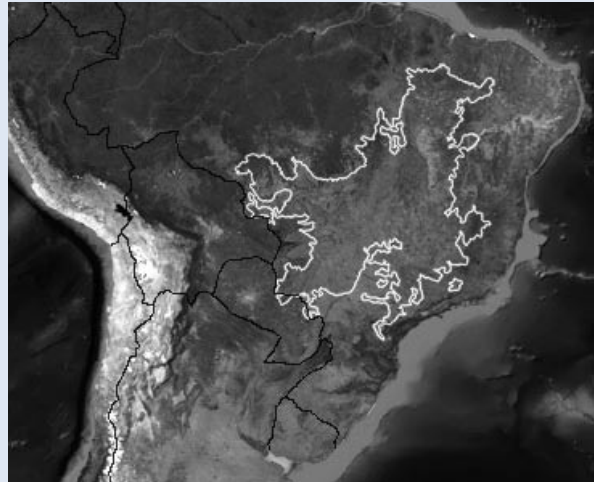


Brazil: Sugar cane plantations devastate vital Cerrado region

Sugar cane plantations and mills are rapidly expanding for bioethanol production and already having devastating effects in the biologically diverse area of Brazil's Cerrado, the savannah region, which supplies Brazil's main hydrological basins. **MARIA LUISA MENDONÇA** in interviews with affected people, finds rivers are being diverted, huge amounts of water are being used by sugar mill companies, and sugar cane plantations, contrary to Brazil's President Lula's claims, are replacing areas of food production, and destroying forest reserves. The mills are bringing human rights abuses, poison to the land, water, people and animals and local agriculture is disappearing. Food can only become scarcer and more costly and sugar cane for biofuel use is supposed to double in the region.



The Brazilian Cerrado: A biodiversity hotspot on the high, flat, central plateau of Brazil, covers over 2 million square kilometres: three times the size of Texas. Portions extend into Bolivia and Paraguay, making it the largest woodland-savannah in South America, and the richest savannah for biodiversity in the entire world.

02/08/2008, LAND RESEARCH ACTION NETWORK – The Brazilian savannah (Cerrado) is known as the 'father of waters' because it supplies the main hydrological basins of the country. The springs of the São Francisco River are located, in the state of Minas Gerais, as well as other important rivers, like Samburá, Santo Antônio, Rio do Peixe, and Rio Grande, which

drains in the Paraná River. The fauna and flora are very rich and the region has many rare species. In Serra da Canastra over 300 species of birds and 7,000 plant species have been identified.

In the town of Lagoa da Prata there has been a sugar cane mill since the 1970s, owned by Antonio Luciano, a 'Colonel' and large landowner, known as one of the biggest *grileiros* (illegal land-grabbers) of Minas Gerais. The French company Louis Dreyfus recently acquired this sugar cane mill, and expanded its plantations to produce ethanol. In the last two years, other companies have been participating in the process of expanding sugar cane mono-cropping in this region. The effects are devastating. In the farm of Antonio Luciano, the São Francisco River was diverted to facilitate drainage for ethanol production, without any environmental license or technical studies. Sugar cane plantations are replacing areas of food



National park, Serra da Canastra, in Minas Gerais state

production, besides destroying forest reserves. In order to start new sugar cane plantations, companies burn native forests, knock down and bury the trees, to escape inspection.

“Today it’s common to find dead animals on the roads, trying to escape the devastation in the forests. We have found dead wolves, foxes, giant anteater, mini anteater, otter, coati, armadillo, snakes, herons, owl, and lizards, as well as dead fish in the rivers, like the surubins, which can weigh 40 kilos. They plant sugar cane by the rivers and lake sides,” explains Francisco Colares, professor of zoology at the University of Iguatama.

According to Mr Colares, the mill of Lagoa da Prata uses water from the São Francisco River in the whole production process, for irrigation during cultivation, to wash the cane after harvest and to cool the boilers in the processing. In one of the abstraction areas, the pumping takes 500 litres of water a second. This quantity of water is sufficient to supply the whole municipality.

The process of mono-cropping expansion is intense. The company Total is building a mill in Bambuí and three more are planned in the region – two in Arcos and one in Iguatama, in addition to expansion of production in Lagoa da Prata. Sugar cane cultivation is close to restricted conservation zones of the National Park Serra da Canastra, considered to be of great biological importance by the Atlas of Biodiversity in Minas Gerais. The park is located between the springs of the São Francisco River and the basin of the Grande River. Expansion of sugar cane production has a strong impact in this area, because of its potential to invade and because of intensive use of pesticides. The Itaiquara mill, installed in the town of Delfinópolis, produces sugar cane in permanent forest reserve areas, close to the large water reservoir of Furnas.

“They plant sugar cane practically inside the water. The company deforested and burned the area, and it was a major threat for the whole region. The Public Prosecutor’s Office filed a lawsuit against the company. We hope the area will be restored soon, and the company is punished for its environmental crimes. This activity brings serious environmental problems. Brazil should prioritize a diversified model of agriculture,” says Joaquim Maia Neto, chief of IBAMA (Instituto Brasileiro do Meio Ambiente – Brazilian Environmental Institute) at the Serra da Canastra National Park.

