

News | Agriculture

## Ukraine war: Global fertiliser crunch pressures Brazil's Amazon

*Brazil agribusiness is keen to mine for potassium in resource-rich Amazon region, but Indigenous fear negative effects.*



A tractor is seen loading fertiliser before spreading it in a soybean field, near Brasilia, Brazil on February 15, 2022 [File: Adriano Machado/Reuters]

By **Sam Cowie**

16 May 2022



**Sao Paulo, Brazil** – Speaking to reporters three days after Russia began its [invasion of Ukraine](#) in late February, Brazil's far-right President Jair Bolsonaro lamented his nation's dependence on Russian fertilisers and took the opportunity to criticise Indigenous land rights.

“We have fertiliser in Brazil, at the mouth of the Madeira River,” he said, referring to the Amazon River’s largest tributary. “We have potassium in abundance, but it is [on] an Indigenous reserve.”

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The world’s largest soybean producer, Brazil is an agricultural powerhouse, with agribusiness accounting for about one quarter of national Gross Domestic Product (GDP). But the country also imports 97 percent of the roughly 10 million tonnes of potassium it uses for crop production each year, making it the world’s largest importer.

Russia and Belarus account for 44 percent of the total Brazil consumes each year, with Canada, Germany, and Israel also key providers, according to government data [published](#) by Brazil’s Valor Economico newspaper.

Now with the Ukraine conflict in its third month, and as potassium prices have tripled in the past year over [fears of looming shortages](#) amid sanctions and logistical bottlenecks, long-held interests in mining huge reserves of potassium in the Brazilian Amazon are being revived.

“These reserves are world class,” said Marcio Remedio, director of Geological Survey of Brazil, a state-owned company under the Ministry of Mines and Energy. “They have the same potential, if not more, than those in the Ural Mountains produced by Russia and Belarus, and also of Saskatchewan in Canada.”

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### **'Huge impacts'**

Brazil agribusiness bosses, many of whom support Bolsonaro, who is seeking re-election in what is expected to be [a heated October contest](#), have rallied behind the idea.



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But local [Indigenous and environmental groups](#), for their part, fear ramping up potassium mining in the Amazon will pollute local rivers, destroy land and lead to the loss of traditional fishing, hunting and subsistence agriculture.

“We are not against mining, but we know that mining brings huge impacts,” Sergio do Nascimento, a spokesperson of the Mura Indigenous group from the Soares village in Autazes, Amazonas state, told Al Jazeera.

In 2010, Canadian firm Brazil Potash, owned by Toronto-based merchant bank Forbes & Manhattan, began drilling for potassium in and around lands where Mura people live in the municipality of Autazes, 120km (75 miles) up-river from the Amazonian capital Manaus.

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The company plans to build Latin America's largest potassium mine in the region, as well as a highway, an industrial plant, power lines and a port to transport the fertiliser. But the project stalled in 2016 and its licence was suspended following a complaint by public prosecutors that the Mura were not adequately consulted.

The location where the mining company plans to operate is within 8km from the Paracuhuba and Jauary reserves, that are 9 square km and 250 square km, with 134 and 337 inhabitants each, respectively, according an online database by Brazil NGO Instituto Socioambiental.



Brazil imports 97 percent of the roughly 10 million tonnes of potassium it uses for crop production each year [File: Adriano Machado/Reuters]

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Under Brazilian law, all heavy extractive or industrial activities are currently prohibited on Indigenous reserves recognised by the Brazilian government. Brazil also is a signatory of the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention of the International Labour Organisation, which stipulates that Indigenous people must be consulted on infrastructure projects that could affect their way of life.

But one of the thorny issues is that the Brazilian government does not officially recognise the Soares and Urucurituba Mura communities located near the proposed potassium mine as “reserves”.

While the Mura people have inhabited the region since at least the 18th century, according to anthropologists – and villagers submitted demarcation requests to Brazil’s Indigenous agency Funai in 2003 – without official status as reserves, they are not entitled to the same protections.

“Once they install a mine on our land, I believe that we won’t have this territory as an Indigenous land any more,” said Nascimento, the Mura spokesperson. “This is a fight for our territory.”

## Company defends plan

A 2018 study by researchers from Brazil’s Unisinos University and New York’s Cardozo School of Law mapped the possible risks to the Mura’s territories, such as serious water and air pollution, as well as collapsed mines and

gas explosions, based on incidents at potassium mines in Russia and the Republic of Congo.

Public pre-consultations on the project have restarted and company representatives told Al Jazeera they expect the environmental licence for the project to be issued soon, though experts say it would take several more years for the project to produce potassium.

