

Brazil

Lula faces struggle to reverse Brazil's environmental destruction

Former minister says climate change will be a top priority after increase in deforestation under Bolsonaro



Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, right, and Marina Silva on election day. Silva served as environment minister in Lula's previous administration © Reuters

Michael Stott and **Michael Pooler** in São Paulo NOVEMBER 3 2022

Receive free Brazil updates

We'll send you a *myFT Daily Digest* email rounding up the latest Brazil news every morning.

Enter your email address

Sign up

Brazil's president Jair Bolsonaro skipped the COP climate talks in Glasgow last year amid stinging criticism of his environmental record, opting instead to receive honorary citizenship from the small Italian town where his [great-grandfather had lived](#).

Brazil's new president-elect, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, has very different priorities.

Within hours of winning [Sunday's vote](#), Lula pledged to halt destruction of the Amazon rainforest and restore Brazil as an international leader on climate issues. He plans to attend this year's COP27 summit in Egypt, which begins next week, even though he does not take office until January.

Green promises, though, are cheap: [Bolsonaro's](#) government also pledged last year to halt deforestation, but Amazon destruction hit a 13-year record in 2021 and he slashed budgets for environmental enforcement.

What has given Lula's words more weight has been the presence of Marina Silva — the internationally renowned former environment minister who oversaw a dramatic reduction in deforestation during Lula's first two terms — in his election coalition.

Silva broke with [Lula](#) in 2008 after losing fights against hydroelectric dams, genetically modified crops and management of the Amazon region. She reconciled with him this year after persuading him to toughen up his manifesto promises, and is widely expected to return to a key post in the new administration.

“The issues of climate change, forest protection, biodiversity and indigenous peoples will be at the top of the [new] government's list of priorities,” Silva told the Financial Times. “They will be a priority for the transport sector, the energy sector, the agriculture sector, for every sector.”

The daughter of black rubber tappers from the western state of Acre, Silva has won international environmental prizes for her life-long fight to preserve the rainforest and its indigenous people from the ravages of illegal loggers, miners and land grabbers.

She agreed to back Lula this time after he agreed to reword his pledge of “net zero deforestation” — meaning forest loss could be offset by other measures — to read “zero deforestation”.

“Silva returning to the post as environment minister would be a strong signal of the new administration’s commitment to ending large-scale deforestation — as is the president-elect’s decision to attend the COP summit,” said Eric Christian Pedersen, head of responsible investments at Nordea Asset Management.

Silva is under no illusions as to the scale of the task after a vast rural constituency was emboldened to take the law into their own hands during Bolsonaro’s presidency. Every day an area of rainforest as big as 2,000 football pitches is razed, according to Imazon, a non-profit government monitoring group. Deforestation has accelerated in recent months as land-grabbers try to maximise their gains before a new government cracks down.

