

Colombia's Palm Oil Biodiesel Push

By Tatiana Roa Avendaño | February 2, 2007

The western world, especially the North, has surrendered to its addiction to fossil fuels. This course has set in motion a process that can no longer be questioned: climate change. Many proposals have attempted to confront it, but the majority of them keep humanity on its current suicide course. Megaprojects to produce biofuels purport to be a solution. But have the people proposing such alternatives even stopped to consider their potential impact on ecosystems, communities, and cultures? This article lays out the steps that have paved the way for these projects, focusing especially on the ramifications of the African palm, from which one type of biofuel is derived.

Biofuels have their own history. To be brief, we'll recall that during the energy crisis of 1973, Brazil refitted a portion of its sugar mills to produce ethanol, and in so doing became the leading exporter worldwide. Today, Colombia wants to follow suit and produce biofuels, particularly bioethanol and biodiesel.

Legislation Begins

In 2001, the passing of Law 693—to which 2004's Law 939 is tied—set the stage for the production of biofuels. Law 693 stipulates that Colombian gasoline must be 10% ethanol by 2009 and over the course of 15-20 years, it must gradually reach 25%. Law 939 seeks to promote biodiesel by requiring diesel gasoline for regular diesel engines to be 5% biodiesel.

Since the end of 2005, production levels from the sugar mills in Cauca, Providencia, Manuelita, and Mayagüez (all located in the Cauca Valley Province), as well as the Risaralda refinery, have neared one million liters of bioethanol a day, all of which goes to cover the demand from the western part of the country and the Bogota Plateau. Moreover, there is talk of constructing some 27 more plants across 17 provinces to extend the 10% mixture with gasoline to the rest of the country. In accordance with the projections of the National Fuel Federation, by 2010, Colombia could double its internal consumption of biofuels simply

by raising the mixing percentage to 15%. By then, Colombia will have a total export capacity of 2.3 million liters of ethanol a day.

The Palm Tree for Biodiesel

Legislation similar to that mentioned above is being drafted for biodiesel, which can be derived from the African palm tree. This tree has nutritional benefits for which it is already known: 600,000 tons of palm oil are produced annually. But in this case, it is biodiesel that we are most interested in.

Before citing statistics, it's important to mention that the major beneficiaries of bioethanol legislation and that being drafted for biodiesel are the above-mentioned sugar cane agroindustries in the Cauca Valley, one of Colombia's western provinces, and in the case of biodiesel, the palm tree agroindustry.

However, the country's diesel consumption for automotive transport is growing at a faster pace than regular gas consumption. In fact, the demand exceeds the refining capacity of Ecopetrol (the state-owned oil company), so 5% of internal diesel consumption must now be served with imports. Thus, there is an opening for African palm tree agribusinesses, which have been gradually increasing their production.



Growth and the Market

In Colombia, the expansion of this crop has been steady. In the mid-1960s, 18,000 hectares were in production. In 2003, some 188,000 hectares were in production, and today there are around 300,000. In addition, seven palm processing plants are under construction in different sections of the country, which will cost approximately one hundred million dollars. According to the Colombia palm workers union, Fedepalma, in 2001 Colombia became the largest palm oil producer in the Americas and the fourth worldwide, after Indonesia, Malaysia, and Nigeria. It exports 35 % of its total production.

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Nevertheless, several economic studies consider the international market for palm oil to be very unstable, since global production rises each day and prices continue to fall. However, palm oil agroindustrial projects have continued to be a priority for the current government and they are being pushed primarily in regions such as the Colombian Pacific, the eastern plains, and the Caribbean coast, where the soil and climate conditions are optimal for the crop. The goal is to reach a million hectares within the next few years.

What Lies Beyond

Individuals studying these agroindustrial development projects have denounced the growing of the crop as a way of laundering money from drug trafficking and as a mechanism for paramilitaries to forcefully remove the population to acquire important resource-rich areas. Their strategy has been to displace the people, and once the territory is

abandoned, the palm tree agribusinesses occupy them. Jiguamiando and Curvarado, both Pacific coast provinces, are glaring examples of this strategy—the Urapalma company illegally occupied these Afro-Colombian territories.

