

Environmental fines are 'ideological', says Brazil's new environment minister

Appointed by president-elect Bolsonaro, Ricardo Salles also says global warming is 'secondary'

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Ricardo Salles questioned figures showing the highest deforestation in a decade and called the global warming debate 'innocuous'. Photograph: HO/AFP/Getty Images

Brazil's new environment minister believes that global warming is "secondary", that many environmental fines are "ideological" and has been accused of altering plans for an environmentally protected area in order to favour businesses.

Ricardo Salles, the former environment secretary for São Paulo state, was recommended for his new role by business and agribusiness groups and announced as minister in a tweet on Sunday by the far-right president-elect, Jair Bolsonaro.

Environmentalists said the appointment was a serious setback to protection at a time when deforestation and **illegal mining** in the Amazon were on the rise.

Bolsonaro has said protected Amazon areas hold up development, has advocated commercial farming and mining on indigenous reserves and attacked the "fines industry" of Brazil's environmental agencies.

Marcio Astrini, the public policy director at Greenpeace **Brazil**, said Salles was "not chosen for his history of environmental protection. He was chosen because he accepts Bolsonaro's agenda." Astrini said neutering environmental agencies and reducing protected areas could make deforestation "explode".

"This is not an environmental agenda. It is an agenda of threats to the environment," he said.

Salles told the Folha de São Paulo newspaper on Sunday that Brazil suffered from a "proliferation" of environmental fines that had an "ideological character". He questioned figures showing the **highest deforestation in a decade** and called the **global warming debate** "innocuous".

"The discussion over whether there is or isn't global warming is secondary," he said. Asked if the new government, which takes office on 1 January, could exit the Paris climate deal – a threat made by Bolsonaro during campaigning,

on which he later backed down – Salles said it would “look item by item at the most sensitive points ... remembering that national sovereignty over territory is not negotiable”.

A lawyer who specialised in company administration, Salles was environment secretary of São Paulo state under the conservative governor Geraldo Alckmin. In 2017, São Paulo state prosecutors **sued Salles** for “administrative improbity”.

Prosecutors alleged in court documents that Salles took part in altering maps delineating an environmentally protected area in São Paulo state “with the clear intention of benefiting economic sectors, notably mining”.

Salles denied the accusations in his Folha interview and said he had highlighted “crass mistakes” in the “ideological work” that had been done in the environmental protection area concerned, adding that the state environment council had approved the plan. The case continues.

He stood unsuccessfully for Congress in October’s elections for the business-friendly New party, and **has argued that Brazilian agribusiness is “under threat”** and criticised the Landless Rural Workers Movement.

Salles was recommended for his new role by the Brazilian Rural Society – an agribusiness group, which aligns him with the new agriculture minister, Tereza Cristina, formerly president of the powerful agribusiness lobby in Congress.

The Climate Observatory (Observatório do Clima), a non-profit environmental network, said his appointment effectively fulfilled another Bolsonaro campaign promise to subordinate the ministry of environment to the ministry of agriculture. It warned of potential boycotts to Brazilian agricultural products if the country dismantled its environmental protection.

“Modern agribusiness will pay the price when markets close to our commodities,” it said.