



Cattle on a farm in Brazil's Pará state. Cattle ranching is the leading cause of deforestation across Brazil. Photograph: Jonne Roriz/Bloomberg/Getty Images

The Bruno and Dom project **Amazon rainforest**

More than 800m Amazon trees felled in six years to meet beef demand

Investigation involving Guardian shows systematic and vast forest loss linked to cattle farming in Brazil

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More than 800m trees have been cut down in the **Amazon rainforest** in just six years to feed the world's appetite for Brazilian beef, according to a new investigation, despite dire warnings about the forest's importance in fighting the climate crisis.

A data-driven investigation by the Bureau of Investigative Journalism (TBIJ), the Guardian, Repórter Brasil and Forbidden Stories shows systematic and vast forest loss linked to cattle farming.

The beef industry in **Brazil** has consistently pledged to avoid farms linked to deforestation. However, the data suggests that 1.7m hectares (4.2m acres) of the Amazon was destroyed near meat plants exporting beef around the world.

The investigation is part of Forbidden Stories' Bruno and Dom project. It continues the work of Bruno Pereira, an Indigenous peoples expert, and Dom Phillips, a journalist who was a longtime contributor to the Guardian . The two men were **killed in the Amazon** last year.

Deforestation across Brazil soared between 2019 and 2022 under the then president, Jair Bolsonaro, with cattle ranching being the number one cause. The new administration of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva has promised to curb the destruction.



Burning forest in Lábrea, Amazonas state in August 2020. Photograph: Christian Braga/
Greenpeace

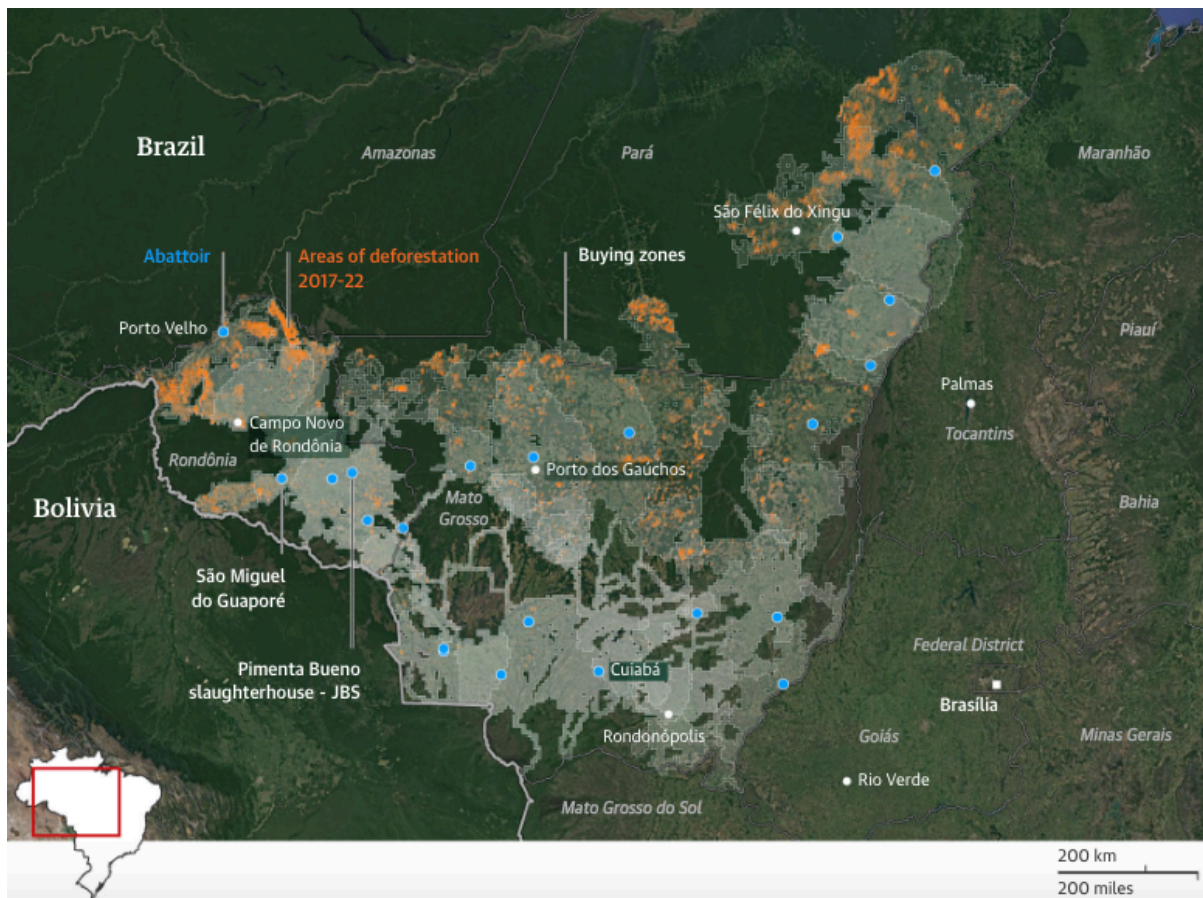
Researchers at the AidEnvironment consultancy used satellite imagery, livestock movement records and other data to calculate estimated forest loss over six years, between 2017 and 2022 on thousands of ranches near more than

