

Bolsonaro's Amazon-sized spat with Germany and Norway threatens Europe-South America trade deal



An illegally cleared area in the Amazon forest, photographed in 2014 during a flight by Greenpeace activists. (Raphael Alves/AFP/Getty Images)

By [Marina Lopes](#)

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SAO PAULO, Brazil — First, Brazil announced it would take foreign aid away from projects to protect the Amazon rainforest and give it instead to cattle and soybean farmers.

Next, Germany and Norway froze tens of millions of dollars in planned assistance.

Then, Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro told German Chancellor Angela Merkel to mind her own country and pointed out that Norway hunts whales.

Tensions are rising between Brazil and its European donors over the preservation of the world's largest tropical rainforest — and the spat is threatening to undermine a long-sought free-trade deal between Europe and South America.

The deal between the European Union and the South American trading bloc Mercosur requires Brazil to abide by the Paris climate accord. The climate pact aims to end illegal deforestation in the Amazon by 2030.

But Bolsonaro, who favors development in the Amazon to lift Brazil up from four years of economic stagnation, has threatened to pull out of the Paris agreement. He refused to meet with France's foreign minister last month to discuss the deal, opting instead to get a haircut. Which he live-streamed.

Now deforestation is surging, and Europeans are calling for action.

“Europe must not stand idly by, as a prejudiced and hate-driven skeptic of science sacrifices vast jungle areas for cattle farmers and soybean crops,” Germany's [Der Spiegel](#) wrote on Monday. The newspaper is one of at least two in Germany to call for sanctions.

Brazil's environmental ministry said last week that it would shut down the steering committee that selects projects to fight deforestation and redirect the money to compensate farmers whose land had been expropriated. Germany froze \$39 million in aid; Norway cut \$33 million.

Illegal deforestation has been increasing for years. Cattle ranchers burn the rainforest to clear land for cows. Forest fires have spiked this year, and the effects are visible: Smoke from the fires enveloped Sao Paulo on Monday in an eerie midday darkness.

Bolsonaro, who was elected last year with the support of Brazil's powerful agricultural lobby, has said he is reclaiming the Amazon "for Brazilians." He has promised to relax the environmental permitting process for building dams and has railed against fines issued by the country's environmental regulation agency.

Yet scientists worry the deforestation could be [reaching a point of no return](#). If an additional 3 to 8 percent of the Amazon is destroyed, they estimate, the process will begin to feed on itself, and the forest will cease to grow back.

Bolsonaro was already under fire after data from Brazil's National Institute for Space Research this month revealed deforestation spiked 88 percent in June compared with the same period last year. Bolsonaro claimed the data was false and fired the head of the agency.

"We cannot accept sensationalism or the disclosure of inaccurate numbers that cause great damage to Brazil's image," Bolsonaro said.

Last week, Bolsonaro accused Germany of trying to "buy" the Amazon.

"I would like to give a message to the beloved Angela Merkel," Bolsonaro told Brazilian media. "Take your dough and reforest Germany, okay? It's much more needed there than here."

He also criticized Norway for its oil and whale-hunting industries. But he tweeted a bloody video of a "grind," a [hunting technique characteristic of Denmark's Faroe Islands, not Norway](#).

Mauricio Santoro, a professor of international relations at Rio de Janeiro's state university, said Brazil's "climate change denial" is "isolating the country" — and can have economic consequences.

"This is Brazil's largest partnership program, and Brazil doesn't really have an alternative for these resources," he said.

Now local leaders are scrambling to strike a deal with the European countries that bypasses Brasilia.

Governors of the nine Amazon states said they "regretted that the position of the Brazilian government had led to a suspension of resources," and they hoped to preside directly over the funds.

Meanwhile, Bolsonaro's critics at home celebrated the decision to cut aid.

"These countries are right, it is the government that is wrong," former Brazilian environmental minister Marina Silva [told the magazine Epoca](#). "The minute the government proposed using the funds to regulate illegally occupied land, not only did they defy the objective of the fund, but they financed actions that would contribute to the destruction of the rainforest."