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Brazilian Senate eases Amazon protection rules



Brazil is one of the world's biggest food producers

The Brazilian Senate has approved controversial legislation that reforms rules on the amount of land farmers must preserve as forest.

The bill, which now returns to the lower house, also eases fines for some previous illegal clearance if farmers commit to a reforestation programme.

Supporters say Brazil needs land for food production, but environmentalists warn of increased Amazon destruction.

Latest figures show tree clearance at its lowest since 1988, officials say.

After several hours of debate, Brazilian senators voted by 59 to seven to approve the legislation.

It now goes back to the Chamber of Deputies, which in May voted to overhaul the Forest Code.

Further amendments are expected before going to President Dilma Rousseff to sign into law.

The bill poses a political dilemma for President Rousseff, correspondents say, as she aims to both support economic development but also uphold environmental pledges made during her election campaign.

Environmental fears

Brazil is a major food producer and the farmers' lobby argues environmental protection unnecessarily harms their sector.

"This is the first time we're ending the monopoly, that we're ending the environmental dictatorship where half a dozen [non-governmental organisations] controlled the environment ministry," said Sen Katia Abreu, president of Brazil's National Agriculture and Livestock Association (CNA).

In a statement, the CNA said that new legislation would allow Brazil to "respond to the world's growing demand for food, as it continues to be a leading example in the preservation of its forests and biodiversity".



Environmental campaigners say the new code will spell disaster

But Greenpeace Amazon spokesman Marcio Astrini told the Associated Press news agency that the new code would reduce the area required for conservation, so allowing new deforestation.

"It's based on the concept that the forest gets in the way, on the argument that developed countries cut their forests, so we need to do the same. That thinking is centuries old now," he said.

Under the Forest Code, which dates back to 1965, landowners must conserve a percentage of their terrain forested, ranging from 20% in some regions to 80% in the Amazon.

Under the Senate bill:

- farmers can 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
- agriculture allowed closer to environmentally fragile areas
- fines suspended for land cleared illegally before 2008 if farmers sign up to replant trees over the next 20 years.

On Monday, the National Institute for Space Research (Inpe) said there had been an 11% drop in the amount of rainforest cleared between August 2010 and July 2011 compared with the previous year.

The government attributed the fall to its tougher stance on illegal logging.

But in at least two states, Rondonia and Mato Grosso, rainforest clearance rose considerably.

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Brazil Amazon deforestation 'at lowest level in years'



Rainforest is cleared for timber or to make way for farming

Brazil says the rate of deforestation in its Amazon region has fallen to the lowest level for 23 years.

The National Institute for Space Research said 6,238 square km (2,400 square miles) of rainforest disappeared between August 2010 and July 2011, a drop of 11% from the previous year.

The government says the fall is due to its tougher stance on illegal logging.

But in at least two states, Rondonia and Matto Grosso, rainforest clearance rose considerably in the past year.

The research institute has used satellite technology to monitor the rainforest since 1988.

Destruction peaked in recent years at 27,700 square km (10,700 square miles) in 2003-4.

The main causes of illegal clearing of the rainforest are cattle farming and agricultural crop production, as well as logging for timber.

Brazil's congress is due to debate a reform of land laws in the next few days which would reduce the conservation area.

The farming lobby says reform is needed as current regulations are a burden on production. But environmentalists say it would be a setback for efforts to preserve the rainforest.

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Brazil's Amazon settlers 'scratching out a living'

By Robin Lustig The World Tonight, Mato Grosso



The rate of deforestation in the Amazon has suddenly increased this year

- [Huge rise in Brazil deforestation](#)

The charred tree stumps in the Amazon rain forest tell their own story.

Even though the trees here are probably the best-protected anywhere on earth - at least in theory - someone is still cutting them down and burning them.

For several years now, the Brazilian government has insisted that the rate of deforestation in the Amazon has declined sharply.

But earlier this year, it suddenly jumped again, to a rate [five times higher than last year](#).

These trees play a vital part in the management of global weather patterns.

They absorb carbon dioxide, which otherwise would contribute to climate change. That is why Brazil is under pressure to protect the forest.

'Villains'

Waldemar Vieira Neves understands that but he says there are other considerations as well.

He is what is known in Brazil as an Amazon settler and, the way many people see it, it is the settlers who are the biggest threat to the survival of the rain forest, burning down trees to clear more land for their cattle.



Waldemar Vieira Neves says he has to work

hard to survive

Waldemar is a small, wiry man, 64 years old, with sharp features and a deep sense of grievance.

"I know everyone thinks we're villains," he says. "But what people don't understand is how hard we have to work to scratch out a living."

We were talking in a small clearing in the forest.

He has lived there for 12 years, ever since the government offered him the opportunity to start a new life as an Amazon settler.

He used to live in the far north-east of Brazil, with no land and not much hope.

So, like tens of thousands of other settlers, he took the opportunity and did what the government wanted him to do - made a new home for himself in the forest and cleared the trees.

Law breakers

Brazil's laws on deforestation are extremely strict.

No-one who farms in the rainforest is supposed to be allowed to cultivate more than 20% of the land he owns. The rest has to be left untouched, as a way of preserving the forest and protecting the environment.

But sometimes, says Waldemar, people feel they have to break the law. What else can you do if there is no other way to survive?

"People say we're destroying the forest," he says. "We're not. We're protecting it, we depend on it. But we have to find a way so that both we and the forest can survive."

The settlers complain that they need more help in finding ways to make a living while keeping on the right side of the law.

They say they need education, not punishment, if the government wants them to farm the land but protect the trees at the same time.

Within the next few months, Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff, who came to office six months ago, [will have to decide whether to veto proposals to relax the Forest Code](#), which restricts how much land in the Amazon region can legally be cultivated.

Farmers and big international agricultural business groups say they need to be able to farm

more land to provide the food that the world demands.

Tough decisions

They want an amnesty for farmers who may have cleared forest land illegally in the past, proposing that - instead of being fined - farmers who have broken the law should be required to buy more forest, equivalent to what they have cut down, in return for an undertaking to leave it untouched.



Amazon settlers say the government encouraged them to move there and clear forests. Brazil now exports more beef than any other country in the world, and agriculture makes up a quarter of the country's entire economic output.

It is the world's second biggest producer of soya, which is an essential ingredient in animal feed, and pressure from the huge soya producers south of the Amazon who are desperate to buy more land is pushing smaller farmers like Waldemar Vieira Neves deeper into the forest.

On the one hand, President Rousseff does not want to risk jeopardising Brazil's rapid economic growth by damaging its powerful agri-business interests.

On the other, she is under intense pressure from environmentalists not to approve any law that could encourage more deforestation in the Amazon.

Before her election last year, she pledged to veto any plan that would weaken the Forest Code and, within the coming months, she is going to have to decide whether to honour that pledge.

Robin Lustig's full report was broadcast on [The World Tonight](#) on Monday 4 July at 2200 BST on BBC Radio 4. It will also be available on the [BBC iPlayer](#).

Brazil passes 'retrograde' forest code



How will heavy rains affect the newly cleared land?

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.)

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

"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.