20 slaughterhouses. All the meat plants were owned by Brazil's big three beef operators and exporters – JBS, Marfrig and Minerva.

To find the farms that were most likely to have supplied each slaughterhouse, the researchers looked at “buying zones”; areas based on transport connections and other factors, including verification using interviews with plant representatives. All the meat plants exported widely, including to the EU, the UK and China, the world's biggest buyer of Brazilian beef.

The research focused on slaughterhouses in the states of Mato Grosso, Pará and Rondônia, important frontiers of deforestation associated with ranching. It is likely the overall figure for deforestation on farms supplying JBS, Marfrig and Minerva is higher, because they run other plants elsewhere in the Amazon.

All three companies say they operate strict compliance procedures, in an open and honest manner, to ensure they are meeting their sustainable goals.



Nestlé and the German meat company Tönnies, which had supplied Lidl and Aldi, were among those to have apparently bought meat from the plants

featured in the study. Dozens of wholesale buyers in various EU countries, some of which supply the catering businesses that serve schools and hospitals, also appeared in the list of buyers.

Nestlé said two of the meatpackers were not currently part of its supply chain, and added: “We may scrutinise business relationships with our suppliers who are unwilling or unable to address gaps in compliance with our standards.”

Tönnies said: “These Brazilian companies process many thousands of animals per year for export,” and claimed it was unclear whether the company was the recipient of products from plants linked to deforestation. Lidl and Aldi said they stopped selling Brazilian beef in 2021 and 2022 respectively.

Some of the meat shipped to the EU could breach new laws designed to combat deforestation in supply chains. Regulations adopted in April mean products brought into the EU cannot be linked to any deforestation that happened after December 2020.

Alex Wijeratna, a senior director at the Mighty Earth advocacy organisation, said: “The Amazon is very close to a tipping point. So these types of figures are very alarming because the Amazon can’t afford to be losing this number of trees ... this has planetary implications.”

The MEP Delara Burkhardt said the findings reinforced the need for greater legislation globally to tackle deforestation: “The destruction of the Amazon is not only a Brazilian affair. It is also an affair of other parts of the world, like the EU, the UK, or China that import Amazon deforestation. That is why the consumer countries should enact supply chain laws to make sure that the meat they import is produced without inducing deforestation. I hope that the new EU law against imported deforestation will be a blueprint for other major importers like China to follow.”



A farm in Marabá, Pará state. Photograph: Bloomberg/Getty Images

Aidenvironment found that 13 meat plants owned by JBS were linked to ranches where there had been forest clearance, felling or burning. For Marfrig and Minerva there were six and three plants respectively.

According to a separate Guardian analysis for the Bruno and Dom project, the Amazon slaughterhouses belonging to these companies processed cattle worth more than \$5bn (£4bn) while still in Brazil in 2022: more value will be added further along the complex supply chain, and by an overwhelming margin the economic value of this industry is being realised outside Brazil, on dinner plates at restaurants in Beijing and New York. They have repeatedly been criticised for deforestation in their supply chains over the last decade.

