

Judge in Brazil orders slaughterhouses to pay for Amazon reforestation



FILE - A river borders an area that has been illegally deforested by land-grabbers and cattle farmers in an extractive reserve in Jaci-Parana, Rondonia state, Brazil, July 11, 2023. (AP Photo/Andre Penner, File)

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Updated 11:56 AM GMT+12, September 6, 2024

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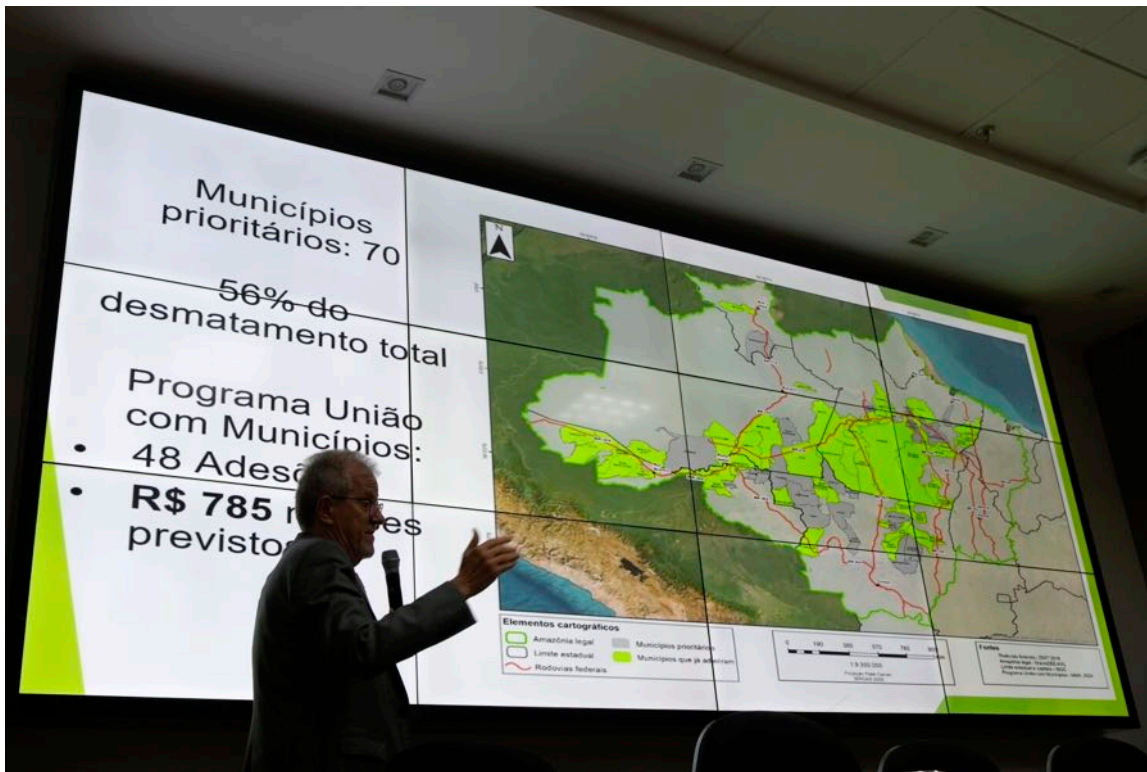
BRASILIA, Brazil (AP) — A judge in the Brazilian state of Rondonia has found two beef slaughterhouses guilty of buying cattle from a protected area of former rainforest in the Amazon and ordered them, along with three cattle ranchers, to pay a total of \$764,000 for causing environmental damage, according to the decision issued Wednesday. Cattle raising drives Amazon deforestation. The companies Distriboi and Frigon and the ranchers may appeal.

It is the first decision in several dozen lawsuits seeking millions of dollars in environmental damages from the slaughterhouses for allegedly trading in cattle raised illegally in a protected area known as Jaci-Parana, which was rainforest but is now mostly converted to pasture.

Four slaughterhouses are among the many parties charged, including JBS SA, which bills itself as the world's largest protein producer. The court has not decided on the cases involving JBS.

Brazilian law forbids commercial cattle inside a protected area, yet some 210,000 head are being grazed inside Jaci-Parana, according to the state animal division. With almost 80% of its forest destroyed, it ranks as the most ravaged conservation unit in the Brazilian Amazon. A court filing pegs damages in the reserve at some \$1 billion.

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The lawsuits are based on transfer documents first reported by the Associated Press that show cattle going directly from protected areas to slaughterhouses. The documents were filled out by the illegal ranchers themselves.

Part of the decision is a collective penalty of \$453,000 against the five defendants, who are linked to one farm.

The money will be used to reforest 232 hectares (573 acres) of what is now pasture there.

“When a slaughterhouse, whether by negligence or intent, buys and resells products from invaded and illegally deforested reserves, it is clear that it is directly benefiting from these illegal activities,” according to a part of the original complaint which Judge Inês Moreira da Costa sustained in her ruling. “In such cases, there is an undeniable connection between the company’s actions and the environmental damage caused by the illegal exploitation.”

Frigon and Distriboi did not respond to questions sent by email. In a filing, Frigon argued the state of Rondonia allowed ranchers to sell the cattle and said there is no relation between buying beef cattle and deforestation. In filings, Distriboi also denies any wrongdoing.

JBS also did not reply to a request for comment.

Rondonia, on the border with Bolivia, is the most badly deforested state in the Brazilian Amazon. In the past few weeks, most cities have been covered by thick smoke from wildfires, a sign of rampant deforestation. The

situation is so dire that its main airport in Porto Velho was closed for seven consecutive days.

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