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Amazon deforestation restrictions likely to be circumvented

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Abstract

Brazil's state of Mato Grosso is part of the "Legal Amazon" region where deforestation is limited by a requirement in the country's Forest Code, which specifies that 80% of each property must be maintained in native vegetation in areas that were originally Amazon Forest and 35% in areas that were originally Cerrado (central Brazilian savanna). A new bill (PL 377/2022) that is rapidly advancing in the National Congress would remove Mato Grosso from the Legal Amazon, reducing this requirement to 20% in both cases.

Keywords Amazonia, Brazil, environment, Forest Code, Mato Grosso

Brazil's powerful agribusiness interests are moving to escape deforestation restrictions in the key Amazonian state of Mato Grosso. This state, which has over twice the area of the US state of California, has long been the scene of rapid destruction of both Amazon rainforest and the central Brazilian savanna or *Cerrado*, each of which originally covered roughly half the state (Costa, F.A. et al. 2021). As part of the Legal Amazon region, Mato Grosso gains certain tax advantages but is also subject to greater limitations on deforestation than areas outside of this region. A new bill (PL 377/2022) (*Câmara dos Deputados* 2022) is now being rushed through the National Con-

gress that would remove Mato Grosso from the Legal Amazon. This and other damaging bills have surged forth since control of both houses of congress was captured by the coalition of political parties that supports President Jair Bolsonaro's anti-environmental agenda (Ferrante and Fearnside 2021).

Brazil's 2012 Forest Code (Chapter 4, Section 1, Article 12) specifies that the percentage of each property that must be maintained in a "legal reserve" of native vegetation in the Legal Amazon region is 80% if the original vegetation at the site is forest and 35% if it is *Cerrado* (Brazil, PR 2012). For areas outside of the

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Legal Amazon only 20% must be maintained as a legal reserve in both forest and *Cerrado* areas. Obviously, the proposed change would allow a vast area to be legally deforested. Among other impacts, the carbon emissions from this deforestation would further undermine Brazil's promises under the Climate Convention.

Ironically, the argument the bill uses to justify this major reduction in environmental protection is that farming this area is needed to feed the hungry both in Brazil and in the World. This is patently false on both counts. Brazil is the world's largest exporter of both soy and beef, meaning that the country produces vastly more of these commodities than the population consumes and each additional hectare that is deforested to produce them is for export rather than to feed Brazil. Basic foodstuffs are produced by family agriculture on small farms, rather than the vast ranches and soy plantations that predominate in Mato Grosso (Hecht, S. et al. 2021). The problem of world hunger is not one of global supply, but rather is almost entirely either the result of poverty preventing the poor from purchasing available food or of distribution impediments such as those caused by conflicts (*Action against Hunger* 2022). The soy and beef for which Mato Grosso is famous are especially irrelevant to the diets of most of the World's hungry.

The continuing erosion of environmental protections in Brazil is of global concern due to the environmental services that the Amazon Forest provides both to Brazil and to the rest of the World (Fearnside 2008). The notable sensitivity of Brazil's political leaders to any environmental conditions placed on imports of the country's agricultural commodities makes this the most effective form of influence on policies that imply increased deforestation (Kehoe et al. 2019).

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Conflict of interest

None.

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