



The Amazon Fires:

What is happening and why? What is the relevance for Europe?

Climate Action Network (CAN) Europe is Europe's leading NGO coalition fighting dangerous climate change. With over 170 member organisations active in 38 European countries, representing over 1,500 NGOs and more than 47million citizens, CAN Europe promotes sustainable climate, energy and development policies throughout Europe.

Summary

EU goods imports are a major cause of the skyrocketing rates of Amazon deforestation and forest fire this year. This is largely driven by the growing demand for beef, soy, palm oil, cocoa and coffee production that requires more agricultural land. Brazil is by far the largest importer of beef and soy to the EU, creating a direct link between EU-based consumption and ongoing Amazon deforestation. Nevertheless, the EU wants to close a trade agreement with Mercosur, a South American trading bloc, that would further liberalise trade in goods that contribute to destruction of the Amazon and acceleration of the climate crisis.

The scale of the problem

- Brazilian Space Agency INPE showed **33,116 fires** have been recorded in the Amazon during the month of August 2022 – **the highest level in 12 years**. Experts are anticipating high numbers of fires in 2022 due to the high rate of deforestation since the last dry season and because deforestation has historically been higher in election years.
- According to INPE's DETER alert system, **more than 11,000 km² of Amazon rainforest was lost in the period from January to August 19, 2022 alone**. This is seven times the size of the Greater London area and represents an increase of 16.5% from the same period last year.
- Deforestation has **soared under President Bolsonaro**: From 2019 to 2021, 34,215 km² of the Amazon have been destroyed, an area larger than Belgium. This is an increase of 53%, compared to the previous three years. (Source: Observatório do Clima)
- Most of this **deforestation is illegal** but the Brazilian government is allowing it to continue, has cut back on environmental regulations and their enforcement, and its rhetoric is encouraging illegal loggers, land grabbers and project developers. According to Human Rights Watch, the situation is very dire. In a report on the "Rainforest Mafia", they state that **violence and impunity fuels deforestation**. (Source: HRW Report)

Causes

- The fires are not an accident or the result of a natural disaster; they are manmade. The forest is intentionally cleared for the **expansion of agricultural land** and in some cases for mineral extraction or infrastructure projects.
- Two-thirds of cleared land in the Amazon and the Cerrado biomes have been converted to cattle pasture. (Source: [Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences](#)) The land is inefficiently used with 65% of those pastures supporting less than one head of cattle per hectare (Source: [Embrapa/Inpe, TerraClass Project](#))
- According to [Global Forest Watch](#), 7.9 million hectares of forests were destroyed for soy in South America from 2000-2015 – an area the size of the Czech Republic (Source: [Wikipedia](#))
- A study from July 2020, published in [Science magazine](#), shows that **about a fifth of beef and soy exports from the Brazilian Amazon and the adjacent Cerrado region to the EU has contributed to deforestation.**
- Brazil is the single biggest exporter of agricultural goods to the EU. (Source: [European Commission](#)) **The EU imports 80,000 tonnes of Brazilian beef every year**, which accounts for more than a quarter of EU beef imports. (Source: European Commission, [Trade Statistics](#))
- Brazil is by far the **largest exporter of soybeans to the EU**, which is mainly used as animal feed in meat production. In the 2020/21 trading year, the EU imported 5.2 million tons of soybeans from Brazil (Source: [EU Trade Data](#)), more than half of total EU imports. Due to its dependency on imported soya, meat production in Europe also exerts pressure to expand agricultural land in Brazil.
- Despite the significance of beef and soy imports from Brazil and their connection with deforestation, the EU has so far failed to oblige importers to prove that the beef and soya entering the EU market did not contribute to deforestation.

Impact of deforestation

- **We are dangerously close to losing the Amazon rainforest forever:** 17% of the forest in the Amazon basin has already been destroyed. Scientists say that at 20-25% deforestation, the rainforest will reach a tipping point at which it can no longer generate enough rain to sustain itself and will develop into a dry savannah. (Source: Thomas E. Lovejoy and Carlos Nobre. [Amazon Tipping Point](#). Science Advances, 21 Feb 2018, Vol. 4, no. 2, DOI: 10.1126/sciadv.aat2340.)
- **Impact on climate change:** The Amazon is currently a carbon sink, containing 90-140 billion metric tons of carbon. (Source: [WWF](#)) If it turns into a savannah, it will start to emit this carbon, which would accelerate dangerous climate change.
- **Threat to biodiversity:** Biodiversity in the Amazon's forest and rivers is amongst the highest on Earth. The region is home to one in ten known species, many of them are unique to Amazonia and endangered. (Sources: [Wikipedia](#) and [WWF](#))

