



The ruins of an illegal gold mining site in a Yanomami reserve in the northern Amazon. Deforestation in Brazil is rising even in legally protected areas and Indigenous lands where criminals rarely ventured in the past. GUARDIAN/EYEVINE/REDUX

Illegal deforestation in Brazil soars amid climate of impunity

By **Herton Escobar** Aug. 5, 2020 , 11:20 AM

Deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon has risen sharply in the past year—again. Estimates set to be released this week by Brazil’s National Institute for Space Research (INPE) will show clearings have increased by at least 28% during the current monitoring year, which runs from August through July, compared with the previous year.

It is the second steep hike under Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, who has made good on his campaign promise to loosen environmental law enforcement and step up development in the Amazon.

The numbers come from Brazil’s Real-time Deforestation Detection System (DETER), which uses low-resolution satellite images to quickly identify new forest clearings and alert authorities to possible illegal deforestation. More than 8700

square kilometers (km²) of primary forest cover has already disappeared from the images since August 2019, according to **data updated through 23 July**, compared with 6800 km² in the previous 12 months. (Data for the final week will be released on 7 August; because July is prime time for deforestation in most of the Amazon, the number is likely to go up some more.)

Although the system doesn't identify the causes of deforestation, other studies show the vast majority is illegal, carried out by ranchers, loggers, miners, and land grabbers who seek to profit from the occupation and exploitation of public forest lands.

Deforestation has been slowly rising in Brazil since 2013, but Bolsonaro's actions and words have given it a big boost. "Deforestation is a high-risk enterprise, profoundly connected to political decisions and rhetoric that influence the perception of that risk," says **Raoni Rajão**, an environmental policy researcher at the Federal University of Minas Gerais, Belo Horizonte. Developers now feel a sense of impunity, Rajão says. Clearings are even on the rise within legally protected areas and Indigenous lands, where criminals rarely ventured in the past. Meanwhile, law enforcement operations are down, and field agents who combat illegal miners have been publicly reprimanded and subjected to internal investigations by their own agencies.

DETER is an alert system and is not optimized for precise area measurements, but scientists say it is still a good thermometer of deforestation. Last year, however, Bolsonaro **called similarly worrisome estimates from DETER "a lie"** and **fired INPE's director**, Ricardo Galvão. Numbers released later by the Amazon Deforestation Satellite Monitoring Project, a higher resolution system also operated by INPE that produces Brazil's official deforestation data, were even worse. They showed that 10,100 km² of forest were cleared between August 2018 and July 2019—**a 34% increase from the previous year**.

The resurgence of deforestation—by far the largest source of greenhouse gas emissions from Brazil—is “a disaster for Brazil’s international reputation,” says Luiz Aragão, head of INPE’s Remote Sensing Division. The country is under increasing pressure from foreign governments and investors to protect the forest, along with its carbon and biodiversity, or face diplomatic and economic consequences. “We need clear messages and decisive actions against these illegal activities,” Aragão says. “Brazil needs to re-establish its environmental order if we have ambitions to grow economically and participate as a leader in the discussion of global issues.”

Bolsonaro has taken some steps to protect the forest. Earlier this year he re-created the Amazon Council—composed largely of military officers—to oversee sustainable development of the region, and in May he authorized the deployment of the armed forces to combat environmental crimes there. Another decree on 15 July made the use of fire in the Amazon illegal for the next 4 months.

The latter measure may indeed help reduce deforestation, if properly enforced. After trees are felled, developers must burn the downed vegetation to clear the land for pastures or cropland, Aragão says. He also sees hope in the fact that the amount of forest felled in the first 3 weeks of July was lower than in July 2019, although still much higher than in the same month of previous years. “That may be a positive sign that the rate of deforestation is slowing down a bit,” he says. “But we have to wait and see.”

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