

The Deforestation of Brazil's Amazon

As Amazon Tree Loss Worsens, Political Pressure Grows, and Brazil Hedges: Critics

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The latest INPE (National Institute for Space Research) deforestation data for the Brazilian Amazon, released last Friday, comes as the result of the policies of President Jair Bolsonaro, say critics. [According to DETER](#), INPE's real-time forest monitoring system, from August 1, 2019 to July 31, 2020, forest loss in the region totaled 9,205 square kilometers (3,554 square miles), an increase of 34.5% over the previous comparative period (2018/2019), when 6,844 square kilometers (2,642 square miles) were deforested.

DETER detected 1,654 square kilometers of forest cleared in July, 2020 alone, a decline from the 2,255 square kilometers detected the same month a year ago. Still, forest loss in the region makes the 2019/2020 deforestation year the highest since at least 2007.

“Reaching the middle of the year with so many [deforested] open areas means that this year’s official deforestation rate [to be confirmed by the Prodes system, also from INPE, in November] will be higher than last year, which hit double digits, reaching to almost 11,000 square kilometers (4,247 square miles). We can reach a number not seen by Brazil for over a decade,” [stated](#) the Institute of Environmental Research of the Amazon (IPAM).

This “season in the Amazon will not be recovered,” added Ane Alencar, IPAM director of Science. “Whoever clears the forest wants to recover their investment, and that involves burning deforested vegetation to clear the land, which will happen sooner or later, with or without a fire moratorium. Curbing fires begins with controlling deforestation.”

Most Amazon fires are set by people, and used as a tool to convert forest to agricultural lands.



Meeting between Vice President Hamilton Mourão and members of the Committee and the Board of Directors of Santander Brasil Bank in Brasília. July 23, 2020. Image by Romério Cunha/VPR (Vice Presidency of the Republic).

Also in July, the Bolsonaro government [dismissed](#) INPE researcher Lúbia Vinhas, general coordinator of the department responsible for monitoring Amazon deforestation. But when asked about last month's decrease in deforestation in relation to the firing, experts agreed that they believe the statistics to be accurate and legitimate.

"There is no indication or reason for INPE to publish politically influenced data. We know the technical team very well and if something was happening [within the institute], they would have signaled us some time ago," said Tasso Azevedo, coordinator of the MapBiomas project, the largest independent biome monitoring program in Brazil.

Marcio Astrini, executive secretary of the Climate Observatory (OC), a network of 52 non-governmental organizations and social movements, shared that opinion.

"There is no doubt that the federal government wants to intervene in INPE, just as it tries to do in other government bodies. However, there is [also] no doubt that the data that the institute provides is extremely reliable, which reflects the reality of what is happening in the forest. INPE is a global reference in the monitoring of tropical forests."

In contrast, the Brazilian government itself seemed to sow doubt over the veracity of INPE's data. On Friday, the same day the DETER data was released, Brazilian Vice President General Hamilton Mourão [repeated on television](#) President Jair Bolsonaro's concerns from a year ago. Mourão [criticized the current INPE system](#), saying that

"We have monitoring systems that are not the best... They lack... quality. The satellites that we have are optical, they don't see during the rainy season, [and

don't penetrate the] clouds. We need to move forward to have a RADAR technology.”

In the past, the administration has suggested replacing INPE with a private service.

During the same television piece, Carlos Nobre, a renowned Brazilian climate scientist who spent 35 years at INPE, countered Mourão's statement:

