

Chile Protects Endangered Hardwood

Alerce trees can live for thousands of years. One cubic yard of wood is valued at up to \$5,000 on the international market.



E-LAW advocate Miguel Fredes has scored a major victory against a multi-million dollar illegal logging racket that was devastating ancient forests in southern Chile.

For years, the government of Chile has allowed trade in the endangered "alerce" tree, a majestic conifer that is a relative to the giant sequoia. Some trees in Chile's southern coastal forests are said to be more than 3,600 years old.

Despite alerce's protected status, Chilean authorities have been allowing the export of alerce to the U.S. An exception to CITES, an international convention to stop the trade of endangered species, allowed export of alerce logged before 1973, or trees damaged by fire or disease.

Miguel says: "This made a perverse incentive to log, burn, and illegally trade alerce trees."

E-LAW U.S. connected Miguel with Cheryl Coon, an attorney based in Portland, Oregon, who provided her services pro bono. Cheryl collaborated with E-LAW U.S. Staff Attorney Jennifer Gleason to help Miguel use the Freedom of Information Act to obtain information from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and U.S. Customs concerning the import of alerce into the U.S.

Miguel used documents from these agencies to lay the groundwork for a criminal investigation of authorities in Chile.



Remains of an ancient alerce tree.

Photo: Carlos Poblete

In April, Miguel won a landmark victory when Chile's government announced it was closing the longstanding CITES loophole, and allowing no further export or trade in alerce. In early May, police arrested the mayor of the small community of Fresia, near Puerto Montt, for his alleged role in this illegal trade.

E-LAW U.S. has worked with Miguel since 1999. Miguel recently wrote: "E-LAW helps us to think globally and act locally. Our work together is based on common goals, friendship, and a passion for the work we do."

For more information about this E-LAW Impact, please contact the Environmental Law Alliance Worldwide at elawus@elaw.org or visit our web site at www.elaw.org.