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The communities of Choco only just received titles for their land in November of 2000, after years of repeated violations of their human, economic, social, and cultural rights, and nine years after the National Constitution officially recognized the territorial rights of black and indigenous communities.

The recognition of land ownership was given when the communities were in a state of a displacement. Upon returning, they found that their land had been swept clean for the growing of palm trees, and nearly the entirety of their towns and villages had disappeared due to palm oil, abandonment, destruction of their dwellings, and the disappearance of their trails and roads, thus making communication between communities all but impossible. As a result, the social fabric has collapsed. Consequently, the communities have begun a lengthy judicial process of denouncement to recover their territory, which has been characterized by gross irregularities in favor of the palm tree agroindustry.

Replicas in the South

Something similar is occurring in the Tumaco region (in southern Colombia, on the border with Ecuador). The communities have also suffered forced displacement and threats, and in this context the companies or the state itself have proposed that community leaders can stay on their land if they become “rural sector business

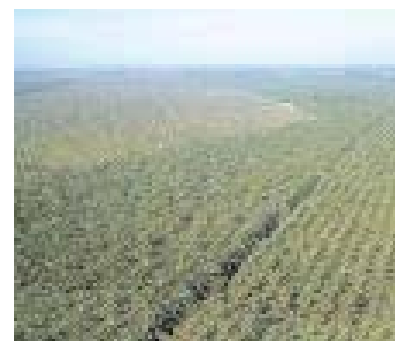
leaders.” In other words, they are forced into the middle of productive alliances or chains with businesses leaders from the palm-growing industry. In this way, land that was previously rainforest is becoming palm tree monoculture, thus dispossessing black communities of their culture and territory while destroying some of the most biologically diverse areas in the world.

With the addition of biodiesel proposals, business leaders from the palm industry and their advocates now have more incentives to continue growing.

Last June, President Uribe addressed Fedepalma’s congress, convoked at Villavicencio, saying the following: “I strongly request [the Secretary of Agriculture] to lock up the business community of Tumaco together with our Afro-descendent compatriots and not let them leave the room, keep them there until they come to an agreement. There is no other choice.... Lock them up and propose that they ... that the state ... come to an agreement about the use of land, and the government will supply venture capital. And give them a deadline and tell them: Gentleman, we are in session, and we will not leave here until we have an agreement ... because we must recognize the good and the bad. Here in Meta and in Casanare and with what’s beginning in Guaviare, we’ve had powerful palm tree growth, but none in Tumaco. And Tumaco, with its highway, and a little to the north, the Guapi area, El Charco has excellent conditions but not one palm tree, just coca, which we need to eradicate....”

These declarations incited the wrath of Afro-Colombian communities, who responded with force to the president of the Republic: “If palm oil, Mr. President, is your pilot megaproject, it will not be in our ethnic territories. Worse yet, if it were, it would bring with it grave environmental, social, and cultural damages. This we can affirm based on having lived with the palm tree monoculture from

the late ‘70s to the present, in other words, for more than 35 years, suffering all the while the impacts of 20,000 hectares of a crop forced upon us ‘deep inside this plantation, comrade,’ which continues to violently expand further into our collective territory.”¹



Large expanses of African palm trees have popped up in areas that were previously rainforest.

With the addition of biodiesel proposals, business leaders from the palm industry and their advocates now have more incentives to continue growing. And yet, the history of the plantations continues to be painful. They are stained with the blood and tears of black and campesino communities from the Pacific, Magdalena Medio, and Caribbean coast. It is the silent history of disappeared forests transformed into plantations. It is the history of ancestral cultures transformed into a palm-dependent proletariat. It is these voices demanding a halt to the destruction called for by biodiesel defenders.

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Endnotes

¹ Letter to the president of the Republic from ethnic territory authorities and legal representatives of the Community Councils of Black Communities from the ethnic territory Kurrulao (South Pacific Colombia).

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