

Guest Opinion: Andean agreement would block conservation of natural resources

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The Andean Free Trade Agreement would accelerate clear-cut logging, weaken protection from invasive species and genetically modified organisms, and block three South American nations from conserving their natural resources.

AFTA would embrace many of the most ecologically problematic elements of the North American Free Trade Agreement and the World Trade Organization, subjugating the hemisphere's ecosystems to trade and investment profits.

Multinational corporations consistently fight to weaken environmental laws. Provisions in AFTA would:

- * Increase industrial clear-cut logging and conversion of native forests to tree plantations or agriculture.

- * Impede governments' authority to protect natural resources or to provide standards, incentives or restrictions to ensure environmental management.

Foreign companies would be empowered to sue governments when they feel their ability to profit is inhibited by environmental management and protection or by the return of land to indigenous communities. Such

lawsuits ensure against "expropriation" of profits and environmental safeguards.

Under NAFTA, corporations have pursued awards of up to \$970 million and overturning of environmental laws.

- * Limit conservation in the service sector. AFTA "market access" and "service rules" limit governments' ability to control damaging activities, including mining, water diversion and extraction, oil drilling, pipeline transport, shipping, hotel construction and waste incineration.

Drinking water standards, laws on pesticides, toxic wastes and renewal energy all could be challenged.

- * Decrease democracy and public involvement. Governments and citizens would have to surrender negotiation of any rules that affect them or the environment to unelected international tribunals. Private foreign corporations get "equal rights" to compete against local service providers. This leads to privatization of water collection and delivery, harming ecosystems and aquifers by increasing the incentive to overpump and pollute.

- * Weaken standards that prevent importation of invasive pests species or genetically modified organisms (GMOs). The countries would have to allow patents of GMOs, even those disrupting native ecosystems.

- * Threaten biodiversity, permitting

corporations to patent lifeforms, enabling intellectual property claims and monopolization of genetic resources and associated knowledge. Communities' rights to decide on habitats and biodiversity based on their culture and traditions would be undermined. Thousands of communities have used and cultivated resources for subsistence rather than profit. But AFTA would allow patenting, exploitation and restricted access of Amazonian plants used for medicine and food for centuries.

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