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PLANTED FORESTS AND FOOD

The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) recently promoted an international conference to discuss the role of forests in food and nutritional safety. The thesis defended by the Organization is that forests should receive significant attention in government policies and strategies for combating hunger.

Such recommendation takes into account the significant potential of native and planted forests in producing food, energy, fibers and fuels, which form a solid base for human development.

It is also based on FAO's own estimate that approximately 1 billion people live in chronic hunger every day worldwide and, considering population growth perspectives of 9 billion inhabitants in the planet by 2050, agriculture production would have to grow 60% to satisfy the nutritional needs of such a population. Therefore, alternatives that bring about positive results towards combating hunger are paramount.

In Brazil, forest plantations generate jobs and income, and also serve as a direct source of food, with the production of honey and mushrooms. With a low investment, apiculture offers a good financial return and high international competitiveness. At present, we are the 11th largest honey producer worldwide, a position conquered also thanks to partnerships established between forest companies and small regional apiarists. Roughly, 5% of honey production in the country is obtained through these partnerships.

According to the Brazilian Association of Planted Forest Producers (ABRAF), Brazil's honey production grew 77% in one year between 2010 and 2011. And, since these activities are developed in a joint manner, the economic and social results end up benefiting the entire region.

Eucalyptus plantations, in addition to providing the raw material for various industrial segments in producing multiple products (wood, charcoal, panels and pulp, for example), they also stand out in the production of edible mushrooms. This is another sustainable method and an increasingly more frequent way of utilizing forest plantation resources.

Shiitake mushroom-growing in the country, for example, is essentially done using eucalyptus logs and the interest of small producers for this

type of mushroom, as a source of income for their properties, is on the rise. However, it is necessary to provide orientation and technical support for their production, in order for producers to achieve good results. It is important to point out that mushrooms are considered a food product with a high nutritional value that are rich in proteins, vitamins and low in fat content.

Another form of using land is agroforestry systems, which combine tree species (wood or fruit bearing) with agricultural plantations and/or animal husbandry. These systems allow for the easy recovery of soil fertility, strengthening of green fertilizers, control over pests and weeds, production diversification (with a more stable supply of products throughout the year), the obtainment of food, wood extraction (for energy and as wood for cooking food) and the cultivation of medicinal plants. For offering so many economic and ecological benefits, agroforestry systems are being widely adopted and encouraged in development programs by Brazilian forest base companies.

The agroforest model is, without a doubt, an important alternative for reconciling forestry production and guaranteeing food safety of rural populations. Proof of this is the generation of jobs and income for communities, which fosters rural development. According to ABRAF, approximately 13 thousand families benefited from development contracts in 2011, including from pulp and paper industries, generating economic and social development for rural communities. That same year, the forest base sector employed 645 thousand direct workers, 1.5 million indirect workers and roughly 4.7 million people were impacted by the income effect.

In order to face the major challenge proposed by FAO of ensuring food safety considering global population growth, it is necessary to do more than produce food. We need to face other important global factors, especially climate change, which stand as major threats for agriculture development, for maintaining biodiversity and for the production of food itself. It is also necessary to satisfy the growing demand for energy and water in a rapid and sustainable manner. And all this necessarily includes forests. ■