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China trade seen as lever for Brazil's green economy

Researchers say bilateral ties can boost renewables and livestock sustainability

By Daniela Chiaretti — São Paulo

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Raoni Rajão — Photo: Agência Senado

A group of researchers argues that China's purchases of Brazilian commodities should not be seen as a driver of deforestation, but rather as a force supporting climate stability and biodiversity conservation—in other words, that bilateral trade can promote green growth in Brazil.

The proposal was outlined in an article published last week in the Chinese edition of "Financial Times," titled "Can China's demand make Brazil greener?" The piece was authored by Raoni Rajão, a professor at the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG), along with Jintao Xu of Peking University and Jinlong Liu of Renmin University—both leading institutions with close ties to the Chinese government.

"Over the past decade, the dominant narrative surrounding Brazil's trade relationship with China has focused on environmental risks. China's vast demand for soybeans and beef has been portrayed as a major driver of deforestation in the Amazon and the Brazilian Savanna (Cerrado) (...). This concern is neither superficial nor unfounded. However, it is incomplete," the authors wrote.

The article argues that the deepening of trade ties between Brasília and Beijing "has also contributed to significant environmental changes in Brazil, particularly in renewable energy and livestock production." It adds: "The central question now is whether this positive dynamic can be consolidated and expanded, so that trade becomes not only compatible with environmental protection, but also an active force supporting it."

solar energy, for example, now accounts for more than 10% of Brazil's electricity generation. Another example is the impact of the so-called "China cattle." China requires that the beef it imports come from animals no older than 30 months at slaughter. Access to the Chinese market—currently the main destination for Brazilian beef exports—has driven significant changes in production systems, including improvements in herd management, pasture productivity, and cattle genetics.

In Mato Grosso, fewer than 2% of cattle slaughtered in 2006 were under 24 months old. By 2025, this share had risen to 43%.

The climate impact is also significant. Cattle produce methane through enteric fermentation. A study by UFMG estimates that a typical extensive livestock system in Brazil emits around 59 kilograms of CO₂-equivalent methane per kilogram of beef. With earlier slaughter, emissions are reduced by 40%.

"These gains show how market access requirements can reshape production practices to improve emissions intensity," the authors noted.

The next step, they argue, is to encourage Chinese buyers to prioritize beef that complies with Brazilian environmental legislation. The outbreak of African swine fever in 2018 reduced China's pork herd and increased its beef imports. Brazilian exports to China and Hong Kong rose from 1.1 million tonnes to 1.75 million tonnes between 2020 and 2025.

The surge in imports has drawn complaints from Chinese producers. "To curb the inflow of cheaper meat into China, authorities set a quota limiting Brazilian beef imports to two-thirds of 2025 levels," Rajão said.

This context underpins the authors' proposal. "When volumes are limited, importers need to set priorities. Instead of basing decisions solely on price, they could prioritize suppliers that demonstrate compliance with Brazilian environmental legislation," they argue—in other words, purchasing from producers that do not contribute to deforestation.

Minas Gerais and Pará already provide data covering approximately 1.5 million rural properties and 50 million head of cattle through the Selo Verde Platform, in compliance with Brazilian law. "If access to more favorable import conditions in China were linked, formally or informally, to traceability and compliance with Brazilian environmental legislation, the signal sent to the market would be significant," the authors conclude.

Translation: Todd Harkin