

Amazon deforestation expected to accelerate in 2020



Brasilia, January 17 (RHC)-- The Amazon rainforest is facing a serious threat because of deforestation and the situation is not likely to get any better in 2020, as experts believe this year will see the acceleration of the environmental crisis.

According to Tasso Azevedo, the coordinator of a group called MapBiomass that monitors the rate of forest destruction, deforestation threatens to accelerate and draw increased global concern since no new fire prevention measures have been taken in the crucial run-up to this year's dry season.

"It would be expected that it will be worse than last year unless something really big happens in the next two or three months to avoid the high season of deforestation that starts in May," Azevedo told the Reuters News Agency in Oslo on Wednesday.

Making matters worse, Brazil's far-right President Jair Bolsonaro has furthered the crisis in the Amazon by purposely ignoring the environmental issues in favor of commercializing the rainforest in the future.

Under Bolsonaro, deforestation rose to its highest in over a decade in 2019, as the far-right president's policies have proven detrimental to the region.

In particular, since Bolsonaro took office, the number of fires in the Amazon rainforest increased 30.5% in 2019 from the previous year, while deforestation rose 85%, according to recent data released by Brazil's space research agency INPE.

The Amazon, the world's largest rainforest, is a bulwark against global warming because of the vast amounts of heat-trapping carbon dioxide it soaks up from the atmosphere. It also provides Brazil with hydropower, and its abundant rain provides irrigation-free agriculture.

Bolsonaro has said his government is protecting the rainforest adequately, but it plans to push ahead with economic development in the Amazon to raise the standard of living of its 30 million inhabitants, including indigenous tribes. It is currently drawing up legislation that will open protected indigenous reservations to commercial mining and agriculture, a move that environmentalists say can only speed up deforestation.

Risks to the forest sparked a public outcry in August when fires raged through the Amazon, drawing sharp criticism from France's President Emmanuel Macron. But the government has yet to roll out any measures to avoid fires in 2020, Azevedo said.

"There is no budget ... if you want to prevent fires you have to start right now, all has to be done in the first half of the year," he said.

MapBiomas, a Brazilian organization, is a collaboration between universities, non-profit groups and technology companies to monitor deforestation, drawing from several different sources including INPE data.

In August, Norway suspended donations to the Amazon fund, which supports projects to curb deforestation in Brazil after the Brazilian government sought to change the governance rules of the fund to decide which projects it supports.

Norway has worked closely with Brazil to protect the Amazon rainforest for more than a decade and has paid some \$1.2 billion into the fund.

"(The government) messed up something that was working," Azevedo said of the cut in Norwegian financing. "My take on this is they were trying to ... stop the money going into civil society and want to use the money for themselves, to control the fund."

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