Other companies are also known to source cattle from the same buying zones.

In cases where the full beef supply chain could be mapped, the study estimated that since 2017 there had been more than 100 instances of forest loss on farms that directly supplied company plants.

More than 2,000 hectares of forest were apparently destroyed on a single ranch between 2018 and 2021 – São Pedro do Guaporé farm, in Pontes e Lacerda, Mato Grosso state – which sold nearly 500 cattle to JBS, though the company said the farm was ‘blocked’ when its due diligences identified irregularities with

them. The JBS meat plant that processed these cattle sold beef to the UK and elsewhere in recent years.



A farm in Pontes e Lacerda, 2015. Photograph: Carolina Arantes

The farm was also connected to the indirect supply of more than 18,000 animals across the three meat packers between 2018 and 2019 according to Aidenvironment. All three companies said they were not currently being supplied by the ranch.

More than 250 cases of deforestation were attributable to indirect suppliers – farms that rear or fatten cattle but send them to other ranches before slaughter. (Some farms act as both direct and indirect suppliers.)

Meat companies have long said that monitoring the movements between ranches in their complex supply chains is too difficult. Critics say this allows for “cattle laundering”, where animals from a “dirty” deforesting ranch are trucked to a supposedly “clean” farm before slaughter, disguising their origin. A clean farm is one with no history of fines or sanctions for deforestation, even if its owner has carried out deforestation on other ranches.

TBIJ and Repórter Brasil worked with **Dom Phillips and the Guardian** to report on an example of cattle laundering in 2020. Then, the team appeared to show that cows from a farm under sanctions for illegal deforestation had been moved in JBS trucks to a second, “clean” farm. After the story was published, JBS stopped buying from the owner of both farms.

However, our investigation has found that the owner now supplies Marfrig, another of Brazil’s big three meat packers. One of his farms, Estrela do Aripuanã, in Mato Grosso state, is still under sanctions but remains part of the international beef supply chain.

Records appear to show that between 2021 and 2022, nearly 500 animals were moved along the exact route that TBIJ investigated in 2020. The cattle ended up at the same “clean” second farm, Estrela do Sangue, which has no embargos or other environmental sanctions.

Separate documents appear to show dozens of animals moving from Estrela do Sangue farm to Marfrig’s meat plant in Tangará da Serra.

Last year, **another TBIJ investigation** linked the Tangará da Serra plant to the invasion of the Menku Indigenous territory in Brasnorte.

According to shipping records, the plant has sold more than £1bn worth of beef products since 2014 to China, Germany, Spain, Italy, the Netherlands and the UK.



Workers in a Marfrig slaughterhouse. Photograph: Ricardo Funari/Lineair/Greenpeace

In a statement, Marfrig confirmed it had received cattle from the owner, saying: “With every transaction it makes, Marfrig checks the status of the cattle-supplying properties. At the time of slaughter, the farm in question was compliant with Marfrig’s socio-environmental criteria, meaning the property was not located in an area with deforestation, embargo, or forced labour, nor in a conservation unit or on Indigenous lands.”

It added: “Marfrig condemns the practice referred to as ‘cattle laundering’ and any other irregularities. All suppliers approved by the company are regularly checked and must comply with the mandatory socio-environmental criteria described in the company’s current policy.”

Minerva said it “tracks the condition of the ranches, ensuring that cattle purchased by Minerva Foods do not originate from properties with illegally deforested areas; possess environmental embargos or are overlapping with Indigenous lands and/or traditional communities and conservation units.”

JBS queried the “buying zones” methodology used in the research, saying it states “the estimate determines the potential maximum purchase zone and not necessarily the effective purchase zone.” It also said that it blocked the São

Pedro do Guaporé farm “as soon as any irregularity was identified”. When asked, it did not specify the date.

A look at some of the corporations that dominate the Amazon

From mining to cattle ranching and soya farming, some of the world’s largest companies exploit the region, though many also claim to be giving something back

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Vale

CEO: Eduardo Bartolomeo

Main business: Mining – iron, copper, nickel. Also manganese and gold

Ownership: Shareholders

HQ: Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Major operations in the Amazon: Carajás, Vale’s iron-ore mine in the state of Pará, is the largest in the world. Vale also controls Mina do Azul (manganese), Mina Onça Puma (nickel), Mina Sossego (copper and gold). It also controls Mina Salobo in Pará, **the largest copper deposit** ever found in Brazil.

