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Forest impacts of pig-iron plant debated

Chaco, located on the border with Paraguay, ranks among Argentina's poorest provinces. What economic activity there is comes mostly from farming and logging. That, in large part, explains why provincial authorities have leapt to the defense of a proposal by Vetorial, a Brazilian company, to build a US\$200 million pig iron plant near Resistencia, Chaco's capital.

Pig iron is a key ingredient in the manufacture of steel, and project proponents say the Chaco plant will generate jobs by helping to supply steel mills not only in Argentina, but eventually also in Brazil and southeast Asia.

Environmentalists contend the project would accelerate deforestation as trees are extracted from native woodlands to produce charcoal that is used to make the pig iron.

Citing the project's environmental-impact study, they point out the plant would consume 90,000 tons of charcoal annually for the first three or four years, then double that amount as production rises. Chaco already produces charcoal to the tune of 220,000 tons annually, the provincial government says.

The new plant, which would be the first of its kind in Argentina, also would draw wood for charcoal from forests in Formosa and Santiago del Estero provinces, organizers say.

Effects on woodlands feared

Critics assert the new plant would require so much charcoal that native forests would suffer significantly. For each ton of charcoal produced, they note, an estimated four to five tons of wood are required. Native forests in the province already have come under intense pressure from fast-expanding soy cultivation, which currently accounts for 1.75 million acres (710,000 has) in Chaco compared to 320,000 acres (130,000 has) just 10 years ago.

But Chaco officials view the project as a highly valuable job-creation opportunity, a fact symbolized recently by Chaco Gov. Jorge Capitanich's visit in February to a Vetorial plant in Brazil's Mato Grosso do Sul state.

"Industrial development of the province is essential in order to bring about social inclusion by way of employment," Eduardo Aguilar, Chaco province's minister of economy, production and employment, said in May during a hearing on the project before Chaco's provincial legislature. "Our government's obsession is industrialization, and we will not miss one single investment that wants to come to our province, provided the law is respected."

Scientists who took part in the legislative hearing on behalf of environmental groups warn that the Vetorial project could bring Chaco province back to the days of wholesale forest destruction that occurred in the region in the second half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century.

Such assertions outrage Aguilar, who in a recent press conference called project opponents "fanatics" and "unbalanced." He added: "The only pollution we have today is hunger, unemployment and the marginalization being experienced by many Chaco residents."

Green advocates such as Raúl Montenegro, a biologist who is president of the Córdoba, Argentina group Fund for the Defense of the Environment (Funam), strongly oppose the government's open embrace of the project.

"Brazil produces some 10 million tons of pig iron annually, half of it with charcoal from wood," Montenegro said at the hearing. "But since a couple of years ago, they've realized that deforestation is being caused not only by soy cultivation and industrial logging, but also by the pig-iron factories, which are coming under strong [regulatory] pressure from Ibama [the enforcement arm of Brazil's Environment Ministry]. That's why Vetorial wants to locate in the Chaco region, which is an important charcoal center where environmental controls are bad. I understand the need for work, but there are other development alternatives."

Vetorial's record questioned

Fighting the project alongside Montenegro's organization is the Earth Forum, a green group formed in 2004 to safeguard Chaco's publicly owned lands. These and other critics of the project charge that Vetorial has been fined in Brazil for felling more trees than it was authorized to cut.

Oscar Ribone, an Argentine metals engineer contracted by Vettori to study the potential for a pig-iron plant here, responds that the fine was annulled. He adds that the company has met all reforestation requirements: "In Brazil, Vettori has reforested 10,000 hectares (25,000 acres), and by 2012 the plan is to have 50,000 hectares (124,000 acres) reforested."

Another flashpoint concerns a proposal by Vettori to plant eucalyptus as a future charcoal source. Though Chaco authorities rejected a company request to use 25,000 hectares (62,000 acres) of public land for eucalyptus plantations, they are asking the National Institute of Agricultural Technology (Inta) to rule on the risks of such plantations and where in the province they might be allowed.

Green advocates warn that eucalyptus trees would add considerable environmental stress to the dry Chaco region since they consume large quantities of water.

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