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## **Brazil: Amazon rainforest deforestation rises sharply**



Official satellite images shed a new light on the pace of deforestation

Deforestation of the Brazilian Amazon rainforest has increased by almost six times, new data suggests.

New satellite images show deforestation has increased from 103 sq km in March and April 2010 to 593 sq km (229 sq miles) in the same period of 2011, Brazil's space research institute says.

Much of the destruction has been in Mato Grosso state, the centre of soya farming in Brazil.

The news comes shortly before a vote on new forest protection rules.

Brazilian Environment Minister Izabella Teixeira says there is cause for alarm and has announced the setting up of a "crisis cabinet" in response to the news.

"Our objective is to reduce deforestation by July," the minister told a news conference.

Analysts say the new figures have taken the government by surprise.

Last December, a government report said deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon had fallen to its lowest rate for 22 years.

However, the latest data shows a 27% jump in deforestation from August 2010 to April 2011.

### **Changes in law**

The latest data comes amid a heated debate in the lower house of Congress on whether to ease an existing law on forest protection.

Observers expect the issue to be put before the Chamber of Deputies again this week.

Brazil's Forest Code, enacted in 1934 and subsequently amended in 1965, sets out how much of his land a farmer can deforest.

Regulations currently require that 80% of a landholding in the Amazon remain forest, but that

falls to 20% in other areas.

Proponents of change say the law impedes economic development and contend that Brazil must open more land for agriculture.

However, opponents fear that in their current form some of the proposed changes might give farmers a form of amnesty for deforested land.

The changes were put forward by Aldo Rebelo, leader of Brazil's Communist Party (PCdoB) and backed by a group in Congress known as the "ruralists" who want Brazil to develop its agribusiness sector.

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## Brazil passes 'retrograde' forest code



How will heavy rains affect the newly cleared land?

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They kept us in suspense for longer than an Oscars jury; but now, deputies in Brazil's lower parliamentary house [have passed a batch of reforms](#) easing the decades-old [Forest Code](#).

[As discussed here a few weeks ago](#) when the long parliamentary discussions began, the code sets down national standards aimed at ensuring the really important bits of the nation's forests are protected from development.

The main force pushing the reforms is [Aldo Rebelo](#), head of the Communist Party of Brazil (PCDoB).

His rationale is that the current code works against small-scale farmers. Regional rivals that compete with Brazil as food exporters are not expected to labour under such a handicap, supporters say.

Among the reforms, [restrictions on clearing forests along rivers and on the tops of hills will be](#)

[eased](#).

There will also be an amnesty for small-scale landowners who illegally chopped down trees prior to July 2008.

There's a dichotomy over development here that reflects a wider global dilemma.

Sure, farmers can exploit more of their land if they clear hilltops and riverbanks.



President Rousseff was elected as the country's first female leader in November 2010

But what happens if strong rains come? How are the chances increased that water will pour down the newly naked slopes and wash soil away?

If [drought comes to the Amazon](#) again, as some climate forecasts suggest it will in ever stronger form, how will the removal of riverbank protection exacerbate water shortages that will affect everyone - farmers included?

Yet Mr Rebelo and agricultural leaders argue that Brazil needs the extra farmland in order to feed its own growing population and preserve an export capability.

The reforms have to pass the Senate before they can come into force, and President Dilma Rousseff has vowed to veto anything with an amnesty in it - so the issue isn't completely resolved.

And the country's environmental leaders are in no doubt which way the decision should go.

A group of 10 former environment ministers has sent a letter to President Dilma and to members of congress urging them to reject the reforms, describing them as a "retrograde step".

(You can find the letter in Portuguese [on former minister Marina Silva's website](#) - if anyone's seen an English version, please post a link - I haven't.)

## “Start Quote

With deforestation being the country's largest source of emissions, reversing deforestation is also the only feasible way for it to meet that target”

End Quote

"Long before the world fully awoke to the importance of its forests, Brazil had taken the pioneering step of formally establishing the need for their conservation in its legislation," they write.

As the Forest Code dates back to 1965, it was something of a pioneering step, certainly for a developing country.

They say the code "has been the single most relevant institutional basis for the protection afforded to forests and all the other forms natural vegetation in Brazil, as well as protecting the biodiversity associated to them, the water resources they protect and the ecological services that they provide.

"Agricultural policy can benefit from the services that the standing forests offer and achieve new and more advanced levels of competitiveness and productivity."

They also point to a conflict between what Brazil says it wants to achieve in the climate change arena - [a cut in emissions of more than one-third by 2020](#) - and reducing protection for forests.

With deforestation being the country's largest source of emissions, reversing deforestation is also the only feasible way for it to meet that target.

Yet just last week came news that [Amazon deforestation had increased almost six-fold in just a year](#) - an astonishing rise, and a trend large enough, if it continues, to guarantee the emissions target won't be met.

And the ministers link this to the Forest Code issue.

"The mere expectation that the amendment to the Forest Law and its consequent weakening would be approved set off a disturbing wave of renewed deforestation in the Amazon region, as has been unequivocally demonstrated by data recently released by the Brazilian Space Research Institute (INPE)," they write.

## **World leader**

There is an international dimension to this.

In the run-ups to three successive UN climate conferences now, I've been told: "We won't finalise a comprehensive deal this time, but we might get something on [REDD](#)".

REDD - Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation - is envisaged as a scheme that would see rich countries funding poorer ones with significant forest resources, like Brazil, to preserve and enhance them, in the global interest of curbing climate change.

