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## FOREST POLICY IN EL SALVADOR

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### SUMMARY

As a result of the 12 year long armed conflict that was finally ended by the signing of the Peace Treaty on 16 January, 1992, El Salvador entered a new process of democratization and interest in the local environment, this only by the intervention of the United Nations. It is thus a completely new atmosphere in which environmental organizations are trying to contribute to creating awareness of environmental issues.

There is still a big effort needed to change the sad fact that El Salvador is one of the most deforested countries in all Latin America (together with Haiti). As part of the peace process, an ombudsman institution was created in 1992. One of its departments was dedicated for the purpose of protecting fundamental environmental rights (3rd generation of human rights, the right to live in a healthy environment). This right has been taken in seriously by a number of Salvadorean non-governmental organizations that are struggling to break with the traditional structures of the society, where only business and economic issues are relevant.

Finally after years of lobbying and with a new political constellation of the National Parliament, an Environmental Law was adopted in the beginning of this year (May 4, 1998), actually the first Environmental Law that has ever existed in the country. Also, several international treaties and conventions that earlier were only signed, are now in the process of being ratified by the Parliament and the President, which represent a big step forward for El Salvador. As an example of this, can be mentioned the United Nations Treaty on Desertification, that was signed and ratified last year.

The question now is, whether we are really facing a spirit of good intentions, or rather a simple compliance with the international trend in order to capture international funding. Only the future will reveal if necessary steps are taken to implement drastic changes as are required. In the following pages, we present the results of the proposed forest policy that soon will be subjected to approval. Due to the large production and consumption of timber and firewood in El Salvador, this policy it is often identified as an economic policy not an environmental one. Thus, the environmental aspect of this policy is marginal. However, this is precisely why it is believed necessary to begin giving the environmental benefits preeminence.

### 1 INTRODUCTION

The forest policy has priority in El Salvador, amongst other issues, due to its critical ecological importance in the integrity of Salvadoran life, now and in the near future. Also, through public declarations and statistics that identify El Salvador as the most deforested of the subcontinent, various government officials have recognized the gravity of the deforestation problem. For 5 years, the government and private businesses have been talking

about the necessity of creating a Forest Law and incorporating it into forest incentives to outline the roles between the government and private business for management of the forest resources.

Although a forest policy isn't explicitly written yet, it is the forest law that has been used as "policy" to establish objectives and programs, and as a mechanism to regulate the use and/or exploitation and/or protection of forest resources. The current situation for implementing the forest law, or creating the forest policy is not ideal. The International Treaties signed and ratified by our country relating to forests, although they are republican laws, are almost unknown by the population and many times by the same officials in charge of applying them.

The participants in all the process of Forest Policy, including the definition of the problem, establishment of objectives, goals, strategies and elaboration of the document, were:

- Direction of the Green Project (USAid).
- Ministry of the Environment and Natural Resources (MARN).
- and Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock (MAG).

Further institutions of private businesses include:

- 2 People of the Forest Corporation, private wood business.
- FUSADES (Salvadoran Foundation for the Economic and Social Development that amalgamates the big private businesses of the country).
- Representatives from the Bank.

## **2 WHAT BASIS AND STRATEGIES STIMULATED THE CREATION OF THE FOREST POLICY?**

The basis of, and strategies which stimulated, the creation of the forest policy began through popular present and past interests for the realization of this policy. Amongst these there has been pressure for the country to define and/or subscribe a forest policy through international agreements, some by means of regional, subregional and universal agreements. The principal one was "Agenda 21" of the Earth Summit, Rio de Janeiro 1992, of which followed agreements that later transferred into Treaties of Conventions. Three of these were signed and ratified by the country and are known as:

- Agreement For the Struggle Against Desertification and Drought.
- Agreement of Climate Change.
- Agreement of Biodiversity.

Further pressure for a forest policy came from the creation of the Central American Commission of the Environment and Development and other agreements celebrated in other international forums, such as the Summit of the Americas.

However, the focus and direction contained in the forest policy is given by the neo-liberal market, representing the private timber business with very evident links with members of the government in power. In addition to the listed participants in the creation process, there were strategies used by organizations and individuals from civil society to further the forest policy, including:

- The declarations made through the media to the forest service of MAG, to the Ombudsman for the Defense of Human Rights, that there exists a fundamental problem of logging forests in rural and urban areas.
- Pressure before executive body and legislation from CESTA for the government to sign the convention of Struggle Against Desertification and Drought.

