

Deforestation soars in Colombia after Farc rebels' demobilization

Area of deforestation climbed 44% in 2016 compared with year before, as criminal groups have swooped in promote illegal logging and mining



A man holding a Colombian flag walks in Meta, Colombia. 'The Farc would limit logging to two hectares a year in the municipality,' says the mayor of a town in the province. Photograph: Mauricio Duenas Castaneda/EPA

[View more sharing options](#)

Shares

39

Sibylla Brodzinsky in Bogotá

Tuesday 11 July 2017 10.00 BST

Last modified on Tuesday 11 July 2017 10.01 BST

Colombia has seen an alarming surge in deforestation

after the leftwing rebels relinquished control over vast areas of the country as a part of a historic peace deal.

The area of deforestation jumped 44% in 2016 to 178,597 hectares (690 square miles) compared with the year before, according to official figures released this month – and most of the destruction was in remote rainforest areas once controlled by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, Farc.

The rebel army was a violent illegal armed group, but for decades, the guerrillas enforced strict limits on logging by civilians – in part to protect their cover from air raids by government warplanes.



Colombia's armed groups sow seeds of new conflict as war with Farc ends

[Read more](#)

But last year, as the Farc began to move towards demobilization, [criminal groups moved in, taking](#)

advantage of the vacuum left behind to promote illegal logging and mining and cattle ranching. Civilians who had been ordered by the Farc to maintain 20% of their land with forest cover began expanding their farms.

“The Farc would limit logging to two hectares a year in the municipality,” said Jaime Pacheco, mayor of the town of Uribe, in eastern Meta province. “In one week [last year], 100 hectares were cleared and there is little we can do about it.”

Over their 53-year existence, the Farc were far from environmental angels. While in some areas the guerrilla presence helped maintain the forests, in others, the rebels promoted clear-cuts to make way for the planting of coca, the raw material used in cocaine, or illegal gold mining, both a source of income for the group.

Bombings of oil pipelines dumped million gallons of oil in waterways and jungles. Between 1991 and 2013, 58% of the deforestation in [Colombia](#) was seen in conflict areas, according to a 2016 report by Colombia’s planning ministry.

“They weren’t environmentalists but they did regulate activity, and – since they had the guns – people complied,” says Susana Mullohand, an environmental activist who conducted a diagnostic study of the environmental risks of the rebel retreat.

“We told the government that it would need to establish control in these areas quickly, but it hasn’t,” she said. “It’s like the wild west now, a land rush.”

Colombia, which has the world’s eighth-largest forest cover, committed under the Paris Climate accords to

reaching zero net deforestation by 2020 and halting the loss of all natural forest by 2030.

Norway is donating about \$3.5m over two years to a pilot project that hopes to stem deforestation by offering paid jobs to former Farc fighters and communities to safeguard forests by tracking and reporting illegal logging, adopting sustainable farming methods and undertaking eco-tourism projects.

“We hope this project can be the way for more activities whereby peace comes with green dividends,” said Vidar Helgesen, Norway’s environment minister, on a recent visit to Colombia.

That is the kind of incentive farmers in the town of Uribe, once a Farc stronghold, say they need to keep the forest on their land intact. “We are willing to leave the forests if we get some sort of subsidy to do it,” one farmer, Noel Segura, said in a phone interview.

Wendy Arenas, of the government’s post-conflict department, said the new deforestation figures were an alert. “We knew it could happen,” she told el Espectador newspaper. “It is no secret that the zones left behind by the Farc are territories where other actors are taking over and profiting from logging.”