Well, REDD hasn't arrived... and probably can't, realistically, because a number of developing countries have said they won't agree measures unless they form part of a comprehensive global climate treaty - which remains as elusive as ever.

Brazil, like Indonesia, has said it would go further on reducing emissions and deforestation with Western support... which isn't forthcoming, because there's no global deal.

Those are the international politics in brief.

But there are also implications for Brazil itself.

Not only a regional leader now, it's also emerged as a global leader, certainly on the stage of nature protection.

At last year's [UN biodiversity summit](#), no country was more visible, more vocal, more engaged in all the issues under discussion than Brazil.

Criticisms of Western nations coalesce around the notion that if you want to claim environmental leadership, do it with actions rather than words.

The same criticisms will, eventually, be levelled at developing countries that do not protect what they have - especially in the face of advice that protection is in their long-term economic interest.



[Article written by Richard Black](#)

## Brazil eases rules on conserving Amazon rainforest



Brazil is one of the world's biggest agricultural producers

Brazil's Chamber of Deputies has voted to ease restrictions on the amount of land farmers must preserve as forest.

The amended law also grants some amnesties for previous deforestation.

Supporters say Brazil needs land to boost agricultural production, while environmentalists say destruction of the Amazon rainforest will increase.

Wrangling over the final bill is likely, as Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff indicated she would veto any bill that contained an amnesty.

After months of at times acrimonious debate, the Chamber of Deputies voted to overhaul the Forest Code, as the legislation is known.

"People believe they can deforest illegally because sooner or later all will be forgiven"

End Quote Philip Fearnside National Institute of Amazon Research

Under the current law, 80% of a farm in the Amazon must remain forested; in other areas, the requirement is lower, falling to 20%.

However, in practice, the legislation has not been widely enforced. It is estimated that 20% of the Amazon, the world's biggest rainforest, has been cleared, mainly as a result of logging and farming.

Under the new bill, small-scale landowners, who make up the majority of Brazil's farmers, will be exempt from having to replant deforested land.

Other changes include:

- allowing the use of previously excluded areas such as hilltops and slopes for some kinds of cultivation
- reducing the amount of land that must be left intact along the banks of rivers and streams from 30m (100ft) to 15m (50ft)
- allowing farmers to count forest alongside rivers and lakes on their land as part of their conserved area, so reducing the total amount of land they need to protect or reforest

One of the most controversial elements grants farmers with land of up to 400 hectares (990 acres) an amnesty if they illegally cut down forest before July 2008.

The legislation must now go to the Senate and then to President Rousseff.

We do not have to cut down one single tree. We can increase agricultural output in already deforested areas,"

Assuero Veronez National Agricultural Confederation

Her spokesman said she would veto any legislation that included the amnesty.

The changes were proposed by Aldo Rebelo from Brazil's Communist Party (PCdoB), who argued that the existing rules prevented small farmers from making best use of their land to lift themselves out of poverty.

Farmers' groups backed the changes, saying Brazil, as one of the biggest exporters of soy, beef and sugar, needed to boost food production in times of high commodity prices.

"None of the world's large farm producers that compete with Brazil - the United States, Europe, China, Argentina and Australia - obliges its producers to preserve any forest," the National Agriculture Confederation (CNA) said.

Amazon dream

Philip Fearnside of the National Institute of Amazon Research said the amnesty would "legalise the illegal".

"People believe they can deforest illegally because sooner or later all will be forgiven," he told the Associated Press.

But CNA Vice President Assuero Veronez said the changes would not increase deforestation.

"We do not have to cut down one single tree. We can increase agricultural output in already deforested areas," he told AP.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Brazil's then military government encouraged people to settle in the Amazon as a way of boosting economic development.

Over the past decade, authorities stepped up monitoring and the enforcement of laws, leading to a significant drop in the rate of clearance.

However, last week satellite images showed that deforestation had increased nearly sixfold in March and April compared with the same period last year.

Much of the destruction has been in Mato Grosso state, the centre of soya farming in Brazil.

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## **Brazilian Amazon activist and wife ambushed and killed**



Joao Claudio Ribeiro da Silva had long been an environmental campaigner

A prominent Brazilian conservationist and his wife have been killed in the Amazon region, police have said.

They said Joao Claudio Ribeiro da Silva and Maria do Espirito Santo were ambushed in Para state, near the city of Maraba.

The environmentalist had repeatedly warned of death threats against him by loggers and cattle ranchers.

News of the killings came hours before Brazil's Chamber of Deputies passed a law that eases

deforestation rules.

The government has ordered an immediate investigation and promised to catch those responsible for the deaths of Mr Da Silva and his wife.

The bodies of the couple were found inside the nature reserve, Praia Alta-Piranheira, where they had been working for the past 24 years.

According to family and friends, the pair had been subjected to numerous threats in the past two years for their environmental activism.

They made a living with eco-friendly cultivation of nuts, fruit and rubber.

Environmental amnesty

News of the deaths came just hours before Brazil's Chamber of Deputies voted on changes to the existing Forest Code.

The legislation, first enacted in 1934 and subsequently amended in 1965, sets out how many trees farmers can cut down.

Regulations currently require that 80% of a landholding in the Amazon remain forest, 20% in other areas.

The new bill, which now needs approval from the Senate and President Dilma Rousseff, reduces the amount of land farmers must keep as forest.

Other changes include some amnesties for those who have illegally cleared land in the past.

Proponents of change argued that the law impeded economic development and said that Brazil had to open more land for agriculture.

Opponents described the legislation as a "disaster".

"It heightens the risk of deforestation, water depletion and erosion," Paulo Gustavo Prado from Conservation International-Brazil told Reuters.