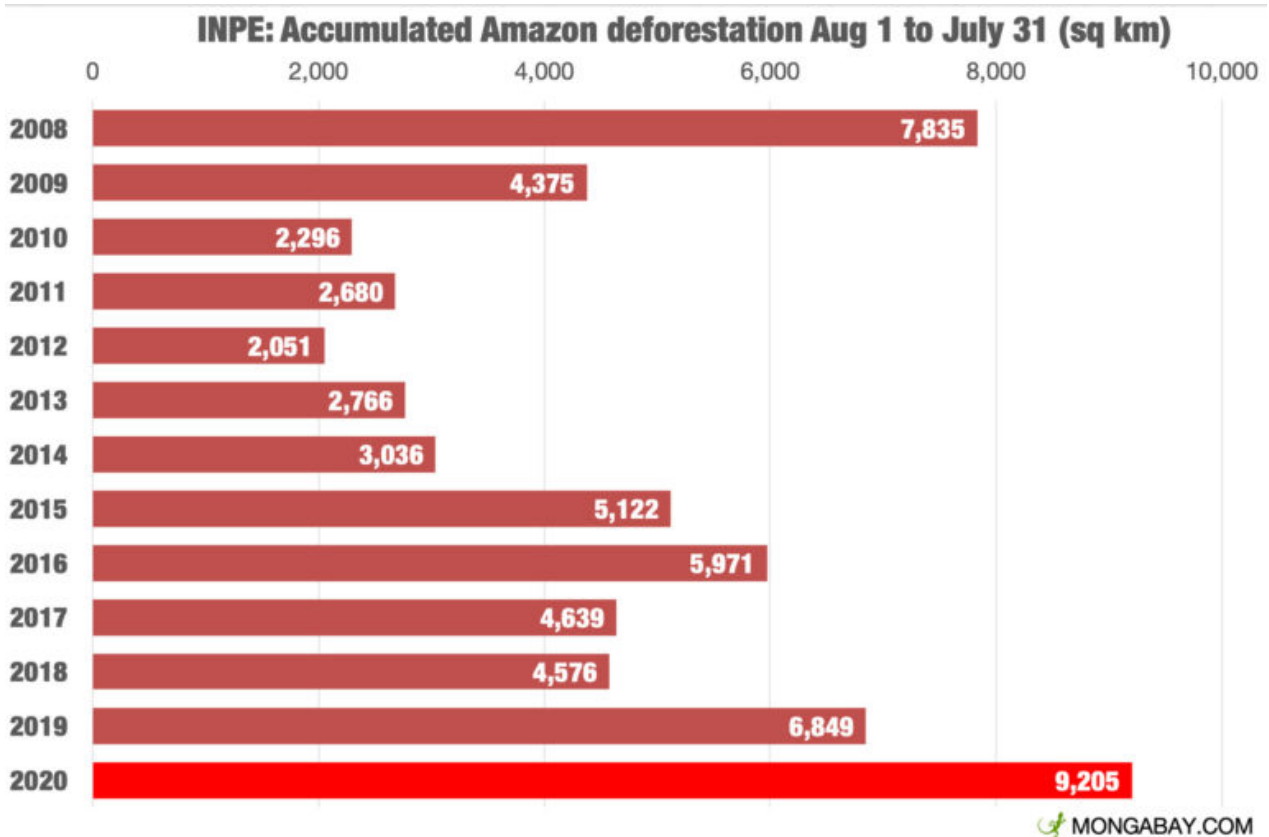
“INPE's monitoring system is the most advanced in the world. That is not why deforestation does not decrease, [rather it is] the lack of effective enforcement. Environmental criminals [are] feeling very empowered, [certain] that there will be no punishment, and since last year they have greatly increased crime in the Amazon.”

Mourão undermining INPE?

Vice President Mourão upstaged INPE's deforestation data release by announcing selected statistics the day before [via social networks](#). He used the INPE system — which he would criticize the next day on TV — to boast about the deforestation reduction seen in July. Critics say he cherrypicked the data, only looking at statistics favorable to the government, while falsely crediting the military for positive results.

“The decrease in deforestation in the Amazon biome was characterized by the beginning of the trend reversal as shown in the [July] graphic, revealing positive results from the [Army's] Green Brazil Operation 2,” says Mourão Tweet.

Critics questioned the positive influence of the Army on the July data, noting that Green Brazil Operation 2, the military maneuver under General Mourão's command, was in the field on duty during May and June 2020 which saw some of the worst Amazon tree loss ever recorded for those months according to a DETER historical series. In May 2020, INPE alerts identified 833 square kilometers (321 square miles) of deforestation; in June 2020, 1,039 square kilometers (401 square miles), and in July 2020, the aforementioned 1,654 square kilometers (638 square miles). Since the Army entered the rainforest in May of this year, deforestation has increased by 98.5%.



Follow the money

Last month, the vice president [complained](#) that the Army’s operation had not received “a penny” to do its fire suppression work. Official data, however, shows that Green Brazil 2 had already received R \$8.6 million (US \$1.5 million), of which a good portion (R \$2.7 million, or US \$500,000) was spent on repairing helicopters that belonged to the Ministry of Defense. IBAMA (Brazil’s environmental agency), on the other hand, has recently had to reduce the number of helicopters it rents to monitor Amazon deforestation and fires, from six to four aircraft, due to defunding overseen by the Ministry of the Environment.

Everton Almada Pimentel, IBAMA’s Air Operations Center chief, offered several alerts to the agency’s board over the last two months about the forest damage that the reduction in overflights would bring to Amazon monitoring. He was dismissed on July 23.

Even as Green Brazil Operation 2 suspended work by some Amazon-deployed battalions due to the alleged money shortage, the program [managed to spend](#) R \$244,000 (US \$45,000) on 633 cans of paint slated for a remote Navy base in Mato Grosso do Sul, a state well outside Legal Amazonia jurisdiction.

