

Chile ravaged by fires

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Chile is facing one of the worst forest fires in its history. The worst hit areas are O'Higgins, Maule, Biobio and La Araucana, all located in the extreme south of the country, where in addition to small Mapuche farming communities, there are large forestry companies.

The fire, fueled by strong winds, high temperatures and an eight-year drought, has had an enormous impact on the country's fauna and flora, which experts consider irreversible.

Valparaiso, one of Chile's main port cities, is known for frequent fires that consume its hillside forests. It has been declared on "Red Alert" after a fire on January 2 consumed 50 hectares and dozens of homes.

The whole city of Valparaiso has been blanketed in a layer of white smoke for over a week. The smoke is a daily reminder of the wildfires that continue to incinerate forests in seven of the country's fifteen regions, four of which have been declared disaster areas.

President Michelle Bachelet announced that the fires, which have already burned over half a million hectares, taken 11 lives and left over 3,000 people homeless, represent one of the worst emergency situations in Chile's history.

But, why is Chile constantly subject to such fires? Why, with such a long history of battling fires of epic proportions, is the country not more prepared to face these emergency situations? The answer lies in why the Chilean forests are so prone to catching fire and why fires spread so quickly.

The configuration of the trees in Chile's forests today is: 75 percent pine, 15 percent eucalyptus, and 10 percent native. Pine and eucalyptus trees are known for being incredibly dry. So, why then was the majority of Chile's native, humid forest destroyed and replaced with this monoculture of dry pine and eucalyptus trees?

To understand this, one has to go back to the first

year of Pinochet's dictatorship. In 1974, Decree Law 701 (better known as the "forest development" law), which subsidizes plantations of monocultures of pine and eucalyptus trees with 75 percent of resources, was enacted. Once the state attached a high cost value to a plantation of trees, along with the "subsidy," companies rushed in to destroy native forests, in order to replace them with plantations of pine and eucalyptus that could produce profits.

This law, which is still in effect today, allowed for the appropriation of huge areas of national territory by two main monopolies: CMPC, run by the Matte family, and Bosques Arauco run by the Angellinis. Seventy percent of Chile's forestry business (2 million hectares) is controlled by these two families.

As part of this process, these companies stripped the Mapuche community of its native lands, leaving them with a mere half a million hectares. Since then, a multi-million-dollar fortune has been accumulated by the two families, yet the regions they exploit suffer from among the highest rates of poverty in the country. For example, over 100,000 residents live in homes without access to water.

While these two companies are worth at least \$10 million, they have shown little interest in investing in fire prevention to protect their land.

Ken Pimlott, director of the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, who has done consulting for Chile's National Forest Corporation (CONAF), noted that with the intensity of forest fires and its impact on residents losing their homes, Chile is about 30 or 40 years behind California, in terms of fire prevention. It begs the question, why doesn't the state own any planes that can carry more than 10,000 liters of water? Why are there no specialized training programs for wilderness firefighters?

Over 9,000 people (including 4,500 volunteer firefighters and 4,600 members of the military, police,

and public functionaries) have been working to extinguish the fires with the aid of 24 planes, 45 helicopters, and 124 fire trucks, not counting the “Supertanker” plane that can carry up to 75,000 liters of water, which is currently being rented out by Benjamin Walton’s (of the Wal-Mart Waltons) Chilean wife, Lucy Ana Aviles.

According to CONAF, there are still 110 active fires, including 49 currently under control and 60 still out of control.

Those most affected by the disaster are obviously the thousands of poor families who have lost their homes, belongings and land, not the major forest companies, whose land and assets are protected by insurance, ensuring their continued profit.

In the final analysis, the “natural disaster” of Chile’s fires is another fatal result of a capitalist state which only serves to maintain the wealth of a small group of individuals, at the expense and exploitation of millions of impoverished people.



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