Any links to deforestation, environmental issues and human rights conflicts? Linked to deforestation in a **2017 scientific paper**. In 2018 was **ordered to repair** environmental damage to land in Pará. In 2020 **an investigation revealed** that Vale had 236 applications registered with the national mining agency (ANM) for mineral exploration in Brazil’s Amazon basin, 214 on Indigenous territory. **It withdrew all** the applications the following year.

Ways it gives back to the Amazon: Protects more than 800,000 hectares (2m acres) of **rainforest** in the state of Pará, in partnership with Instituto Chico Mendes de Conservação da Biodiversidade. Planning and design for the mines focused on reducing environmental impact and water use. The company funds extensive health, education, cultural and sports programmes across the region. It runs the Fundo Vale scheme, which supports green businesses and works to restore and protect thousands of hectares of forest. It also funds a research scheme – the Instituto Tecnológico Vale – which studies the Amazon’s biodiversity.

Has announced \$2bn (£1.6bn) plans to reduce its emissions. In 2021 announced a “social ambition” programme to work with neighbouring communities.



The Carajás open-cast iron-ore mine in the Amazon, the world’s largest, which is owned by Vale. Photograph: Daniel Beltrá/Greenpeace

Alcoa

CEO: Roy Harvey

Main business: Mining – aluminium and bauxite

Ownership: Shareholders

HQ: Pittsburgh, US

Major operations in the Amazon: Runs the Juruti mine in Pará, which has been assessed as having a 700m-ton deposit of bauxite (the raw material used to make aluminium) – one of the largest in the world.

Any links to deforestation, environmental issues and human rights conflicts? Brazilian federal and Pará state prosecutors sued Alcoa's **Brazilian mining subsidiary** in 2005 in an effort to block the Juruti mine. In 2009 a **Bloomberg report concluded** that it would consume 10,500ha of primary rainforest in the Amazon and suck 500,000 litres of water an hour from the Amazon.

Ways it gives back to the Amazon: After some negotiation, the government granted **full collective land rights**, and Alcoa agreed to pay rent for occupying community land, compensate for losses and damages, and give local people an annual share in mine profits. According to Mongabay, “more than 10 years on, Alcoa has reformed its corporate image and ways, earning an enviable collection of sustainability certificates along with a reputation for dialogue with local communities.” Alcoa's Gênesis Costa told the publication: “We've invested 73m Brazilian reals [\$14m] in Juruti in installations like the hospital, which seems set to become an [example] for the region.”

MRN

CEO: Guido Germani

Main business: Mining – bauxite

Ownership: Joint venture between Rio Tinto, Alcoa, Norsk Hydro, Vale

HQ: Porto Trombetas, Pará, Brazil

Major operations in the Amazon: The Oriximiná and Terra Santa mines in Pará, which produce bauxite ore.

Any links to deforestation, environmental issues and human rights conflicts? Scientific report in 2017 linked **MRN to deforestation**. A Christian Aid **report** in 2022 alleged that MRN's mining operations in Oriximiná had “caused the deforestation of extensive areas of tropical forest” and “polluted watercourses”, and argued that tax exemptions given to the company “cut

directly into the budgets of the state and municipalities tasked with providing public services and investing in sustainable development”.

Ways it gives back to the Amazon: Company **has rehabilitated** Lake Batatain Oriximiná, and helped establish the Saraca-Taaquera national forest and Trombetas biological reserve to prevent further forest loss and environmental degradation. Has reforested 7,500ha, and invested more than \$4m in social environmental projects.

Norsk Hydro

CEO: Hilde Merete Aasheim

Main business: Mining – aluminium

Ownership: Shareholders

HQ: Oslo, Norway

Major operations in the Amazon: Owns four companies in Pará: Mineração Paragominas, which explores for bauxite in the Paragominas region; the Alunorte alumina refinery; the Albras aluminium factory and the Companhia de Alumina do Pará, all three in the Barcarena area.

