

Why Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro has environmentalists worried for the Amazon

By Mark Tutton, CNN

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Who is Brazil's new president-elect? 01:57

(CNN)The Amazon rainforest is an ecological wonder. Its waterways and canopy provide a rich ecosystem for [a 10th of all the world's species](#) and help regulate the temperature of the entire planet. But the election of far-right politician Jair Bolsonaro as Brazil's new president has many worried about the forest's future.

Most of the Amazon forest is in Brazil and [20% of it](#) has been lost to deforestation since the 1970s, an area bigger than France. When trees are cut down, the carbon stored inside them is released into the atmosphere. The remaining forest also absorbs less carbon dioxide. That means the health of the Amazon has a direct effect on global warming.

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Existing threats

The forest is being cut down to make way for activities like cattle ranching, soy bean farming, mining, hydropower dams and new highways.

Deforestation fell dramatically [between 2004 and 2012](#), but in recent years it has been increasing, and the powerful agricultural lobby in the Brazilian congress is pushing for more development of the forest. It endorsed Bolsonaro during his election campaign.



A fire burns trees next to grazing land in the Amazon basin on November 22, in Ze Doca, Brazil, 2014. Fires are often set to clear forest for grazing land.

Indigenous lands

Brazil's Ministry of Agriculture is heavily influenced by the agricultural lobby. Soon after taking office this week, Bolsonaro signed an executive order giving the ministry responsibility for certifying indigenous lands as protected territories.

About 13% of Brazil is legally designated as indigenous land, mostly in the Amazon. That land is reserved for the country's 900,000 indigenous people (less than 0.5% of the population). Indigenous groups said the president's order would lead to "an increase in deforestation and violence against indigenous people."



Jair Bolsonaro on January 1, 2019.

Bolsonaro, who has earned the moniker "[Trump of the tropics](#)," defended the decision on Twitter, writing that: "Less than a million people live in these places, isolated from true Brazil, exploited and manipulated by NGOs. Together we will integrate these citizens."

Tica Minami, campaign coordinator for Greenpeace Brazil Amazon, said: "We know indigenous land and protected areas are a very effective way to stop deforestation and protect the forest, and are fundamental for the survival and culture of indigenous people."

To remove any designated indigenous land would require the support of Brazil's congress, which is already considering a series of bills aimed at opening indigenous land to activities such as mining.

Weakening protection?

Bolsonaro has changed his mind on a campaign pledge to combine the environment and agriculture ministries -- to the relief of environmentalists.

But he named Tereza Cristina as his new minister of agriculture. She led the agricultural lobby in congress and has said Brazil [must end its "industry of fines"](#) for environmental infractions -- echoing Bolsonaro's criticism of the Ministry of the Environment during his campaign.



Tereza Cristina, Brazil's new minister of agriculture, on November 8, 2018.

"Unfounded accusations are coming from all sides, including international organizations which have amicably established themselves in our country," Cristina said during an event at the Ministry of Agriculture this week.

"Issues relating to climate, sustainability and biodiversity are relevant but this discussion must be an honest one and must begin with one basic premise: Brazil is a country with an extremely advanced environmental legislation that was able to preserve its native forests and riparian woods. Our country is a model to follow, never a transgressor to be blamed."

In December, Bolsonaro named Ricardo Salles as his environment minister. Days later, a judge in a civil action found Salles guilty of "administrative impropriety" while he was environment secretary for Sao Paulo state, in 2016. The judge found Salles guilty of altering maps in an environmental protection plan to benefit mining companies.

The judge ordered Salles to pay a substantial fine and suspended his right to stand for office for three years. Salles said he would appeal the ruling and was sworn in as environment minister this week.



Ricardo Salles, Brazil's new environment minister, on December 10, 2018.

"We expect Bolsonaro will be against environmental protection and the environment minister he picked will follow his agenda," said Beto Veríssimo, co-founder of Imazon, an environmental NGO based in the Brazilian Amazon. "Agribusiness people think he (Salles) will help reduce obstacles for environmental licensing and reduce protection."

Climate change

Last November, Brazil's foreign ministry withdrew its offer to host the COP 25 UN climate conference -- the meeting tasked with moving forward the Paris Agreement, where countries committed to limiting global warming -- citing "fiscal and budgetary restrictions" as the main reason, Agencia Brasil reported.

Brazil's Foreign Minister, Ernesto Araújo, has called efforts to combat climate change a conspiratorial power grab by the global left in his blog, titled "Against Globalism."

"It's a bad decision to not host the climate meeting (COP 25)," said Veríssimo, adding that it shows the government wants to avoid international scrutiny on climate change.

[Read: COP24 climate talks end in agreement -- barely](#)

Environmental groups

During the election campaign, Bolsonaro said he wanted to "[end all activism in Brazil](#)."

That has concerned human rights groups in Brazil and beyond, and environmental groups fear their work could be made much more difficult under Bolsonaro.



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"If we take his proposals as candidate, it doesn't look good for environmental and indigenous rights or for campaigning organizations," said Minami. "We're also concerned about the shrinking democratic space in Brazil."

If environmentalists find it harder to operate, that could mean less oversight of development in the Amazon. And given the forest's importance to fighting global warming, that could have an impact far beyond the country's borders.

A University of Leeds study estimated that since 1980, the Amazon has absorbed roughly 430 million tonnes of carbon per year -- more than four times the UK's annual carbon emissions.

"He bears responsibility for not just the Brazilian economy but for the climate of the whole planet," said Minami. "It's a responsibility that Brazilians and global citizens must demand from him."