

Brazil's Amazon fires off to record 2024 start as green union blames firefighting budget cut

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Smoke from burning vegetation rises in a rainforest in Yanomami Indigenous land, Roraima state, Brazil, March 2, 2024. REUTERS/Bruno Kelly/File Photo

SAO PAULO, May 20 (Reuters) - Brazil's Amazon rainforest has experienced its largest blazes on record in the first four months of the year, with the environmental workers union on Monday placing partial blame on lower government spending on firefighting.

Brazil's President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva has staked his international reputation on protecting the Amazon rainforest and restoring Brazil as a leader on climate policy.

The Amazon, the world's largest rainforest, is vital to curbing catastrophic global warming because of the vast amount of greenhouse gas it absorbs.

A record drought in the Amazon rainforest region, driven by the El Nino climate phenomenon and global warming, has helped contribute to dry conditions fueling fires this year.

More than 12,000 square kilometers (4,633 square miles) of the Brazil's Amazon rainforest burned between January and April, the most in over two decades of data, according to Brazil's space research agency Inpe. That's an area larger than Qatar, or nearly the size of the U.S. state of Connecticut.

Fires in the Amazon generally do not occur naturally but are ignited by people, often seeking to clear land for agriculture.

Firefighting budget cuts are also partially to blame, environmental workers union Ascema said in a statement. They complained that this year's budget for environmental agency Ibama to fight fires is 24% lower than 2023.

In a statement, Brazil's environment ministry said that the Amazon fund, which draws on donations from foreign governments, put 405 million reais (\$79.4 million) toward firefighting at the state level under Lula's current administration, which began in 2023.

The federal government sent about 380 firefighters to Roraima, the northern Amazon state that was hit the hardest by the fires, which were intensified by drought, the ministry said. It did not respond to questions on cuts to Ibama's firefighting budget. The agency did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Ibama agents have suspended field work since January amid tense negotiations with the federal government for better pay and working conditions.

Ascema has rejected the latest government offer and demanded larger salary rises after more than a decade of paltry increases and dwindling staff.

While the area burned is a record for the first four months of the year, it pales in comparison to blazes in the peak dry season from August to November, when an area that size can burn in a single month.

"The government needs to understand that without total engagement from environmental workers, the situation foreseen for this year is unprecedented catastrophe," said Ascema President Cleberson Zavaski.

"Prevention efforts, such as raising awareness about ignitions, creating firebreaks in strategic areas, and conducting prescribed burns, depend on employing people with stable conditions," said Manoela Machado, a fire researcher at the Woodwell Climate Research Center. "These measures will influence the severity of the fire crisis when the dry conditions allow fires to spread."

(\$1 = 5.1040 reais)