

Brazil's beef and soy exports to the EU linked to illegal deforestation, study finds

By **Helen Regan, CNN**

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Source: [CNN](#)

The world lost a field worth of forest every 6 seconds in 2019, analysis says 01:50

(CNN) — Around half of Brazil's beef exports and almost a quarter of soy exports to the European Union could be linked to illegal deforestation in two of the country's most ecologically important regions, [according to a new study](#), which could have serious consequences for international trade agreements and efforts to combat the climate crisis.

The study "The rotten apples of Brazil's agribusiness" [published in the journal Science](#) on Thursday links illegal deforestation on rural properties in the Amazon and Cerrado to their agricultural production and exports to EU countries.

Brazil's Cerrado is [a biodiverse region made up of savannah](#), grassland and forest that spans around 200 million hectares (about 500 million acres). Large swathes of these important ecological regions in Brazil are being cleared because of global demand for meat -- to make way for cattle ranches, and later converted to grow soy which is used to feed livestock or exported to other parts of the world.

The study found that while most of Brazil's agricultural output is deforestation-free, 2% of properties studied in the Amazon and Cerrado are responsible for 62% of illegal deforestation. A significant portion of that deforestation is linked to agricultural exports, the study said.

"This small but very destructive portion of the sector poses a threat to the economic prospects of Brazil's agribusiness, in addition to causing regional and global



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Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro [said last year](#) that "protecting the forest is our duty, acting to combat illegal deforestation and any other criminal activities that put our Amazon at risk."

Meanwhile, the far-right and pro-business president vowed to explore the rainforest's economic potential. He found that in China, the country's largest trade partner, which ramped up imports of beef and soy from Brazil in the wake of the US trade war.

Critics say the rapid dismantling of environmental protections and Bolsonaro's economic policies [have set the stage](#) for environmental disaster.

The method

To make the link between illegal deforestation and agricultural exports, the team -- led by **Raoni Rajao**, professor in Social Studies of Science at the Federal University of Minas Gerais -- compiled land-use and deforestation maps for Brazil and information on 815,000 rural properties in the Amazon and Cerrado, as well as cattle transport documents. They also developed software that calculated the level to which each property studied was complying with environmental and deforestation laws.

They found that about 1.9 million metric tons of soy grown on properties with illegal deforestation may have reached EU markets annually. That means 22% of all soy exported from the region to the EU is potentially contaminated.

The authors caution that the true percentage could be higher as their sample covered 80% of soy planted in the region.

Roughly 41% of EU's soy imports come from Brazil, equating to 13.6 million metric tons per year.



Related Article: The Amazon is burning because the world eats so much meat

Between 25% and 40% of EU beef imports come from Brazil. The study estimates that 12% of the 4.1 million cows traded to slaughterhouses in the states of Para and Mato Grosso in 2017, came directly from properties with potentially illegal deforestation.

But the number increases to about 50% when taking into account suppliers that had indirect contamination with illegal deforestation. This includes if a ranch does not deforest but buys cattle from one that does.

The study also cautions that in the state of Mato Grosso, contamination of beef exports by illegal deforestation could be as high as 44% in the Amazon and 61% in the Cerrado regions.

The report said that the Brazilian government insists "that national laws ensure high conservation standards, and hence trading bans should not include legally authorized deforestation." But their results could have huge implications for how countries proceed with trade agreements when they know a portion of the imports could be linked to illegal deforestation of the Amazon.

"International buyers of Brazil's agricultural commodities have raised concerns about products that are contaminated by deforestation," the authors said in the report. "Among the concerns is that increasing greenhouse gas emissions from deforestation and forest fires in Brazil could cancel out EU climate change mitigation efforts."



Photos: Fires raging in the Amazon rainforest

Part of the Amazon rainforest burns in Porto Velho, Brazil, on Friday, August 23.

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Deforestation in the Brazilian rainforest is speeding up. It [increased by nearly 64%](#) in April this year, compared to the same month last year, according to data from Brazil's National Institute for Space Research (INPE). In April, more than 156 square miles (405.6 square kilometers) of rainforest were destroyed -- a vast swath more than double the size of Washington, DC.

The first trimester of 2020 had already seen a more than 50% increase in deforestation compared to last year, according to INPE data.

Last year, after [mass fires consumed large swaths](#) of the rainforest, Brazilian President Bolsonaro was accused of encouraging the activity of illegal ranchers, miners and loggers, many of whom use fire as a quick way to cut down trees to clear room for crops and cattle grazing. By November 2019, the deforestation rate in the Amazon had risen to its highest level in more than a decade.

As the global demand for meat soars, and as China turns to Brazil for its supply of soybeans amid the trade war with the US, experts worry that Brazil's agricultural boom will come at the cost of habitats like the Cerrado and Amazon.

In their report, the authors found that 120,000 properties in their study were deforested after 2008. About 36,000 of those properties in the Amazon -- representing 84% -- and 27,000 thousand in the Cerrado -- 35% -- carried out this deforestation that they said was in all likelihood done illegally.

designed to wreak havoc on it

deforestation and GHG (greenhouse gas) emissions by not barring imports and consuming agricultural products contaminated with deforestation, illegal or not."

The authors said the report raised awareness of the importance of pressing Brazil " to conserve its environmental assets" and international efforts to cutting greenhouse gas emissions.

CNN's Amy Woodyatt, Flora Charner and Eliza Mackintosh contributed.

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