- **Threat to indigenous peoples:** The Brazilian Amazon provides land and livelihood for several hundreds of distinct indigenous peoples. Subsequent Brazilian governments have actively limited their rights and protection, but the situation has never been as worse and violent as under the current Bolsonaro government. The criminal network has only grown stronger under his administration, threatening forest defenders in every way. The crimes, such as the heartbreaking murder of Brazilian Indigenous rights advocate Bruno Pereira and British journalist Dom Phillips, go unpunished and those who attempt to create a semblance of justice are retaliated against. (Source: [Amazon Watch](#)) Furthermore, the Bill 490/2007 that was introduced in 2007 gained new strength after President Bolsonaro took office. This bill, if passed by the Federal Supreme Court of Brazil, would prevent or hinder many Indigenous peoples from claiming their right to traditional lands that then could be used for commercial purposes. (Source: [Human Rights Watch](#)) Hence APIB, the largest indigenous peoples' organisation of Brazil, is fighting this bill by leading mass mobilisation in the country and pressuring the Federal Supreme Court to stop purposely delaying the process. (Source: [APIB](#))

Solutions

In Brazil:

- 63 Brazilian NGOs, including the Articulation of Indigenous Peoples of Brazil (APIB), demand a stop to deforestation in the Amazon and call on the government to better enforce rules, increase penalties and secure the land rights of indigenous people. (Source: [Statement here](#))
- APIB sues Bolsonaro under the International Criminal Court (ICC) in Hague for indigenous genocide and destruction of the Amazon. (Source: [APIB](#))

In Europe:

- **Stop the EU-Mercosur trade agreement:** The EU and the Mercosur region, which comprises Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay, politically agreed on a new trade agreement in June 2019. (Source: [European Commission](#))

The agreement would liberalise trade for forest-risk commodities, including beef, poultry and ethanol (derived from sugar cane and soy). This means that increased EU demand for these products could accelerate deforestation.

In spite of this, the agreement does not contain sufficient safeguards to prevent deforestation. It merely stipulates that parties shall "implement measures to combat illegal logging and related trade" without detailing what these measures should comprise or how their success shall be monitored.

Moreover, the article on deforestation is part of the agreement's "Trade and Sustainable Development" chapter, which is excluded from the enforcement mechanism that applies to the rest of the trade deal. (Source: [Text of the TSD Chapter of the EU-Mercosur deal, Article 8 and Article 15.5](#)). Consequently, the vague terms and weak enforcement mechanism would make it hard for the EU to hold Brazil accountable for breaches of its commitment to fight illegal deforestation.



Europe should first of all make ratification of any free-trade agreement conditional to measurable and verifiable actions by the Brazilian government to solve the environmental and human rights crisis, including a five-year moratorium on deforestation, demarcation of indigenous lands, the resumption of Brazil's national deforestation control plan and the salvaging of federal agencies that have been dismantled by the Bolsonaro administration.

Secondly, the EU and Mercosur should reopen negotiations for an agreement that contributes to solving the climate crisis, not accelerates it. A new agreement would aid the transition to a climate neutral economy for instance by facilitating trade and investment into agroecology, renewable energy and clean transport. It would also encourage technology and knowledge transfer. This would stimulate a green recovery, create new future-proof jobs and conserve natural assets.

- **Tackle deforestation in EU consumption:** The EU causes 72,900 square kilometres of forests to be lost per year due to consuming timber products or products grown on deforested land (Source: [European Commission](#)) – an area larger than Ireland (Source: [Wikipedia](#)). Destruction is also driven by our consumption of commodities such as soy (mostly used to feed farm animals), palm oil, beef, rubber and cocoa as well as by industrial logging and other extractive industries. The EU should take immediate steps to phase-out deforestation in the commodities we consume:
 - Adopt a regulation on the placing on the internal market of “forest and ecosystem risk commodities” (FERC), i.e. the commodities whose extraction, harvesting or production has, or risks having, a detrimental impact on forests, other ecosystems and related human rights. The European Commission published a [proposal](#) for such a regulation in November 2021 but it contains a number of weaknesses that ought to be addressed. Firstly, its scope is limited as it only applies to six forest-risks commodities and doesn't include other sensitive ecosystems apart from forests. For instance, it wouldn't safeguard destruction of the Brazilian Cerrado savanna, which is heavily affected by deforestation or the Pantanal, the world's largest wetland area, which was devastated by fires in previous years (see [demands by Observatório do Clima](#)). Secondly, it relies on laws in producer countries to respect communities' customary tenure rights (see [overview by Fern](#)), which Indigenous Peoples' groups demand to be closed to protect their territories. (Source: [APIB](#))
 - Adopt mandatory human rights, environmental and climate due diligence obligations for EU companies. The European Commission unveiled its proposal for a Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD) in February 2022 but in its current form, it would be unable to prevent further deforestation or human rights abuses in the Amazon. Over 220 civil society organisations therefore [call for it to be strengthened](#).

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