Meanwhile, the government continues to deflect international pressure to reverse its anti-environmental policies. In his recent media appearances, Mourão defended the administration’s protections of the Amazon and indigenous peoples, and even went on the attack:

“We are under pressure from countries that have not done their work in another period in history.”

A year ago, President Bolsonaro mocked Germany and Norway when they [suspended the](#)

[Amazon Fund](#) and other economic programs. German Chancellor “Angela Merkel, take that money and reforest Germany, Okay?” and “Isn’t [it] Norway who kills whales at the North Pole?”



The online caption reads “Green Brazil Operation — Prevfogo/IBAMA brigade members participate in joint operation to fight fires in the Amazon,” but the photo was taken in August 30, 2019. This year’s Army operation only started in May 2020. Image Vinícius Mendonça / IBAMA.

Civil society responds with emergency letter

In the face of the ongoing Amazon deforestation and fire emergency, more than 60 organizations and collectives [delivered an emergency letter last week](#) to the presidents of the House of Deputies and the Senate, to foreign investors, and Brazilian and European parliamentarians, detailing five proposals to contain the deforestation crisis.

The measures proposed include: a moratorium on deforestation in the Amazon for at least five years, with exceptions such as for traditional populations and family farming; toughened penalties for environmental crimes and deforestation, including the creation of a task force to suppress land crimes; immediate resumption of the Action Plan for Prevention and Control of Deforestation in Legal Amazonia (PPCDAm); demarcation of indigenous and quilombola lands (settlements occupied by runaway slave descendants), and the creation, regularization and protection of Conservation Units; and the restructuring of IBAMA, ICMBio (The Chico Mendes Institute) and FUNAI (Brazil’s indigenous agency), which were broken up by the current government.

Among the major signatory organizations of the emergency letter are the Articulation of Indigenous Peoples of Brazil (APIB), the Climate Observatory, the National Coordination of Articulation of Black Rural Quilombola Communities (CONAQ), the Institute of Man and the Environment of the Amazon (Imazon), SOS Amazonas, Amazon Watch, Greenpeace Brasil and the Sustainable Amazon Foundation (FAS).

The letter comes as [external pressure](#) on the Brazilian government to curb deforestation continues growing, [not only among investors](#) but among international companies, who are

being urged to review their business partnerships and supply chains. NGO campaigners such as Greenpeace UK and Global Resource Initiative are [demanding](#) that British supermarket chains Morrison and Lidl stop buying meat from Brazilian company JBS, the largest meat processing company (by sales) in the world. JBS's operations have recently and [repeatedly been connected with deforestation](#). Tesco, another major retailer in England, [asked the British government](#) to take steps to adjust its Brazilian supply chains to ensure that food sold in the country is not related to deforestation.

Salles meets with illegal miners

Image on the right: Environment Minister Ricardo Salles (left) with President Jair Bolsonaro. Image Antonio Cruz / Agência Brasil.



So far, the Bolsonaro government seems little inclined to listen to critics. It has, however, been meeting with, and initially responding favorably, to some of those responsible for the Amazon's deforestation.

Last Wednesday, Environment Minister Ricardo Salles traveled to the Munduruku Indigenous Reserve, in western Pará state, and met with miners — some of whom self-declared themselves as being indigenous — men protesting against the military's operations in their region.

A [video](#) shows one miner telling Salles:

“We indigenous people depend on the mining activity.... We are aware that it is illegal, but show us [another] way, a job...”

In [another video](#) documenting the same meeting, Salles responded:

“Brazil lives this dilemma, to recognize that indigenous people have the right to choose how they want to live, what economic activity they want to do... among them mining, following the environmental law. For this, it is important that we open that debate. Stop pretending that the indigenous people do not want to mine, that they do not want to produce crops [via industrial agribusiness] or they do not want to have activities related to the timber sector, as if this were an absolute truth. The great role of Brazilian society, which is represented by the Executive, Legislative and Judiciary branches, is to recognize that. And to stop treating the Indian as if he could not choose their own destiny.”

The day after Salles' visit, the Ministry of Defense announced the suspension of operations to combat illegal mining in that part of Pará state. According to the ministry, the operations were suspended for "reevaluation" to be conducted with a group of "representatives of the region" to be flown to the nation's capital Brasília by the Air Force for a meeting with authorities. The ministry did not reveal who those "representatives" would be and with whom they would meet.

The Federal Public Ministry of Pará (MPF-PA) criticized the Defense Ministry decision and Salles' meeting with illegal miners, classifying it as "surreal." Last Friday, the Ministry of Defense announced the restart of its operations in the area where the miners are working.

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Featured image: Incinerated forest in Juara town, Mato Grosso state, Brazil. July 9, 2020 © Christian Braga / Greenpeace

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