country with monoculture pine tree plantations has engendered a severe infestation of the southern pine bark beetle.

RAN is demanding that Weyerhaeuser abides by Forest Stewardship Council standards, which ban the use of most toxic chemicals, such as chlorinated hydrocarbons, encourage landowners to use forest management practices that reduce the need for routine, intensive chemical use.

The Chemical Fallout

Weyerhaeuser regularly applies excessive amounts of toxic herbicides, pesticides and chemicals on its tree plantations.

According to the Northwest Coalition for the Alternative to Pesticides, over 200 commonly used ingredients in herbicide concoctions are considered hazardous air and water pollutants, 21 are known or suspected carcinogens, and 127 are regarded as occupational hazards.

Fertilizers have likewise been associated with an alarming range of environmental ramifications, including severe toxicity to amphibians and fish.

High fertilizer use contributes to degrading water quality by causing algal blooms that reduce water's dissolved oxygen content, dramatically raise its pH level and stress aquatic organisms.

Social Problems

According to Weyerhaeuser and the logging industry, tree plantations generate local jobs, a claim that has proven to be false in most situations. Industrial tree plantations result in net lower employment than more locally controlled and sustainable logging and non-timber operations. Few of the profits of industrial tree plantations remain in the local community.

As a result of modern technology, such as tree-cutting feller bunchers, plantations provide very few, seasonal and low quality jobs, and this is only during the plantation phase. Once the trees are planted, employment drops dramatically until harvest, some 10-30 years later. Worldwide, there are very few climates where planting and harvesting can be carried out year round.

Tree plantations require high levels of soil fertility and water supply. As a result, plantations often overtake regions where people are already using the land, be it through agriculture or forested use. Although figures vary, on the whole industrial plantations generate less employment than conventional agriculture, particularly family agriculture.

Weyerhaeuser's industrial tree farm in Uruguay, for example, offers only 5 jobs per hectare, compared with an average of around 20 jobs per hectare in other industries. Further, the majority of exports are unprocessed wood, meaning that the people of Uruguay are not employed to convert the raw logs into products for sale, such as paper bags.

Tree plantations in the developing world drive money away local economies and into the hands of multinational timber companies. Occupying large areas of fertile land, industrial plantations require state support and long-term investments from \$600 to \$4000 US dollars per hectare. In most cases, tax exemptions and soft loans from private lenders sweeten the deal. Forestry research, road construction, port improvements, and even mill construction are subsidized by government.

To entice Weyerhaeuser, Uruguay, backed by the World Bank structural adjustment policies, granted the company tax breaks on land, lowered duties on imported trucks and equipment, and exempted forestry from income tax for at least one crop rotation. Uruguay also agreed to pay half of the cost of tree planting. Uruguay's GDP in 2002 was \$26.5 billion for a population of 3.4 million , Weyerhaeuser's annual profits in 2002 were nearly \$20 billion worldwide with 57,000 employees.

Take Action For Our Forests

With more than 400 of America's top companies committing to phase out of the sale and distribution of old growth and endangered wood products, it is time to "Wake up Weyerhaeuser!" RAN will pressure Weyerhaeuser by targeting its customers and urging them to drop contracts with the company until Weyerhaeuser executives realize that environmental misconduct does not pay.

We need your help. To join the campaign to "Wake up Weyerhaeuser" please call RAN at 415-398-4404 or e-mail: grassroots@ran.org.

Find out more information, join our online community, and take action online at www.ran.org.