In knowledge obtained from recent political documents, Ministry of the Environment and Natural Resources and Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock were called non-governmental institutions to obtain a facade of "environmentalism". However, despite this front, we know that the interest of directors and managers for the forest policy was obtained through the policy or the law of "Green Stamps", so that they would be able to export without problems and sell their products on the international market. In this situation, the campesinos, who are most in need of credits, are not subject to either benefits or credits.

The group responsible for the Forest Policy (Ministry of the Environment and Natural Resources and Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock) had prepared a "Forest Action Plan" of reforestation to "delay the campesinos" after the Post-War as part of the actions of policy. However, the campesinos showed no interest — they expected some advantage of credit, labor in their community or economic support.

In the final document made in Dec. 1997 in Monte Cristo, one of their paragraphs says: to "define the role of the state as to the protection, conservation and restoration of natural resources, generation and dispersal of technical information to orient forest production, mechanisms of community self-administration for the management of the forest, promote forestry that stimulates the private forest sector to dedicate resources for reforestation, management, harvest, industrialization and commercialization of forest products. Also, it is proposed that the activities of standardizing and facilitating the orientation to the forest sector must be left to the state to make a free market economy."

Regarding the forestry problem, according to the World Bank in 1997, the actual vegetative cover is between 3-5 % of the national territory and the protected zones are under 0.2 % of the territory. For the "National Environmental Strategy" the situation of forests is the following:

- The national land possesses 2 % original forest, 12 % of forest cover, 2 % mature forest.
- A large part of the soils suitable for forest and lands of protection are deforested, covering 48% of the land cover of the country, contributing to the loss of natural resources.

The annual consumption of forest products totals 4.9 million m<sup>3</sup> of which 93.5 % (4.6 m<sup>3</sup> cubed) is consumed as firewood, signifying the major volume of forest products is destined for the production of energy. Of this, 3.9 millions of m<sup>3</sup> is generated in rural and urban hearths and 0.7 m<sup>3</sup> is industrial energy used for brick and salt factories. In regards to the "salt forest" and the exploitation of the mangroves, of the 100,000 hectares that existed in 1950, it is estimated that in 1989 only 26,000 hectares of mangroves existed.

Documents prepared and distributed by the Ministry of the Environment in collaboration with USAid say that these figures coincide with increasing population and suggest that overpopulation is the principal cause of deforestation. According to these documents, this is due to excessive use of firewood; "it is the growing population that

demands the firewood, wood for construction and for rural infrastructure, paper, resins and others. This situation leads to the loss of approximately 98,485,131 metric tonnes of eroded soil per year.”

It is determined that the repercussions of these phenomenon stretch across the productive sector, in particular to agriculture, industry and the rest of the population. Further, loss of forests and soils also damage to the productive infrastructure, particularly by the sedimentation of rivers by hydroelectric dams. Even though the ecological impact of deforestation is evident, studies have not been done to quantify their magnitude. (Estrategia pp. 33).

These repercussions listed by the Ministry of the Environment don't concur with those of the workers of the Forest Service who say that the rural population is the most affected sector of the forest problem. As the rural population lives directly from these resources, the lack of water affects them on their cultivated lands promoting erosion and lowering cultivated outputs. As a consequence they need to use more insecticides and fertilizers to be able to obtain higher outputs and resources to combat plagues and sicknesses.

Continuing with facts of the National Environmental Strategy, deforestation causes various ecological problems including:

- Erosion of the soils, therefore lowering the productive capacity.
- Deterioration of the capacity of ground water storage in hydrological reserves.
- Noxious and harmful alterations to the climate.
- Deterioration of the countryside and loss of tourism opportunities, recreation and education.
- Loss of biodiversity.

Although the problems are detected by the population, there has been no emphasis placed on the causes of such harms nor the real magnitude of such drastic changes. Official facts published in the documents of National Environmental Strategy, Forest Policy, include a discussion about politics and forest incentives but don't identify problems found by civil society, especially those found by environmental groups and by neighboring associations. CESTA, among other environmental groups, has been declaring abuses of forests in El Salvador since 1987 especially those made in the metropolitan area of San Salvador. These areas have been logged primarily by construction companies within which, activists found representatives of the big capital members of the ANEP (National Association of Private Business).

In the controversial issue of El Espino Farm (a forest in the metropolitan region of San Salvador) being an area of dispute between one family and the cooperatives (the actual owners), there were two orders declared constitutional that divided the land and permitted logging for urban development. In this way, the petition made by environmental groups, including CESTA, that was put before the conservative-dominated Legislative Assembly requesting that this area to be declared as an “Ecological Reserve Zone” or Forest Reserve, was refused. This demonstrates, once again, that the environment is merely a theme of conferences and of multinational agreements, but in reality, the government and private business sector represent the big capital investors, not the forest nor the general population.