

Lula vowed to safeguard the Amazon. After Bolsonaro, it won't be easy.

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BRASILIA — When Luis Inácio Lula da Silva was elected president of Brazil on Sunday, Gustavo Conde felt a sense of relief — for himself and everyone.

“It feels like we can breathe again,” the 23-year-old cook said in downtown Brasilia. “And so will the planet.”

If Lula keeps his campaign promises to safeguard the Amazon rainforest, analysts say, Brazil could have a major impact on the worldwide fight against climate change, after years of accelerating deforestation under President Jair Bolsonaro. Scientists warn that the lungs of the planet, vital to slowing global warming, are approaching a tipping point.

“Let’s fight for zero deforestation. The planet needs the Amazon alive,” Lula, who served two terms as president from 2003 to 2010, said in his victory address Sunday night. “A standing tree is worth more than tons of wood illegally harvested by those who think only of easy profit.”

During the bitterly fought campaign, Lula made the environment central to his pitch. Whereas Bolsonaro has promoted the development of the rainforest, Lula pledged to reverse many of his policies.

On Sunday, he vowed to restart the surveillance and monitoring of the rainforest, stop the invasion and burning of Indigenous lands, and fight other environmental crimes, including mining.

Marina Silva, who was environmental minister under Lula and spokeswoman for environmental issues during his campaign, said the challenge is greater than when he first took office in 2003, but he will take concrete steps to strengthen the country’s main environmental agencies, which were largely dismantled or neutered under Bolsonaro.

“Lula is as convinced today about the environmental issue as he has always been about the social issue,” Silva told *The Washington Post*. She pointed to his record: During his first two terms, deforestation fell by about three quarters from a peak in 2004.

The significance of the Amazon, a region that occupies about 40 percent of South America's land mass and contains a third of the world's trees, in the fight against climate change can hardly be overstated.

When healthy, the rainforest's annual carbon uptake is similar to Germany's total greenhouse gas emissions. The landscape also plays a crucial role in regulating weather patterns. Its trees release huge amounts of moisture into the air, generating a river of rain that can affect precipitation half a continent away.

The rainforest spreads across nine nations, but some 60 percent is in Brazil. Under Bolsonaro, who campaigned for president on promises to open up the Amazon to business, rates of deforestation in the Amazon have reached record highs. Satellite images reveal the ecosystem has shrunk by about 17 percent, and parts of the forest now emit more carbon dioxide than they absorb.

More than 2 billion trees in the Amazon have been cut down or burned on Bolsonaro's watch, according to Imazon and MapBiomas, two of Brazil's most renowned environmental research groups.

A study published in the journal *Nature Climate Change* in March showed the Amazon could soon approach a "tipping point," at which swaths of the rainforest convert irreversibly to drier, more open grasslands. This would release millions of tons of carbon stored in the rainforest's soils and trees, making it almost impossible for the world to achieve its most ambitious climate goals and avert catastrophic warming, scientists have warned.

A recent analysis published by the website Carbon Brief found that if Lula follows through on a pledge to enforce Brazil's Forest Code, a law that requires private landowners to preserve native vegetation on a certain fraction of their property, he could reduce deforestation by 89 percent by the end of the decade.

"This is a key element of stabilizing global climate, second to stopping fossil fuel use," tweeted climatologist Stefan Rahmstorf, head of Earth systems analysis at the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research in Germany. The morning after Lula's win, he wrote, was "a day of hope for the world."

The victory was inspiring for Manoela Machado, an ecologist at the Woodwell Climate Research Center who studies fire prevention in the Amazon.

"The promise or the hope now is the government won't be so permissive" of illegal logging and land clearing, she said. "It means I'm more energetic to fight than ever before."

The government of Norway said Monday it would resume financial aid to Brazil to reduce deforestation through a global protection fund, Brazilian media reported.

Norwegian Environmental Minister Espen Barth Eide told the news agency NTB that his government will contact Lula's team to resume the aid that was halted in 2019.

But Lula faces a tremendous challenge, given the scope and impact of policies passed under Bolsonaro and the accumulated damage, analysts and activists say.

“It will be very difficult to reverse the environmental policy overnight,” said Marcio Astrini, executive secretary of the advocacy network Climate Observatory. “Bolsonaro has sabotaged the institutions that fight environmental crimes. It will take time to restructure these public agencies.”

Brazil has long struggled to bring order to the Amazon, but conditions have worsened significantly under Bolsonaro.

Environmentalists say he has emboldened criminals by siding with those who want to exploit resources for economic gain, assailing the institutions charged with protecting the rainforest and its Indigenous communities and permitting illegal mining.

Some analysts warn that a bloc of lawmakers with ties to agriculture could try to block Lula’s environmental policies and pass legislation to facilitate land-grabbing and illegal mining.

Lula, who has spoken of turning Brazil into a “climate champion,” said Sunday his administration would be open to “international cooperation to preserve the Amazon” through investment or scientific research.

“What is new about this time is that he sees climate and the Amazon as an economic asset, and as a vehicle to put Brazil back in the international scenario, after Bolsonaro’s years of isolation,” said Pedro Abramovay, executive director for Latin America and the Caribbean at Open Society.

In Colombia, 42 percent of which is considered part of the Amazon, President Gustavo Petro has pledged to work with Lula and other South American leaders to combat deforestation.

But those plans are already proving difficult to implement for Petro, and have exposed differences in vision between the two leftist leaders. While Petro suggested building an anti-oil bloc in the region, Lula has rejected the idea for Brazil.

“When governments change, it doesn’t automatically change what happens to the forest,” said Federal University of Minas Gerais professor Raoni Rajão, one of Brazil’s leading researchers on deforestation. He said it was unclear how Lula would bring new infrastructure projects in the Amazon without causing more damage.

Any substantial change will take time, Rajão said. The budgets of the environmental control agencies have already been allocated for 2023.

Gabriela Sá Pessoa in São Paulo, and Samantha Schmidt and Diana Durán in Bogotá, Colombia, contributed to this report.