The image shows a digital advertisement for Buzzmonitor. At the top left is the Buzzmonitor logo. The main headline reads "Fique por dentro do melhor de Social Media e CRM". Below this, it says "Central de Insights Buzzmonitor". A prominent orange button contains the text "SAIBA MAIS". To the right, there is a preview of a dashboard with three guide cards: "Como usar o Buzzmonitor", "Huffaland e Drinkhamer: entenda a diferença", and "Como monitorar as tendências locais no Twitter". Below the cards is a question: "Já decidiu qual será a sua plataforma de gestão de redes sociais e atendimento multicanal para 2022?". At the bottom of the dashboard preview is a process flow diagram with the steps: PLANEJAMENTO, EXECUÇÃO, ANÁLISE, and REPENSAMENTO, each with an associated icon.

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Federal Judge Jaiza Fraxe is monitoring the company's talks with the Mura people to make sure they are treated fairly, and the project depends on her ruling. But the public prosecutors' office has accused the company of coercing members of the Mura tribe in Soares to get behind the project.

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“The company, or its interlocutors, exerted pressure and coercion on Indigenous and riverine people in the region, in order to sell their land/possessions and territories of traditional use to the company,” reads an excerpt of a document sent to Amazonas Federal Court that was signed by prosecutor Fernando Merloto Soave and seen by Al Jazeera. The document cited field visits from the end of March.

Brazil Potash denies the accusations.

“All of the acquisitions were made legally, according to Brazilian law,” said chief executive Adriano Espeschit. “Brazil Potash is an ESG [environmental, social, and corporate governance] company ... Regarding the mining impacts, we have already completed exhaustive studies.”

According to Espeschit, the project in Autazes would account for some 20 percent of Brazil’s demand for potassium. “It’s a project of huge interest to Brazilian agribusiness,” he said.

Brazil Potash also has planned projects in the municipalities of Itapiranga and Itacoatiara, both in Amazonas state and situated beside the Amazon River, 100km and 70km from Autazes, respectively, but they are not as developed as the Autazes project.

## Strategic reserves

Experts say the location of the Autazes potassium reserves along the Madeira River makes them strategic for distribution in agribusiness hubs in Brazil's farming heartland in the central-west region, and in the Amazonian agricultural frontier.



“It’s cheapest to transport by river ... cheaper than railway and much cheaper than by road,” said Antonio Galvan, head of Brazil’s powerful soybean growing group Aprosoja, allied to President Bolsonaro. “We could increase our crop production if we weren’t so dependent on [foreign] potassium,” he told Al Jazeera.

Other companies also are eyeing potassium opportunities in Autazes and the surrounding region.

This April, the Oxyer Holding Company, based in the southern state of Parana, made 14 requests to Brazil’s National Mining Agency to research for potassium on Mura Indigenous lands, according to data seen by Al Jazeera.

The data was collected by AmazoniaMinada, or “Mined Amazon”, a project that monitors mining requests in Brazil protected areas such as Indigenous lands, using records from the country’s National Mining Agency.

The company declined to comment on the matter when contacted by Al Jazeera.



Fertiliser is seen in a tractor as it is being spread in a soybean field near Brasilia [File: Adriano Machado/Reuters]

## **Way forward**

Throughout his mandate, Bolsonaro has sought to overturn current prohibitions on mining and other industrial-scale activities on Brazil’s Indigenous lands in the name of economic development.



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While Bolsonaro criticised the Autazes potassium project as “being in the hands of foreigners” in 2016 when he was a congressional representative, he met with Forbes & Manhattan chief Stan Bharti at the beginning of April with the intention to “unlock” the mine, according to local media reports and the Reuters news agency.

Forbes & Manhattan is also the owner of the proposed and highly controversial Belo Sun mine in the Amazon, which would be the world’s largest open-air gold mine, which has not begun operating. Recently, a federal judge upheld the suspension of its licence, also on grounds that local Indigenous communities were not adequately consulted and that socio-environmental impact studies did not meet requirements of Funai, the country’s Indigenous agency.

The president has not publicly commented on fears potassium mining could harm the environment or infringe on Indigenous rights, but he has argued that without potassium mined from the Autazes region, Brazil would suffer food insecurity.

Roughly a week into the Ukraine war, he tweeted that a proposed bill he sent to Congress to allow mining on Indigenous lands would resolve Brazil’s potassium woes. But experts were quick to disagree.

“Brazil is going through a [fertiliser] crisis first because it abandoned a policy of independence in terms of agricultural inputs since the end of the ’80s,”

said Raoni Rajao, a professor of environmental management at Federal University of Minas Gerais and author of a recent study on the matter.



He also pointed out that just 10 percent of Brazil’s potassium reserves are on Indigenous lands. “The biggest interests in mining on Indigenous lands is [the illegal gold mining](#) lobby that want to legalise their activities.”

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