

Deforestation of Brazilian Amazon surges to record high

Environmentalists fear 2019 will be one of worst years for deforestation in recent memory

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Inspectors walk through an area affected by illegal mining in Pará state in Brazil's Amazon basin. The rainforest lost 739sq km during the 31 days of May Photograph: Vinicius Mendonca/AP

Deforestation of the Brazilian Amazon surged last month to the highest May level since the current monitoring method began, prompting concerns that president **Jair Bolsonaro** is giving a free pass to illegal logging, farming and mining.

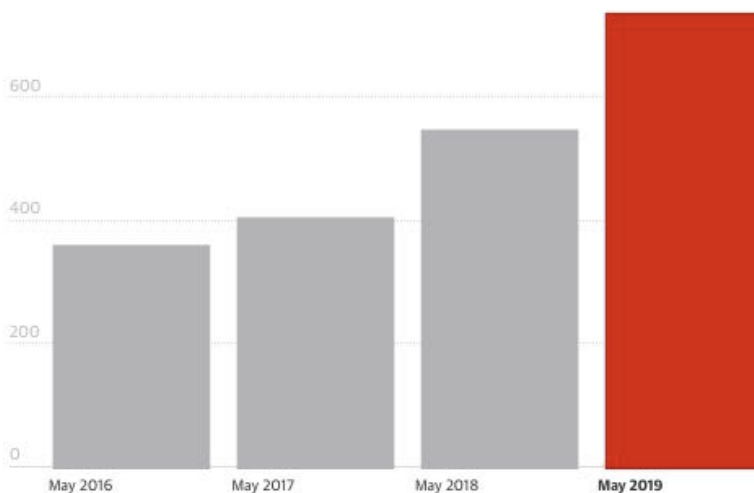
The world's greatest rainforest – which is a vital provider of oxygen and carbon sequestration – lost 739sq km during the 31 days, equivalent to two football pitches every minute, **according to data** from the government's satellite monitoring agency.

Although a single month is too short to confirm long-term trends, May is considered an important guide because it marks the start of the dry season, which is when most burning and other forms of forest clearance are carried out.

Unless the government sends a clear signal it will not tolerate a further acceleration, environmentalists fear there will be an increase in the coming months that could make 2019 one of the worst years for deforestation in recent memory.

“The government can't deny these numbers from their own agency. The question now is what they'll do about it,” said Carlos Souza, of the independent monitoring group **Imazon**. “By the end of July, we'll have a clear idea of the impact of recent moves to dismantle environmental policies.”

The Brazilian Amazon rainforest lost 739 sq km last month - a record for May since current satellite monitoring began



Guardian graphic | Source: INES

Since the far-right Bolsonaro came to power in January, he has weakened the environment ministry, loosened controls on

economic exploitation of the Amazon, halted demarcation of indigenous land and encouraged mining and farming interests to expand in the region.

Since the president criticised the government's main monitoring agency as a "fines industry", it has issued a fewer penalties than at any time in 11 years and the number of inspection operations is down 70% from last year.

His environment minister, Ricardo Salles, who was **convicted for environmental fraud** and had never visited the Amazon region before this year, has further undermined morale by failing to appoint regional chiefs and by firing veteran inspectors. Earlier this week, **Folha reported** he was moving to privatise the satellite monitoring of the forest.

He has also vexed donors Norway and Germany by **proposing to weaken the voice of civil society** in deciding how the \$1.3bn Amazon Fund is spent.



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In congress, the dominant agricultural lobby is pushing for further relaxations, including the breakup of protected areas.

Bolsonaro's oldest son, Flavio, who is a senator, recently proposed a reform of the forest code that would remove the obligation of farmers in the Amazon to maintain forest cover on 50-80% of their property. This measure would **reportedly open up** an area larger than Iran for extractive industries. A growing wave of speculative land claims are being registered inside reserves, which is putting more pressure on the boundaries.

"The spike in deforestation is depressing, but hardly surprising: you have a government in Brazil who is dismantling nearly every environmental policy put in place since 1992 and who is harassing federal environmental agents, thus empowering environmental criminals," said Carlos Rittl, the executive secretary of the **Climate Observatory**, an NGO formed by a coalition of environmental groups. "However, we must wait and see how it will behave in June."

Other factors might have contributed to the increase. The first few months of this year were cloudy and rainy, which made satellite monitoring more difficult, so some areas might have been missed by earlier sweeps. The bad weather could also have prompted loggers and farmers to delay land clearance until May. The economy, which is often a driver of deforestation during period of high beef and soy prices, has also been in the doldrums, though Bolsonaro has indicated that agribusiness can help to lift **Brazil** towards positive growth.

In this regard, he is echoing and amplifying the message of his predecessors as president, Dilma Rousseff and Michel Temer, both of whom presided over periods of accelerated forest clearance as they became reliant on the rural lobby and commodity exports to China and Europe.

Another factor is an expansion of infrastructure projects, including roads and hydroelectric plants. The Brazilian state that suffered the greatest deforestation last month was Pará, which is home to the BR163 road through the Amazon and the Belo Monte dam.