THE ROLE OF SOYA

Since the US food giant Cargill announced plans to construct a giant terminal in Santarem in 2000, local communities have fought to stop the impact that soy expansion is having on the surrounding region. The port was built in direct contradiction of Brazilian law, which requires an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) to be carried out before construction of such sites could begin. Several protests against the port were organized by non-governmental organizations, but with limited success, and the facility has remained in operation since 2003.

After years of lobbying and a long legal battle, Cargill was finally ordered by Brazil’s Federal Court to carry out the EIA in December 2007. The pressure exerted by social movements, NGOs and European companies resulted in a commitment from the industry not to buy soy from newly deforested areas in the Amazon. The Soy Moratorium, declared in July 2006, is an important first step towards helping stop further deforestation for soy production in the Amazon basin.

WHAT THE MAPPING SHOWS

Deforestation

Economic activity leading to deforestation has taken place in Santarem and Belterra for over a century. As this activity has moved on, the forests have started to grow back and it is common to find in the region areas that are in different stages of regeneration. Previously undiscovered areas, known as expanses, still perform vital ecological functions. In addition to this, the map indicates the actual and potential destruction of forests after the introduction of soy to the region. Any deforestation without authorization from the environmental agency is illegal.

Impact on Rivers

The intensive use of herbicides in the soy fields contaminates the generate (small streams) and their sources. It is possible to find springs surrounded by extensive soy plantations and, according to local people, trees are sometimes seen dumping wastes directly onto the river beds. Furthermore, plantation farmers build small dams that block the course of the water, affecting water supplies for settlements downstream. Another direct impact of soy expansion is the removal of riparian, or wetland, forest, causing the sedimentation of the main rivers, which also leads to the destruction of the riparian forest. In addition, soy plantations, due to the instability of riparian forest, this water becomes muddy, making it impossible for local people to use it for drinking and eating.

Blocked Access

Due to the availability of large tracts of cheap agricultural land, soy producers have acquired large swathes of the forest. In doing so, they prevent local people from exercising their right to travel freely in forests previously used by their communities. In some cases, the tracks which were previously used as paths have been replaced by fields of soy, and have disappeared completely. The absence of pathways, over trails and side roads used traditionally by farmers has led to continual conflict between soy farmers and members of the communities.

Threatened Communities

The expansion of soy in the region is partly due to the rise in commodity prices, which has caused the prices of land to soar. One hectare, which in 2006 was sold for R$70, soared to R$500, and now sells for R$1,500. It has also caused a reduction in the number of families living in various areas. In some cases, entire communities have disappeared. Many members of these communities have been forced to sell their lands because hereditary land-use has not been properly documented in soy plantations, have contaminated crops, animals, water sources and have poisoned people who have been directly exposed to them.

Moreover, as more and more small farms are converted to large soy, the infrastructure available for communities has been reduced. As communities in new areas, recently built schools are abandoned and access to public transport has become more difficult.

Previously Undiscovered Communities

Many rural communities in Belterra and Santarem are not shown on existing maps - this is the case for many rural communities within the Amazon. Through participatory mapping, 121 communities along the main highways and side roads of the region were formally identified for the first time.

Map of deforestation up to 2001 and from 2001 – 2006