

SUBSCRIBE AND SAVE 54%

Fifth of Brazilian beef exports to EU linked to illegal deforestation

ENVIRONMENT 16 July 2020By [Adam Vaughan](#)**Deforestation in Para, Brazil**

Paralaxis / Alamy Stock Photo

Around one-fifth of the beef and soya the European Union imports from Brazil each year has been linked to illegal deforestation in the Amazon rainforest and Cerrado savanna.

The extent of European consumers' role in the destruction of two globally important biodiversity hotspots is revealed as [Brazil faces a bleak year for deforestation](#) because of an anticipated drought and the activities of emboldened loggers. European politicians [have also warned](#) a [major trade deal](#) is at risk if climate change-fuelling deforestation in Brazil isn't tackled.

Past [investigations](#) have uncovered the links between individual Brazilian cattle ranches and European food firms. Bigger picture efforts to show the size of the problem have suffered from not being granular enough, with data drawn from a municipality level, allowing agribusiness to say it wasn't to blame for illegal logging.

An international team has now connected the dots using Brazilian government records, including maps of land use, deforestation and permits issued when cattle is moved between the properties and abattoirs ahead of international trade. Ruling out legal forest clearance, the team found 20 per cent of soya and at least 17 per cent of beef exports to the EU were associated with illegal deforestation.

Read more: [Beef-eating consumers are helping drive Amazon deforestation](#)

“Is that too much, too little? It's probably disappointing to critics of agribusiness. On the other hand, it's not zero. We are talking about millions of tonnes [of exports to the EU], and we estimate 58 million tonnes of CO₂ related to those exports between 2009 and 2017, so it is substantial,” says Raoni Rajão at Federal University of Minas Gerais in Brazil.

Just 2 per cent of ranches are responsible for 62 per cent of the illegal deforestation, suggesting a potentially easy fix. “What we found to our surprise is how concentrated is the deforestation in a few farms. The government or farmers say ‘yeah the Amazon is too big to monitor, it's impossible’. No, it is possible, it's here, you have to focus on those super sites,” says Rajão.

While the research drew on records across Brazil for soya, there was only enough data on beef for two states, Mato Grosso and Pará, implying far more beef exports could be tainted with illegal deforestation. Rajão says Brazilian agribusiness has a self-interest in fixing the problem, given [evidence that Amazon deforestation is disrupting the rainfall](#) cattle farms rely on.

Erasmus zu Ermgassen at the Catholic University of Louvain in Belgium, who wasn't involved in the research, says the study's big advance was in using records of animal movements to tease out the links to deforestation. “This work highlights how international markets, such as the EU, have a long way to go to ensure their sourcing is compliant with their climate commitments,” he says.

Louis Verchot at agriculture research group CGIAR says the study “moves us one step closer” to cleaning up supply chains and living up to a 2014 pledge to halt deforestation, [which countries and businesses have failed to do yet](#).

Journal reference: *Science*, DOI: [10.1126/science.aba6646](https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aba6646)

Sign up to our free [Fix the Planet](#) newsletter to get a monthly dose of climate optimism delivered straight to your inbox

More on these topics: [climate change](#) [Europe](#) [meat](#) [brazil](#)

TRENDING

LATEST

VIDEO

FREE

- No, NASA hasn't changed the zodiac signs or added a new one** **1**
- Alzheimer's disease may start in the gut and spread to the brain** **2**
- Why hasn't the UK seen a second wave of the coronavirus?** **3**
- How to see the spectacular comet Neowise with the naked eye** **4**
- Beetles carrying tiny backpack cameras stream footage to a smartphone** **5**



SUBSCRIBE

VIEW IN THE APP

BUY IN PRINT

Sign up to our newsletters

Enter your email address to get started

Your email

SIGN UP


[Contact us](#) | [Coronavirus: customer update](#) | [Help](#) | [About us](#) | [Privacy & cookies](#) |
[Cookie preferences](#) | [Terms & conditions](#)

[Advertise](#) | [Write for us](#) | [Events](#) | [Science jobs](#) | [Syndication](#) | [RSS feeds](#)

[Gift subscriptions](#) | [Student subscriptions](#) | [Educational subscriptions](#) |
[Corporate subscriptions](#)

GET THE APP



 Get it on
Google Play

FOLLOW US

© Copyright New Scientist Ltd.

Back to top