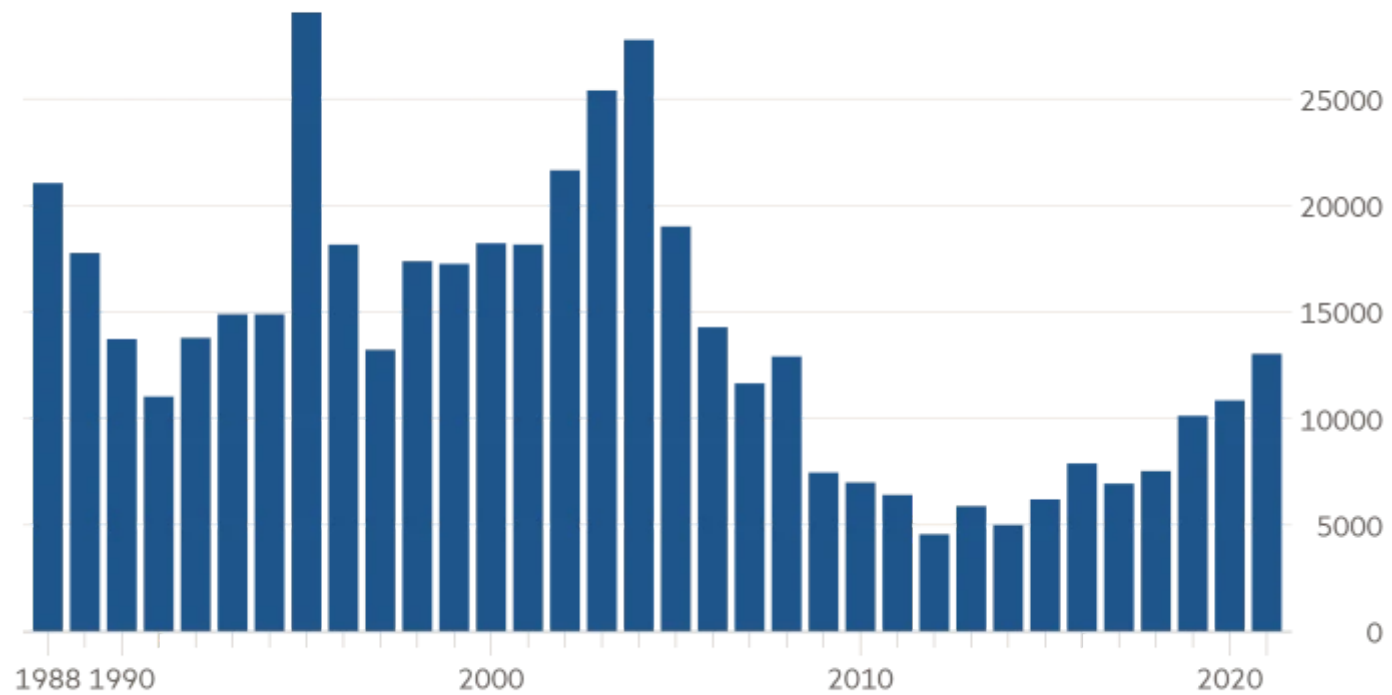
“Things have changed and the picture is much worse than it was in 2003,” Silva said. “The Bolsonaro government didn’t just weaken [environment] management, it didn’t just cut budgets, it also empowered the sectors which are damaging for indigenous people and forest protection and gave a lot of economic power to the most backward elements in agribusiness.”

Raoni Rajão, professor of environmental management at the Federal University of Minas Gerais, said that while the goal of zero illegal deforestation was credible, it was “practically impossible within the next decade”.

However, there is scope to tackle the large-scale tree clearances in areas of 25 to 500 hectares, he added.

Environmental destruction has increased over the past decade

Deforestation of the Brazilian Amazon, measured via satellite images, by year (sq km)



Source: Brazil's National Institute for Space Research (Inpe)

© FT

“This deforestation can be drastically reduced and even eliminated if there are policies in place,” Rajão said. “You need to make the consequences [of lawbreaking] greater than the profit, then it will be possible to reverse it.”

will be possible to reverse it.

Prosecuting illegal loggers and miners in the vast Amazon area has proven notoriously difficult. Only a fraction of offenders serve prison time, and the number of environmental fines levied has plunged under Bolsonaro.

Congressional elections last month underlined the political clout of Brazil's agribusiness lobby and the hostility of Bolsonaro's conservative base to green issues. Bolsonaro blamed the burning of the Amazon on indigenous peoples in a recorded speech to the UN in 2020.

Ricardo Salles, who resigned as [Bolsonaro's environment minister](#) after being accused of illegally trafficking Amazon timber and proposing to take advantage of the coronavirus pandemic to relax environmental rules, was recently elected to congress for São Paulo, Brazil's biggest state, with over 640,000 votes.

That was almost three times as many as Silva's 236,000, though she won enough support to be elected as one of the state's 70 deputies.

"Brazilian society is divided between progress and backwardness, between democracy and authoritarianism, between racism and respect for diversity, between machismo and respect for women," Silva said of the election result.

Like many progressives in Brazil, Silva believes that her country can expand its economy sustainably if it boosts productivity from existing farmland and harnesses the potential of natural resources without destroying them.

"We need . . . to create new value chains, new products, new materials and bet heavily on the bio-economy," she said. "We have a lot of opportunities because we are able to have a clean energy matrix, we can produce electric cars using clean energy to do so, we can produce green hydrogen . . . we have so many possibilities."

Additional reporting by Bryan Harris and Carolina Ingizza

Climate Capital



Where climate change meets business, markets and politics. [Explore the FT's coverage here.](#)

Are you curious about the FT's environmental sustainability commitments? [Find out more about our science-based targets here](#)