

End of Deforestation Tracker for Brazil's Cerrado an 'Incalculable Loss'

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The Brazilian Cerrado savanna, a [global biodiversity hotspot](#) that has already lost half of its area to crops and cattle, is at risk of no longer being monitored for deforestation as of the end of the year.

The prospect of an end to the 20-year satellite monitoring program, blamed on a funding shortage at the National Institute of Space Research (INPE), has prompted an outcry not only from the scientific community and civil society groups, but also from the soy industry, which depends on the data to prove the environmental compliance of the commodity.

Cláudio Almeida, coordinator of INPE's program for monitoring the Amazon and other biomes, confirmed the risk of the suspension of the Cerrado monitoring system. "Today, we only have resources to keep the monitoring team until the end of the year," he told Mongabay in a video call. [The Brazilian website \(\(o\)\)eco](#) was the first news outlet to report on the issue, back in June.



Companies in the soy industry rely on data from the Cerrado monitoring program run by the National Institute of Space Research (INPE) to prove that the commodity is deforestation-free. Above, the business association representing the largest soy traders, says INPE's data is indispensable for Brazilian agribusiness. Image courtesy of Victor Moriyama/Greenpeace.

Almeida said the Cerrado program is at stake because the budget from the federal government is only sufficient to cover the cost of monitoring the Amazon Rainforest. Funding for the Cerrado tracking system comes from the World Bank, but that funding agreement is over and INPE is now living on borrowed time, Almeida said.

"This resource was supposed to have ended last year, but there was some money left and we managed to extend it for one more year. But this source is now dry," he said, adding that INPE is trying to find new sources of financing inside the government and with international and national partners.

As in the Amazonia, the monitoring program for the Cerrado comprises one system that provides the annual deforestation rate (PRODES, in place since 2001), another that gives updates about forest loss [every five days \(DETER, since 2018\)](#), and one that shows the location of fires. The cost of keeping these databases running, employing the team that analyses the satellite images, and maintaining the information online [in INPE's public and free database](#) is 2.5 million reais per year (\$461,000).

This amounts to just 1.4% of the 175 million reais (\$32.2 million) that the Ministry of Defense spent at the end of 2020 to buy a new satellite from a Finnish company. Experts say the equipment is not appropriate to observe the Amazon, according to the Brazilian columnist Rubens Valente.

"There are signs that it is purposeful to leave INPE without resources," Tasso Azevedo, one of Brazil's top deforestation experts, told Mongabay by phone. "At the same time that you spend millions buying unnecessary satellite images you leave a program like Cerrado, which is relatively cheap, with no budget."

Azevedo is the coordinator of [MapBiomass](#), a platform that tracks the changes in land use in Brazil and that uses INPE's data to produce its own reports. As a last resort, he said, the MapBiomass team can step in to do INPE job. "If anyone hopes to make the Cerrado monitoring unviable, I am sorry, but it will not happen," he said. "If necessary, we can go after financiers or provide support from MapBiomass or other partners to keep its alert system working. But without the alerts, we can't stay."



Brazil's Cerrado savanna has already lost half of its area to agribusiness, and may collapse within 30 years if deforestation continues at the current rate, scientists warn. According to experts, forest loss may increase without deforestation monitoring. Image courtesy of Marizilda Cruppe/Greenpeace.

Brazil is the [world's biggest soy producer](#), with most of the crop grown in the Cerrado. A report by [Chain Reaction Research](#), which looks at commodity-driven deforestation, shows that almost 30% of deforestation in the Cerrado is linked to soy expansion. This increasingly prominent association between soy production and deforestation has put the industry under growing pressure from consumers and financial institutions.

Soy growers and traders seeking to shake off this reputation have come to rely on INPE's Cerrado monitoring services to establish their deforestation-free cred. These "are indispensable tools in the collection of relevant data for Brazilian agribusiness ... especially to ensure the traceability of those who operate with the environmental laws in force," the [Brazilian vegetable oil industries association](#) (Abiove), whose members include top soy traders like ADM, Bunge and Cargill, said in a statement sent to Mongabay.

In December last year, 160 groups (including Tesco, McDonald's, Unilever and Lidl) [signed the Cerrado Manifesto](#) demanding an end to the trade in soy grown on areas cleared after 2020. Civil society organizations, like Greenpeace and Rede Cerrado, are also in the group, which is now warning against allowing the Cerrado monitoring program to end. In [an open letter](#), they said that "stopping to monitor the deforestation of the Cerrado is an incalculable loss to the country."

INPE falls under the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovations. In a statement emailed

to Mongabay, the ministry said INPE's services "will not be interrupted in any way and will continue to be provided with efficiency and transparency" and that "it works permanently with the Ministry of Economy and the National Congress for the recomposition of its budget." However, the ministry did not say where the money to keep the program running will come from.

INPE did not respond to Mongabay's request for comment. [Now operating on the smallest budget in its history](#), the space agency is also struggling to keep its supercomputer Tupã running, according to according to the Brazilian news portal G1. At 11 years old and [suffering from frequent blackouts](#), the machine is responsible for generating weather forecasts for most of Brazil and for issuing warnings for the risk of natural disasters such as storms, droughts and cold waves.



The prospect of an end to the program monitoring Brazil's Cerrado savanna, blamed on lack of funding, has drawn an outcry from scientists, civil society groups and the soy industry. The National Institute of Space Research (INPE) says it only has enough funding to keep the program running until the end of the year. Image courtesy of Luiz Flamarion Barbosa de Oliveira/Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS).

Ceasing monitoring, more deforestation

Brazil's tropical savanna is an immense biome covering 2 million square kilometers (772,000 square miles), an area the size of Mexico that covers all or parts of 10 Brazilian states. Monitoring an area that big is not an easy task, made harder by the fact that most of its vegetation is composed of grasslands dotted by dry forest patches, experts say.

That's why INPE's database is the most-used resource for monitoring deforestation in the Cerrado — not just in scientific research, but also in commercial agreements (where Brazilian companies have to prove their products are deforestation-free), and in international programs like the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and

REDD+. “INPE’s Cerrado monitoring is a benchmark, the accuracy level is very high,” Azevedo said.

Another major role of INPE’s monitoring is to provide intelligence for both civil society and federal and local governments to implement measures to curb deforestation.

The Cerrado is considered Brazil’s headwater, the source of eight of the country’s 12 river basins (including the Amazon), and an important carbon sink, [storing the equivalent of 13.7 billion metric tons of carbon dioxide](#). But it has already lost half of its area to cattle pasture and farmland for soy, corn, sugarcane and cotton. Deforestation in the Cerrado increased by 13% from 2019 to 2020, according to INPE data, amounting to 7,340 km² (2,834 mi²) — an area five times the size of London. If deforestation continues at the current rate, [scientists warn the biome may collapse within 30 years](#).

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Featured image: A satellite monitoring program run by the National Institute of Space Research (INPE) that provides quick alerts of fires and deforestation in the Cerrado, the Brazilian savanna, may be shuttered at the end of the year due to lack of funds. Experts say the program is crucial to allow a rapid response to environmental crimes. Image courtesy of Marizilda Cruppe/Greenpeace.

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