

Without stronger government action, Brazil's low deforestation in the Amazon is unlikely to last

A recent report from Brazil's national space agency showed that deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon is the lowest it's been in a decade. The news made headlines and was lauded as an example of the progress President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva had made toward his promise of eliminating illegal deforestation there by 2030. Since taking office in 2023, Lula's administration has ramped up environmental policies aimed at making the country's beef industry more transparent, such as increasing policing and remote monitoring of forest lands.

But some of that progress is at risk of being undone, say environmental experts.

In January, a number of agri-food groups left a voluntary trade agreement known as the Amazon Soy Moratorium, which had been highly effective at curbing deforestation for the sake of cultivating soybeans. The pact prohibited members from buying soy grown on lands deforested after July 2008. When the moratorium fell apart earlier this year, researchers and advocates expected it to usher in a rise in deforestation for soy cultivation. Now, thanks to a group of scientists working in both the U.S. and Brazil, we have an initial expectation of how much deforestation is likely to occur in the coming years.

In a new paper published last week in *Science*, researchers say that the Amazon forest is at risk of losing 1.4 million hectares -- or the equivalent of about 2 million soccer fields -- to deforestation over the next 10 years.

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Before the moratorium was in place, soy cultivation was one of the main drivers of deforestation in the Amazon; for example, in Mato Grosso, Brazil's leading soy producing state, a quarter of soy production from 2001 to 2005 came from clearing forested lands. After a widespread public campaign led by Greenpeace, public and private sector actors working in the Amazon forest came together to create the soy moratorium. "People generally followed it," said Lisa Rausch, one of the authors of the *Science* paper. "There weren't many violations of it, especially in the early days and years. This created a situation where land deforested after 2008 was no longer valuable to soy traders."

Ane Alencar, a director of science at the Amazon Environmental Research Institute, or IPAM, agreed that the soy moratorium was a "very important private policy mechanism" for curbing deforestation. She also argued that without it, lands deforested after 2008 that are currently used for things like raising cattle will now be converted to soybean production -- and that the cattle ranching will move to "new frontiers," likely leading to deforestation elsewhere in the Amazon.

The new research on soy-driven deforestation in the Amazon also comes at a time when private

commitments from major food groups to clean up their supply chains have been flagging. This month, JBS, the world's largest meat producer, publicly walked back its so-called promise to reach net-zero deforestation by 2040. The news shouldn't necessarily come as a surprise, as last year, the company's chief sustainability officer admitted in an interview with Reuters that the pledge was always purely aspirational.

Alencar believes that the private sector still has a role to play in disincentivizing deforestation, and that companies like JBS are still susceptible to consumer pressure to do the right thing. "They are very reactive to the public opinion," she said, "so maybe there is a need for more campaigns asking for these companies to be more responsible in the Amazon."

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Other forest countries in Latin America are working on curbing deforestation. Colombia recently passed a first-of-its-kind law aimed at increasing traceability within its beef industry. Over the next two years, government agencies must work with cattle ranchers to ensure they are not raising herds on illegally deforested lands -- as well as bring in slaughterhouses, meat processors, cattle auctioneers, and exporters to make sure they are not moving or selling products from these areas. Rausch called this development a strong signal, but said much remains to be seen about how Colombian authorities will accomplish these goals.

And there are still other agreements in place that aim to restrict deforestation in Brazil -- such as the nation's Forest Code, which limits how much land can be cleared for any type of agricultural production. When lands are deforested outside of these limits, the owners receive a fine and then the land in question is placed under embargo, meaning it cannot be used for any commercial agricultural use.

But Rausch argued the Forest Code does not go far enough to protect forested land. Her paper found that 20 percent of soy farms in the Amazon have embargoes against them for illegal deforestation. "The economic incentives for deforestation are still there," she said, while adding that the latest deforestation update from Brazil's space agency is welcome news. "But unless there are new things brought to the table, this will be a temporary drop, and it will creep back up for sure."

Alencar also finds the future outlook of deforestation in the Amazon "worrisome." With Lula up for reelection -- and facing off against Flavio Bolsonaro, son of former president Jair Bolsonaro -- Alencar fears that progress could be undone.

"I'm afraid that all of these results that we have achieved," she said, "they'll really be in danger if the government becomes more anti-environmental."

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