Any links to deforestation, environmental issues and human rights conflicts? Linked to **water contamination** in 2018 after heavy rainfall led to local flooding but stated that other factors had been responsible. A Dutch court **ruled in 2022** that a case against the company related to the events could proceed. The company strongly disputes the allegations.

Ways it gives back to the Amazon: Has developed new techniques that safeguard communities and the environment. The \$100m Hydro sustainability fund supports community investments. A **rehabilitation programme** is being operated around the Paragominas mine with the support of local universities. Since the 2018 storm, it has been building stronger links with local communities.

JBS

CEO: Gilberto Xandó

Main business: The world’s largest meat-processing company

Ownership: Shareholders

HQ: São Paulo, Brazil

Major operations in the Amazon: Owns multiple abattoirs in the Amazon and sources livestock directly and indirectly from hundreds of farms throughout the forest.

Any links to deforestation, environmental issues and human rights conflicts? Has been linked to deforestation. A report by Global Witness in 2022 highlighted failures by JBS, Marfrig and Minerva Foods to monitor their supply chain properly, and also raised issues with the auditors. In 2018 Norway's state pension fund divested from the company over these concerns.

Ways it gives back to the Amazon: In 2020 the company pledged to build the Green Platform, which would allow it to monitor all suppliers by 2025. Runs the JBS Amazon Fund, backing initiatives to promote sustainable social and economic development in the Amazon. In 2021 promised to publish a net-zero action plan, with targets consistent with the criteria of the Science-Based Targets Initiative (SBTi), a partnership between CDP (formerly the Carbon Disclosure Project), the UN Global Compact, World Resources Institute and the World Wide Fund for Nature.



Ranchers herding cattle in Santana do Araguaia, Pará state, Brazil. Beef production is the biggest cause of deforestation in the Amazon. Photograph: Bloomberg/Getty

Marfrig

Chairman: Marcos Antonio Molina dos Santos

Main business: Processing meat

Ownership: Shareholders

HQ: São Paulo, Brazil

Major operations in the Amazon: Owns abattoirs and sources directly and indirectly from multiple farmers.

Any links to deforestation, environmental issues and human rights conflicts? **Has been linked to deforestation.** Discussions over a \$200m **loan from the Inter-American Development Bank** – tied to environmental targets – were broken off because, according to the IDB, conditions were “not ideal”. Marfrig said the talks were ended mutually due to a disagreement over “financial conditions” and methodologies. In December 2021 the Norwegian state pension fund **placed Marfrig under observation** “due to risk that the company contributes to serious environmental damage”.

Ways it gives back to the Amazon: Took the industry lead with the **Marfrig Verde +** pledge in 2020 to have full traceability of its Amazon cattle by 2025. Marfrig created a risk-mitigation map for the Amazon and other Brazilian biomes, for direct and indirect suppliers, to identify the areas most exposed to deforestation and social conflicts. The company says it now monitors 100% of direct suppliers, while for indirect suppliers, traceability rates have reach 80% in the Amazon biome and 74% in the Cerrado biome.

Minerva Foods

CEO: Fernando Galletti

Main business: Beef producer and exporter, also in processed foods

Ownership: Shareholders

HQ: Barretos, Brazil

Major operations in the Amazon: Owns numerous abattoirs and sources from farmers.

Any links to deforestation, environmental issues and human rights conflicts? Has been linked in the past **to deforestation**. The company says that it uses the best-available technology in its traceability practices to ensure compliance with environmental, labour and land tenure regulations within its portfolio of producers.

Ways it gives back to the Amazon: Minerva is the only company **to monitor all** of its direct supplier farms, according to its reports. Pioneered the wider application of geospatial monitoring technology, tracks the condition of ranches, ensuring that cattle bought by Minerva do not originate from illegally deforested ranches; or possess environmental embargos (punitive measures imposed by inspectors to stop activities that degrade the environment). Is working with suppliers to get them into its **low-carbon emission “Renove” programme**.

