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Brazil fires top parks official in latest environmental reshuffle

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BRASILIA (Reuters) - The head of Brazil's national parks service has been removed, according to the official government gazette on Friday, in the latest management change under the right-wing government, which has sought to weaken environmental protections.



A tract of the Amazon jungle is seen burning near Ouro Preto, Rondonia State, Brazil August 20, 2020. REUTERS/Ueslei Marcelino

The notice in the gazette confirmed a Reuters report late on Thursday that cited two sources familiar with the matter.

Homero Cerqueira was dismissed from the top job at ICMBio, which oversees Brazil's parks and other protected nature reserves, by Environmental Minister Ricardo Salles, one of the sources said.

The dismissal follows a visit by Salles to the Brazilian Pantanal, the world's largest wetland, to observe efforts to fight fires that are on pace to hit a monthly record in August.

A second source said that Salles, following consultations with farmers in the Pantanal, had criticized ICMBio's response to the fires before Cerqueira's exit. The sources spoke on condition of anonymity because the decision had not been announced.

Salles said in a statement that the ministry thanked Cerqueira for his service modernizing ICMBio, but did not give any reason for the dismissal. A spokesman for the Environmental Ministry, which controls ICMBio, declined to immediately comment.

ICMBio oversees the roughly 19% of Brazil's territory that falls under various types of

heightened federal protections. Nearly 29% of the Amazon rainforest, seen by scientists as a vital curb on climate change because of the vast amount of carbon dioxide it absorbs, is under ICMBio's protection.

Under President Jair Bolsonaro - who has appointed climate skeptics to high-level government positions - climate change officials and environmental enforcement chiefs have been fired in the past year.

A video of a minister's meeting with Bolsonaro released in May under a court order in an unrelated investigation showed Salles calling for environmental deregulation while the public is distracted by the COVID-19 crisis.

Salles said at the time that he wants to cut red tape, saying it holds back economic development.

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