

Under Bolsonaro, Amazon deforestation hit new September record

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A deforested plot of Brazilian Amazon rainforest in September 2021. Under President Jair Bolsonaro deforestation has risen to record highs [File: Bruno Kelly/Reuters]

Brasilia, October 9 (RHC)-- Deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon has broken a record for the month of September, continuing a trend that has accelerated during the tenure of the country's far-right President

Jair Bolsonaro.

About 1,455 sq km (562 sq miles) of rainforest were cleared in September, according to satellite data from the Brazilian space research agency INPE. That is up 48 percent from a year ago and beating the September 2019 record in a data series that began in 2015.

Average deforestation in the vital ecosystem has increased by 75 percent from the previous decade since Bolsonaro took office in 2019. The news of accelerating deforestation takes place as Brazil braces for a contentious election on October 30, where Bolsonaro will face off against former left-wing president Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, who has promised to crack down on deforestation.

“Anyone who cares about the future of the rainforest, the lives of Indigenous peoples and the possibility of having a livable planet should vote to remove Bolsonaro,” Marcio Astrini, the executive secretary of the Climate Observatory, a coalition of environmental groups, said in a statement.

Lula won the first round last week but failed to clear the 50 percent threshold needed to avoid a run-off. Bolsonaro’s surprisingly strong showing in the first round, where many expected him to lose outright, has environmentalist groups feeling uneasy.

Many believe that the future of the Amazon, a vital resource in the fight against climate change, will hinge on the results of the upcoming election. About 60 percent of the Amazon is located in Brazil.

Bolsonaro, an ally of Brazil’s powerful agribusiness sector, has overseen a massive depletion of the rainforest as ranchers and loggers clear and set fire to wide swaths of the forest. During his first year in office in 2019, 9,178sq km (3,543sq miles) were destroyed, the worst year on record.

With three months still remaining in the year, 2022 is currently the second worst, with more than 8,590sq km (3,316sq miles) destroyed. The Brazilian justice ministry has said that it is conducting policing operations to crack down on illegal deforestation and burning, the Reuters news agency reported.

But fires have surged as agribusiness interests seek to clear out space for farmland and grazing pastures. In early September, Brazil set a five-year record for the number of fires burning in the Amazon, and activists have said that under Bolsonaro enforcement has been lacklustre.

A July report by the Igarape Institute, a Brazilian think-tank, found that authorities are doing little to curb deforestation in the Amazon. The study analysed 302 environmental crime raids carried out by the federal police in the Amazon between 2016 and 2021, and found that only 2 percent targeted people illegally seizing undesignated public lands. Indigenous people and environmental land defenders have also been targeted with violence and abuse.

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