Brasil Biofuels

CEO: Milton Steagall

Main business: Agribusiness, biofuels and renewable energy

Ownership: Privately owned

HQ: São João da Baliza, Roraima, Brazil

Major operations in the Amazon: Sustainable cultivation of palm oil, biotechnology lab, biodiesel plant, renewable energy thermoelectric plants, and biorefinery under construction to produce hydrotreated vegetable oil (HVO) and sustainable aviation fuel (SAF) biofuels.

Any links to deforestation, environmental issues and human rights conflicts? Biopalma, bought by BBF in 2020, was the **subject of a federal investigation** into the impact of pesticide contamination from the plantations. A police investigation cleared the company. BBF was also accused of violence and intimidation by a neighbouring community. The company counters that in fact they have been the victims of theft and assault and state that good relationships with local communities are a vital part of their working philosophy.

Ways it gives back to the Amazon: The BBF Group **sees its mission** as “decarbonising the Amazon forest and changing the energy matrix of the northern region of Brazil”. Developing a **sustainable model** for producing palm oil is one of the prime goals. According to the company, under the strict Brazilian palm-oil regulatory system, plantations can only be on land previously defined as degraded.

More than 6,000 jobs created in the Amazon. The company estimates that more than 25m tons of carbon have been stored by the 11m trees it has planted. The biofuels produced by the company and used by Amazon residents lead to a significant amount of avoided emissions. The company says its biofuel-powered thermoelectric plants produce clean energy for remote Amazon communities. Also supports local communities with transport and technological projects.

Agropalma

CEO: Beny Fiterman

Main business: Biofuels

Ownership: Part of Alfa Group, privately held

HQ: Belem, Pará

Major operations in the Amazon: Plantations, extraction plant and refinery in Pará.

Any links to deforestation, environmental issues and human rights conflicts? Faced **allegations of landgrabbing**. The company says all their land was acquired in good faith but is continuing to look into possible issues predating their purchase. Subsequently, the **certification of their plantations** has been temporarily suspended by the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil. The company says it remains a member and expects to have the suspension lifted soon.

Ways it gives back to the Amazon: The company says it is committed to zero deforestation: since 2002, the company no longer converts forests into palm plantations. Primary responsibility for a 64,000ha Amazon forest reserve. Has pioneered palm oil family farming and is committed to providing formal employment for families to help them into guaranteed and sustainable work. Runs a school for 500 children. Partnered for 15 years with **Conservation** International to develop a sustainable production model that has registered 1,029 species of Brazilian fauna in Agropalma's forest reserves.



Cutting sugarcane for ethanol and sugar production. Pesticide contamination from plantations has become a growing threat. Photograph: Brazil Photos/LightRocket/Getty Images

Suzano

CEO: Walter Schalka

Main business: Eucalyptus pulp

Ownership: Shareholders

HQ: São Paulo, Brazil

Major operations in the Amazon: The Suzano factory in Imperatriz, Maranhão, lies on the border between the Cerrado, a large area of tropical savanna, and the Amazon, and sources from both biomes.

Any links to deforestation, environmental issues and human rights conflicts? “Coconut breakers” – women who harvest coconuts – complain that **Suzano’s expansion** is displacing the palms they depend on; the company denies this. Eucalyptus production is also water intensive, and local populations have complained that river levels are affected.

Ways it gives back to the Amazon: Suzano has a regenerative business model, planting more than **1.2m trees every day** in degraded land, only harvesting what it plants, with 40% of its land (nearly 1m hectares) set aside for permanent conservation. Eucalyptus plantations are being seen as a way of achieving reforestation and carbon capture goals, supported by the regional government, which has announced that it will use eucalyptus to help replace some of its lost forests. The plantations can help solve the climate crisis, the company says.

In 2022, Suzano began a project to connect 500,000ha of priority conservation areas through biodiversity corridors, and also announced the launch of a new forest restoration venture to restore and conserve 40,000 sq km of Brazilian forest, which will involve planting 2m trees of native species. Runs a number of social programmes with local communities.



Brazil meat giant JBS pledges to axe suppliers linked to deforestation

Cargill

CEO: Brian Sikes

Main business: Commodity traders

Ownership: Largest privately owned US company

HQ: Wayzata, Minnesota

Major operations in the Amazon: Cargill buys from a number of plantations in the Amazon.

