

# In the Brazilian Amazon, a road project drives the threat of deforestation

by Jennifer Ann Thomas on 5 July 2021 | Translated by Maya Johnson

- *Plans to pave a 400-kilometer (249-mile) stretch of road in the Brazilian Amazon could lead to 170,000 square kilometers (65,600 square miles) of deforestation by 2050, researchers warn.*
- *A new study shows forest loss around the BR-319 highway in Amazonas state is already by 25% since the government expressed interest in restarting the road works.*
- *Experts say the argument that the road is needed to boost the region's economy and improve connectivity is not valid.*

The pace of deforestation has surged in the region around Brazil's BR-319 highway since the federal government announced its interest in restarting road works, a new study has found.

The paper (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S253006442100002X>) by researchers from Brazil's National Institute of Spatial Research (INPE) and the University of Kansas reports forest clearing in what's known as the highway's direct zone of influence zone. The deforestation between July and September 2020 amounts to 16.4 square kilometers (6.3 square miles) — a 25% increase compared to the same period in previous years.

BR-319, also known as the Manaus-Porto Velho Highway, was built during Brazil's military dictatorship between 1968 and 1973 and later abandoned in 1988. Years of neglect and rainfall have rendered the road unusable over time. Its 885.9-kilometer (550-mile) stretch is the only land route connecting Manaus, the capital of Amazonas state, with Brazil's south and southwest.

The highway is divided into segments that currently fall under different legal classifications. The end segments, called A and B, make up the first 198 and the last 164 km (123 and 102 miles) of the highway. These are already paved and do not require new environmental licensing. The spotlight is instead on the middle section of the highway, 400 km (249 mi) of unpaved road, and the C segment, or "Charlie," a 52-km (32-mi) section in the middle that needs resurfacing.

In June 2020, the federal government published an official call for tender for the works needed for section C. A contract was signed in December, but work was suspended in March this year following a lawsuit filed by the Federal Prosecutor's Office (MPF). Then, in April, the Supreme Federal Court (STJ) authorized the work on section C.

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The 52 kilometers (32 miles) composing segment Charlie, or C, highlighted on the map above were approved for repaving in April. Image courtesy of DNIT.

The Federal Prosecutor's Office says an environmental impact study (EIA/Rima) must be carried out, while the National Department of Transportation Infrastructure (DNIT) sees the project as repairs of a road built in the 1970s, making it exempt from needing a new study.

The DNIT says that "not repairing the highway is a great disruption to order, safety and the public economy because it is the only roadway connection between Rondônia [state] and the states of Amazonas and Roraima and consequently, the rest of Brazil." It adds this connectivity is especially important in the context of dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, public prosecutor Rafael Rocha says the DNIT's argument can't be applied in the current scenario. "How long would it take to pave the road? The situation the north [of Brazil] has been experiencing would not have been any different had the highway been paved," he said.

In January this year, the DNIT published a call for tender to select a company to carry out the environmental studies for the 400-km unpaved middle section of the highway, in order to proceed with paving. Experts have expressed concern that restarting the dictatorship's original project could push the notorious Arc of Deforestation even deeper into the southern part of Amazonas State. According to the authors of the INPE study, some 90% of BR-319's direct zone of influence is composed of intact forest.

"The region is mostly made up of environmentally protected areas and Indigenous lands. It will require a careful evaluation due to the region's importance to the Amazon Rainforest as a whole," said Luiz Aragão, co-author of the article and head of INPE's Land Observation and Geoinformatics Division.