The Secretary of Agriculture and Environment of the town of Luz, Dario Paulineli, describes other impacts in the region. “Sugar cane plantations expanded quickly in the last few years. The company



Indigenous cane cutters, São Paulo Brazil.

Louis Dreyfus has made many lease-contracts with local farmers, and the environmental impact has been enormous. The mills spread poison from airplanes, and it reaches neighbouring farms, as well as urban areas. They cut trees protected by law, like pequi and gameleira, and they plant sugar cane near the springs of the rivers. They don’t respect environmental impact studies. Many animals are dying with the devastation of forests.”

According to farmer Gaudino Correia, it is not worth leasing out the land. “Contracts are for 12 years, and after that the sugar cane has destroyed everything. The mill uses heavy machines to prepare the land, which causes soil erosion. They burn sugar cane, and the ashes spread throughout the region. I did not want to lease out my land, and now I’m surrounded by sugar cane. Here there is no more land for farming, and therefore food prices have risen a lot. My neighbours have stopped producing corn, beans, coffee, and milk, and leased out their lands. I still plant corn, beans, and produce milk, but for small producers the price did not increase, only for the middleman and consumers.”

Farmer Sebastião Ribeiro has the same opinion. “The company insisted, but I didn’t want to lease out my land. My neighbours who did it ended up with depression, because it is the same as if you lose your land. What will happen if all farmers stop planting food crops?” Mr Ribeiro says ethanol companies use the water of the São Francisco River to irrigate sugar cane.

Local environmental organizations are concerned with the social and environmental impacts of ethanol production. “The government should give priority to preservation of the rivers’ springs. It is like wearing out the veins that lead the blood to the heart. This expansion is happening very fast, and production of sugar cane is supposed to double in the region. Family

farming is going to disappear, and foods may become scarce,” says Lessandro da Costa, director of the Environmentalist Association of Alto São Francisco.

Despite the propaganda of ethanol companies, saying their activities bring employment and development, local organizations denounce several cases of environmental and labour laws violations. “They use aggressive poisons that affect the health of workers and the population. Banco do Brasil (Brazilian National Bank) has plenty of money to foster large mills, which destroy the Cerrado and the Amazon region, while small farmers have no access to loans for food production. This policy will lead to bequeathing destruction”, affirms Carlos Santana, adviser of the Rural Workers Union of BambuÍ. He explains: “sugar cane cutters are paid by the amount they cut, not by the hour, so this causes exploitation. Many workers get sick and are unable to continue in the job.”

Nelson Rufino, President of the Rural Workers Union of Lagoa da Prata, says: “Louis Dreyfus Corporation causes great environmental destruction. They cut and bury trees to hide their environmental crimes. Only half of the conduits where they deposit the vinasse [fertiliser] are made from cement. In other conduits the vinasse goes directly to the ground water and to the rivers. We call the vinasse stinking water.”

Mr Rufino describes the social impacts on local communities. “Our towns are completely surrounded because sugar cane plantations reach up to urban areas. The mills spread poison by airplane, and the number of cases of cancer in the population is enormous. In my family alone, we have five cases of cancer, and that is common in the region. In our town, there are over 140 workers removed from their jobs because of health problems like tendonitis, spinal problems, asthma and other lung diseases. Five deaths are registered as work accidents. Two workers fell into the fuel boiler, one died during the burning of sugar cane, two others died in tractor accidents.” Most workers in sugar cane plantations are migrants, so they are more vulnerable to exploitation and prejudice. The place where they live in Lagoa da Prata is called ‘Carandirú’ (a reference to an infamous prison). Mr Rufino explains: “For the workers the situation has worsened because we have lost income. Last year we had a strike for 45 days, and we got an increase from R\$2,50 to R\$2,80 for ton of cut sugar cane. But the company wants to sue us, and has filed a lawsuit against the Union.”

Another way to manipulate workers is by stimulating competition. The company divides the workers into groups, according to the amount of sugar cane they can cut. Those who don’t achieve the target (usu-

ally a minimum of 10 tons of sugar cane per day) are not hired for the next season. Those who achieve the highest results go to the class of “bulls,” which cut from 17 to 25 tonnes of sugar cane per day. Many workers in this group have been dismissed because of health problems and now they are called “sick calves.”

Even in areas where there was already agricultural activity, sugar cane monoculture produces a much larger degree of devastation, because it substitutes diversified agriculture for homogeneous, continuous cultivation, which leads to total destruction of forest reserves. The demand of ethanol corporations for large quantities of good quality lands, with access to water and infrastructure, results in the devastation of natural resources and local agriculture. So, it is not true to say sugar cane plantations are expanding in degraded areas and marginal lands, as the Brazilian government claims. Moacir Gomes, former president of the Rural Workers’ Union of BambuÍ, concludes: “President Lula doesn’t know the reality. How can he say sugar cane has not replaced areas of food production? The mills are bringing poverty to our regions, and we can predict our people will have less access to food.” ■ PE

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A sliver of transitional rainforest in Mato Grosso, Brazil.