Any links to deforestation, environmental issues and human rights conflicts? Has been linked to deforestation in the Amazon and the neighbouring Cerrado. Named as the “world’s worst company” by Mighty Earth in 2019. In the report’s foreword, the former US congressman Henry Waxman wrote of their exchanges with the company: “We’ve successfully worked to improve the environmental and human rights practices of dozens of companies, but have never encountered a company that has such difficulty translating high-level commitments into action.”

The environmental law charity ClientEarth has now **filed a legal complaint** against Cargill over its failure to adequately deal with its contribution to soya-driven deforestation and human rights violations in Brazil. The company says it has **“an unwavering commitment”** to eliminate deforestation in Brazil.

Ways it gives back to the Amazon: One of the original signatories to the Amazon Soy Moratorium (ASM). Supported the Coalizão Brasil, which pleaded with Brazil’s far-right former president, Jair Bolsonaro, not to leave the **Paris climate agreement** or dismantle the environment ministry.

Has accelerated its commitment to eliminate deforestation in its soya supply chain in the Amazon, Cerrado and Chaco biomes by 2025. Is investing in programmes and training to help farmers, increased technology to improve traceability, and investments in teams in Brazil and throughout South America in order to accelerate deforestation efforts. Committed \$30m to launch the **Land Innovation Fund for Sustainable Livelihoods**, which funds projects that empower farmers and protects forests across South America.



A soya plantation on the edge of Amazon rainforest near Santarem. Only one global soya producer has a good record in reducing deforestation. Photograph: Brazil Photos/LightRocket/Getty

Bunge

CEO: Greg Heckman

Main business: Agribusiness

Ownership: Shareholders

HQ: St Louis, Missouri

Major operations in the Amazon: Bunge buys from a number of plantations in the Amazon.

Any links to deforestation, environmental issues and human rights conflicts? Has been **linked to deforestation** in the Amazon. Company is working to eliminate deforestation from its supply chains and **announced last year** that it was beating its own targets.

Ways it gives back to the Amazon: Signatory to the **Soy moratorium** since 2006. In 2021, **98% of Bunge shareholders** backed a proposal to reduce deforestation, with the support of the directors.

ADM (Archer Daniels Midland)

CEO: **Juan Ricardo Luciano**

Main business: Commodity traders

Ownership: Shareholders

HQ: Chicago

Major operations in the Amazon: Buys from a number of farms.

Any links to deforestation, environmental issues and human rights conflicts? Has been **linked to deforestation**. **Ways it gives back to the Amazon:** Pledged to achieve **100% deforestation-free supply chains by 2025**. Member of the Round Table on Responsible Soy Association.

Louis Dreyfus

CEO: Michael Gelchie

Main business: Commodity traders

Ownership: Shareholders

HQ: Rotterdam, the Netherlands

Major operations in the Amazon: Louis Dreyfus buys from a number of plantations in the Amazon.

Any links to deforestation, environmental issues and human rights conflicts? Linked to **deforestation**.

Ways it gives back to the Amazon: Supports the extension of the ASM, and the first major soya company to announce a **policy to eliminate the destruction of native ecosystems** and endangered wildlife from its soya supply chain.

Amaggi

CEO: Judiney Carvalho de Souza

Main business: Soya beans

Ownership: Privately owned

HQ: Cuiabá, Brazil

Major operations in the Amazon: Amaggi buys from a number of plantations in the Amazon. Largest of the Brazilian soya traders.

Any links to deforestation, environmental issues, and human rights conflicts? Supply-chain analysts Trase calculate that Amaggi has been **exposed to deforestation** risk.

Ways it gives back to the Amazon: The **only global soya production** and trading company to get an “A” rating for tackling deforestation from CDP in 2021. Given 9/10 for its approach to tackling deforestation by Global Canopy’s **Forest 500** rankings. Member of the soya bean working group, which aims to fight deforestation in the Amazon. Has social investment programme focused on food security where it operates. Signatory to the Soy Moratorium. Also runs the André and Lucia Maggi Foundation (FALM), which was founded in 1997 and supports local communities and runs a scholarship programme among other activities.