

Brazil's Amazon deforestation remains high despite slight fall

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Pahnin Mekragnotire, an Indigenous man of the Kayapo tribe, observes the destruction left by loggers during a surveillance patrol of Menkragnoti Indigenous Land [File: Lucas Landau/Reuters]

Brasilia, September 11 (RHC)-- Deforestation in Brazil's Amazon rainforest fell in August compared with the same period a year earlier, continuing a downward trend while remaining higher than before right-wing President Jair Bolsonaro took office.

Forest clearances in August totalled 918 square kilometres (354 square miles), down 32 percent from the same month in 2020, data from the country's national space research agency (INPE) showed. The decrease marked the second month in a row deforestation numbers were lower than previous years.

However, deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon, often dubbed "the Lungs of the Earth," only fell by 1.2 percent from January to August 2021 compared with the same period in 2020. That decrease equalled 6,026 square kilometres, or an area more than seven times the size of New York City.

Year-to-date deforestation in Brazil remains nearly double what it was during January to August 2018, before Bolsonaro took office and immediately took steps to weaken environmental enforcement, prompting a boom in logging.

Nevertheless, in recent weeks there have been signs the Bolsonaro government is taking some tentative steps towards combating the soaring destruction.

The government has doubled the budget for environmental enforcement and plans to hire some 700 new environmental field agents, Environment Minister Joaquim Pereira Leite said last month.

Despite the steps, environmental advocates say that destruction has merely plateaued and shows no sign of returning to pre-Bolsonaro levels. The high deforestation rate also helps to feed forest fires, with the felled trees serving as tinder, according to the Amazon Environmental Research Institute.

Loggers generally extract valuable wood with fire being set to the remains to clear it for eventual agricultural use. A Reuters news agency witness travelling in southern Amazonas state during the past week saw massive fires billowing smoke miles into the air with the haze blanketing the landscape.

Many of the fires were near the edge of existing cattle pasture. Much of the burned land will likely become pasture too, with cattle ranching the main driver of deforestation, according to a draft of a landmark study compiled by 200 scientists and published in July.

Amazon fires in August – while also showing a slight decline from a year ago – remained above the historic monthly average for the third consecutive year, according to INPE. Prior to Bolsonaro, the last time Brazil saw such high levels of fire in the Amazon was in 2010.

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