4-11-2014

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Eager To Cash In, South America’s Soy-Producing Nations Ignore Monoculture’s Many Risks

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Category/Department: Region
Published: 2014-04-11

The Southern Cone’s five transgenic-soy-producing countries—Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay—together grow more than 50 million hectares (500,000 sq km) of the oilseed, nearly all of which is exported to Europe and Asia, where it is used to feed livestock and, in the specific case of China, to produce different types of oils.

South American environmental organizations say the soy industry destroys forests, pollutes the water, soil, and air, and pushes small-scale farmers off their land. Many economists are critical of the soy frenzy as well, saying the decision to dedicate vast stretches of land to a single crop is both short-sighted and risky, since it makes all five countries overly dependent on a single product and a single market, China, which consumes nearly 80% of the region’s soy production.

The soy-producing nations are taking a huge gamble, experts in both disciplines agree. The monoculture experiment—which already involves an area of land roughly equivalent to the size of Spain—may produce immediate returns, but it could eventually ruin the soil and thus compromise the region’s food sovereignty for generations to come.

"Cause for celebration"

The governments in those countries "boast about the growth of grain production, even though the advance of monoculture using transgenic seeds is damaging to the region’s overall agricultural situation," journalist Juan Luis Berterretche explained in an article published late last year by ecoportal.net, an Argentina-based Web site that covers international environmental news.

One of the biggest problems, the article explains, is that soy producers need to use vast extensions of farmland to offset steep operating costs and still maintain high profit margins. "Smaller establishments become nonviable. As a result, more and more farming families end up transferring their land over to large, mostly foreign-owned operations." Large agribusiness outfits spend heavily on machinery (tractors, fumigators, harvesters, and even drones). Smaller producers simply cannot compete. "This strategy is causing an accelerated foreignization of the land (NotiSur, Jan. 20, 2012) and the economy, and, in social terms, a veritable agrarian counterrevolution," the article reads.

The model is seen as beneficial, nevertheless, to the region’s progressive governments, which are enjoying a sizeable boost in tax revenue. That is particularly the case for the governments of Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, and Uruguay, which are able to use the additional revenue to fund income-redistribution programs—planes de asistencialismo (welfare plans), as they call them—which help guarantee a certain level of social stability. Soy farms, furthermore, "provide currency that allows [the governments] to balance their external accounts and boost GDP, a perverse and deceptive economic indicator used to show how much progress the countries are supposedly making," Berterretche wrote.

Argentina, whose government is active in defending human rights and is a regional leader in income redistribution, boosted its coffers to the tune of US$30 billion thanks to tax revenue earned
from the country’s most recent soy harvest, which involved some 55 million tons of the oilseeds. It comes as little surprise, therefore, that governments view the trend toward monoculture—something many experts consider a negative development—as a "cause for celebration," the article concludes.

**Felling the forests**

Environmental organizations are concerned in particular about the impact the growing soy industry is having on the region’s forests. Although deforestation is a well-known problem, its link to soy farming has often been overlooked. In fact, there is a direct correlation, according to groups like the Iniciativa Amotocodie, a Paraguayan organization whose name alludes to an Ayoreo Indian legend.

Bolivia has lost 8% of its forestlands in recent years, while Brazil has lost 9% and Argentina 14%. The numbers are even worse for Paraguay (15%), where clear-cutting has been a problem for decades. Various studies suggest that Paraguay lost 90% of its forests—nearly all of its forestry resources—in the past half century. Half of that was felled in just the past 15 years.

On Jan. 28, the Paraguayan Web site e’a.com published an article based on information gathered by researchers from the University of Maryland in the US. In collaboration with a team from Google, the researchers synthesized a dozen years worth of satellite images to produce a timeline of global deforestation and its advances. Their findings were alarming, especially in Paraguay, which "was found to have the highest ratio of forest loss to gain, indicating an intensive deforestation dynamic," according to the lead investigator, Matthew Hansen of the University of Maryland. Hansen’s study was published last December in Science magazine.

Forest loss has been especially rapid in western Paraguay’s Chaco region because of an influx of livestock ranchers, the images confirmed. The "livestock invasion" in Chaco is not, however, an isolated phenomenon, the e’a.com article suggested. One of the main reasons ranchers have emigrated west is that they no longer have access to their traditional grazing grounds in the east. Why? Because those lands have been taken over by large-scale soy operations.

The trend is likely to continue. Paraguay currently has approximately 14 million head of cattle, nearly 90% of which now graze in the western part of the country. The Asociación Rural de Paraguay (ARP), a powerful business organization, expects the country’s cattle population to reach 20 million by 2020, at which point Paraguay could become the world’s fifth-leading beef exporter. Logging plays a role as well, as many of the trees being cut in Paraguay are valuable hard woods. Guyra Paraguay, a nongovernmental organization (NGO) active in defending the country’s biodiversity, estimated as of last October that, overall, Paraguay loses more than 2,000 ha of woodland per day—87.3 ha per hour!

**Awash in "Maradona seeds"**

Like Paraguay and Argentina, Brazil has also turned a blind eye to the industry’s many drawbacks. In 2005, then President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2002-2010) opened the door to the transgenic-soy industry by signing the Ley de Biossegurança, which legalized the use of genetically modified organisms (GMOs). His excuse was that illegal imports from Argentina had already flooded Brazil with transgenic seeds. The state, he said, was powerless to control the contraband. Growers in the southern Brazilian states of Paraná, Mato Grosso, and Rio Grande do Sul dubbed the smuggled items "Maradona seeds" in reference to the Argentine football legend Diego Maradona.
The Ley de Biossegurança created the Comissão Técnica de Biossegurança, which is responsible for regulating the country’s biotechnology sector. In the past nine years, the Comissão has approved the use of 58 different GMOs. During that same period, the European Union (EU) authorized the use of just two GMO seeds—one for corn, the other for potatoes.

Brazil’s open-armed embrace of GMOs has also resulted in an excessive consumption of toxic agrochemicals, which tend to go hand-in-hand with the transgenic-farming model (NotiSur, Nov. 22, 2013). The situation has grown so worrisome that last September, the Instituto Nacional do Câncer, together with the Fundaçao Oswaldo Cruz, called on the Brazilian people to mobilize against the widespread use of agrochemicals.

**Opposed in principle**

Bolivia, where transgenic soy farming has also made gains in recent years, is in many ways a case apart. The country’s laws prohibit the production, importation, distribution, and sale of biologically modified seeds, which also run counter to President Evo Morales’ own naturalist philosophy. Morales, Bolivia’s first indigenous president, has pushed for policies aimed at protecting and defending Pachamama, the Mother Earth revered by the indigenous peoples of the Andes (NotiSur, July 8, 2011).

Article 255 of the Bolivian Constitution prohibits any production or sale of GMOs. Another law, Resolución Administrativa 135 (in place since 2005), protects corn (which originated in the Americas) from "any possibility of transgenic contamination." A third law, Decreto Supremo 181 (issued in 2009), bars the state from buying any genetically modified food that it might later use in its various meal programs for students.

Nevertheless, the government is already celebrating the extra tax revenue it will receive from the sale of this past summer's harvest, which reached record levels thanks in large part to the nearly 9,000 sq km of soy planted—against the government’s wishes—in the eastern department of Santa Cruz.

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