*An unpaved section of BR-319. Image courtesy of IDESAM/Press.*

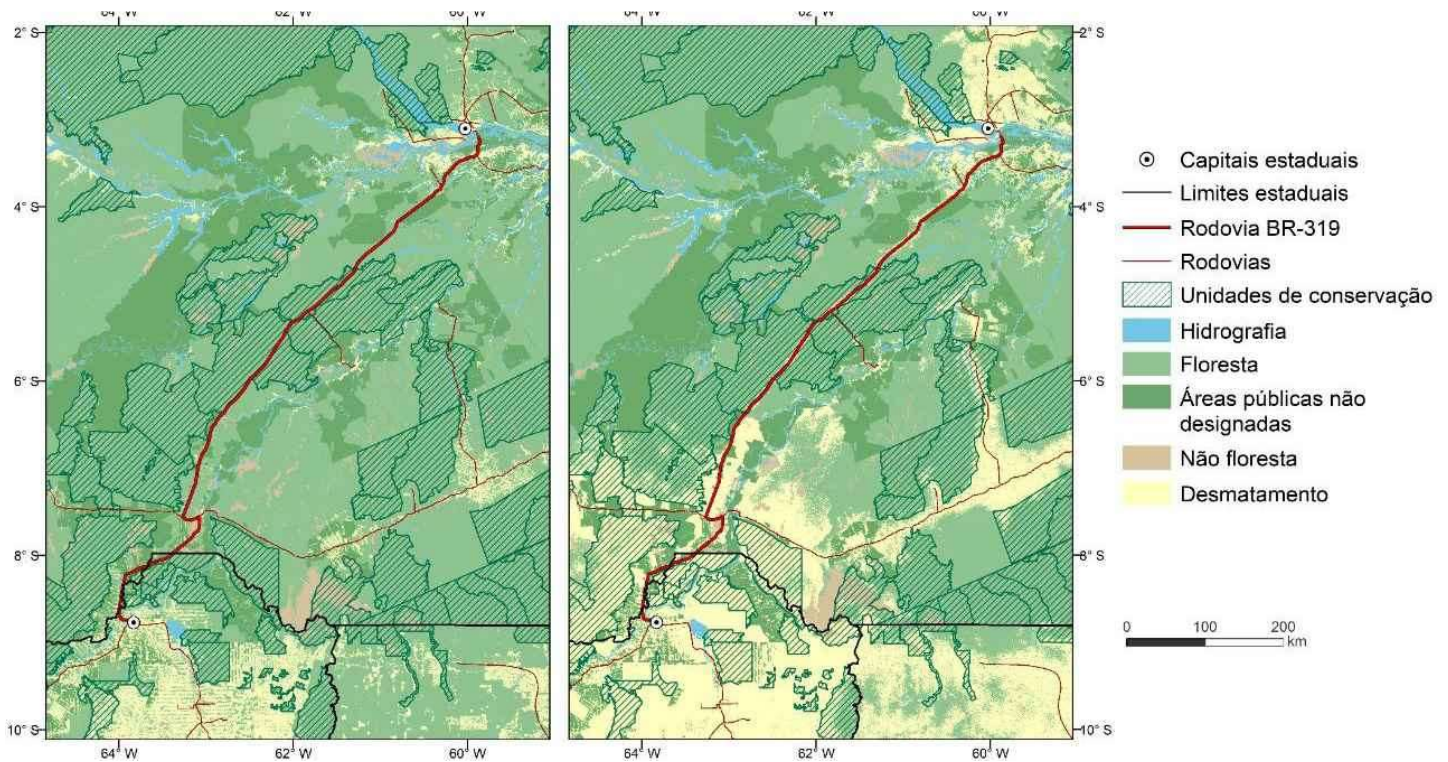
## 8 billion tons of CO<sub>2</sub>

Researchers from the Remote Sensing Center and Environmental Services Management Laboratory at the University of Minas Gerais (UFMG) published a technical note ([https://csr.ufmg.br/csr/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Nota\\_tecnica\\_112020-01\\_pavimentacao\\_BR\\_319.pdf](https://csr.ufmg.br/csr/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Nota_tecnica_112020-01_pavimentacao_BR_319.pdf)) in November 2020 on the deforestation that would be unleashed as a consequence of paving the full length of BR-319. The results were used as a reference in the INPE study.

The researchers compared two scenarios: in the first, the highway remains unpaved and the average deforestation rate of the last five years is maintained. In the second, the proposed works to pave the full stretch of the highway are carried out, and result in impacts from migratory flow, agricultural expansion and land occupancy. The technical note's conclusion about the second scenario is that "deforestation rates under these conditions will be high, reaching 9,400 square kilometers [3,600 mi<sup>2</sup>] per year by 2050."

Under the same scenario, "accumulated deforestation would reach 170,000 square kilometers [65,600 mi<sup>2</sup> by 2050], four times more than what has been projected based on the historical average."

"Accumulated CO<sub>2</sub> emissions would also more than quadruple, reaching 8 billion tons, the equivalent emissions of 22 years of deforestation in the Amazon based on 2019 rates," the UFMG researchers wrote.



The projected spread of deforestation in 2050 resulting from paving of BR-319. Image courtesy of the Remote Sensing Center and Environmental Services Management Laboratory at University of Minas Gerais (UFMG).

Raoni Rajão, head of the UFMG Environmental Services Management Lab and one of the researchers who contributed to the technical note, said there's no justification for paving the unpaved sections of BR-319.

"The project makes no sense from the environmental, economic or social points of view. It is a political demand that will give access to one of the largest regions in Brazil still untouched by land grabbers."

Rajão refuted the argument that paving the road will integrate the region with other parts of Brazil. "The Manaus Free Trade Zone generates 80 billion Brazilian reais [\$15.8 billion] per year, most of which leaves the state. It uses a specific type of transport, but this doesn't mean that it is isolated," he said.

The main transportation channels used in Amazonas, and indeed throughout much of the Amazon region, are the network of rivers. "There are different types of water vessels that could receive investment to help out local communities, such as floating schools and ambulance boats," Rajão said.

Luiz Aragão from INPE echoes the view. "There is a consolidated waterway transport system on the Madeira River," he said. "One has to analyze what gains would actually result from paving the highway, considering maintenance costs."

Rajão said the stretch connecting Porto Velho and Manaus is nearly 1,000 km (620 mi) long — about the same distance as Paris to Berlin. "Manaus is distant from the southwest of Brazil not because of asphalt, but because it is, geographically very far away," he said. "Pavement will not shorten the distance."

#### Citation:

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Banner image of the BR-319 highway by Philip M. Fearnside.

This article was reported by Mongabay's Brazil team and first published here

(<https://brasil.mongabay.com/2021/06/obras-na-br-319-ja-incentivam-desmatamento-no-amazonas/>) on our Brazil site (<https://brasil.mongabay.com/>) on June 7, 2021.



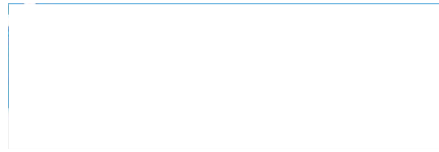
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