

Future of Amazon Deforestation Data in Doubt as Research Head Sacked by Bolsonaro

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Global Research, August 07, 2019

[Mongabay](#) 5 August 2019

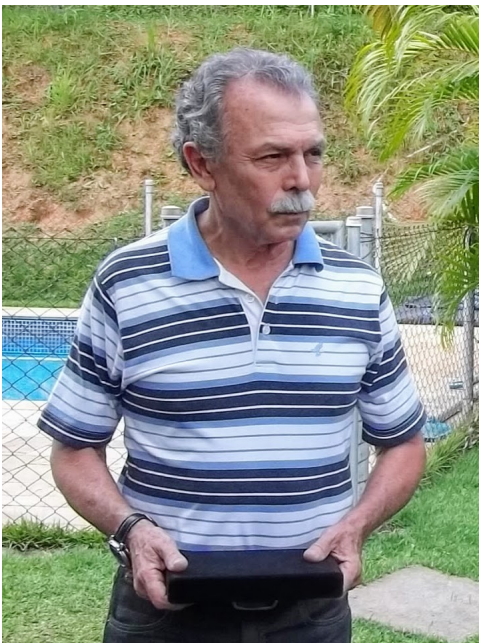
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After a month of intensifying criticism from far-right President Jair Bolsonaro concerning data revealing a spike in deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon over recent months, the Brazilian President has fired the head of the government agency in charge of tracking forest loss, raising concerns over the future of an institution recognized nationally and internationally for its cutting-edge satellite-imaging and monitoring program.

On August 2, Bolsonaro fired the head of the Brazilian National Institute of Space Research (INPE), Ricardo Magnus Osório Galvão. The [announcement](#) was made by Galvão himself after a meeting with the Minister of Science, Technology, Innovation and Communication, Marcos Pontes.

Image on the right: Physicist Ricardo Magnus Osório Galvão, former head of the Brazilian National Institute of Space Research (INPE). Image courtesy of Giro720 CC BY-SA 4.0.



“I will be fired... The way I reacted to the president[’s accusations of data inaccuracy and data manipulation] has created an embarrassment that is untenable,” Galvão told journalists in Brasília.

In July, INPE issued an [alert](#) identifying deforestation and degradation totaling some 2,072 square kilometers (800 square miles) in June for [Legal Amazonia](#) — a federal designation

that includes all or parts of nine Brazilian states — as detected by DETER, the institute's real-time detection system. INPE noted that DETER alerts should not be used as exacting measures of deforestation rates compared year-to-year; rather the figures aim to support surveillance and enforcement.

However, a [2018-2019 month-to-month comparison](#) does show a drastic uptick in deforestation. According to DETER, Brazil's Amazonian deforestation in June 2019 was [88 percent greater](#) than for the same month in 2018, while deforestation in the first half of July was [68 percent above](#) that for the entire month of July 2018.

INPE is not scheduled to post its detailed 2019 annual deforestation analysis (conducted between August and July by its PRODES satellite monitoring system) until later this year. PRODES determines [annual deforestation](#) using NASA Landsat satellite imaging. Data gathered from August 2017 to July 2018 detected an increase in deforestation of 7,536 square kilometers (2,910 square miles) in Legal Amazonia, which represented an increase of 8.5 percent compared to 2017, measured from August 2016 to July 2017, when an area of 6,947 square kilometers (2,682 square miles) was cleared.

Experts recently contacted by Mongabay endorsed INPE's [cutting-edge](#) satellite-imaging used to track forest loss and dismissed the Bolsonaro administration's accusations of [data manipulation](#). The government has offered [no significant evidence](#) to back up its charges that INPE data is inaccurate.

Beyond challenging INPE data, Bolsonaro has also criticized the way INPE works, claiming that he should have been notified before monthly deforestation statistics were released. The day before Galvão's firing, Bolsonaro accused him of working in conspiracy with "[an NGO](#)." The administration has repeatedly accused international nonprofits working in the Brazilian Amazon of having undue influence over Brazil's national environmental policies — including NGO participation in the implementation of the [Amazon Fund](#), long seen as a fairly [successful initiative](#) for curbing Amazon deforestation.

"If all this devastation you accuse us of doing, and that has already been done in the past, [were true] the Amazon would have been extinct," said Bolsonaro in a press conference on August 1 when he dismissed INPE's figures. "I am convinced that INPE's data is [a] liar.... In our feeling, this is not consistent with reality. It even looks like he's [Galvão's] on duty of an NGO," he added.

Worrying future

Galvão's removal triggered an outcry from scientists, NGOs, federal prosecutors and [INPE officials](#).

"Bolsonaro knows that his government is primarily responsible for the current scenario of destruction of the Amazon. The dismissal of INPE's head is just an act of revenge against those who show the truth," said Márcio Astrini, public policy coordinator at Greenpeace Brasil, in a statement.

"The new government has been implementing in the country an anti-environmental project, which scrap[s] the State's ability to combat deforestation and favor[s] those who commit environmental crime. And now, when it comes to facing the consequences of his decisions, he [the president]

tries to hide the truth shamefully and blame others,” Astrini added.

Bolsonaro’s cabinet did not comment on Galvão’s removal. Instead, it forwarded a statement from the Ministry of Science, Technology, Innovation and Communication that confirmed the dismissal, thanked Galvão for his work and stated that the choice of a new head will be made based on “the necessary merit [required for] the position.”

Two INPE officials who talked to Mongabay under condition of anonymity expressed “serious concerns” not only about who will next head the institution, but also about the future of INPE’s decades-long monitoring system.

“I’m very concerned about the future. I worry greatly about ensuring that the systems will keep working as they are, with transparency... I hope the government won’t stop our work,” the INPE official told Mongabay.

“Galvão’s dismissal was shocking to us. It’s scary to have a president who discredits a scientific institution that has its work recognized worldwide, simply due to his political interests... It is a complete disrespect to people who are dedicated to science, education, culture. We are being scolded. The scientists are scared,” a second INPE official said.

According to this official, the government’s attacks against INPE seem a strategy to discredit the institution in order to pave the way to set up a private system to monitor the country’s deforestation. In March, the *Folha de S.Paulo* newspaper [reported](#) that Environment Minister Ricardo Salles was preparing an alternative private system to that employed by INPE, at a cost of at least \$8.5 million, using satellite imagery to be provided by Planet, a U.S.-based company. According to the newspaper, INPE currently pays some \$150,000 annually for NASA Landsat satellite imagery that it uses to assess PRODES annual deforestation rates, while DETER alerts use images from CBERS, Sino-Brazilian satellites, which are free.

Galvão’s removal and his replacement have yet to be published in the country’s official gazette, [Diário Oficial da União](#). In an [interview](#) with Radio Eldorado on August 5, Pontes said that INPE’s new head will be announced by August 6. According to the minister, an Air Force officer and a PhD researcher with deforestation expertise top the list.

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Featured image: Deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon in Rondônia state. This 2016 satellite image shows the smoke from fires which are typically set to clear rainforest in preparation for grazing and farming. Image courtesy of Planet Labs, Inc CC BY-SA 4.0.

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