

THE LAST AGRICULTURAL FRONTIER



**The increase of deforestation
in less-protected Mercosur
territories.**



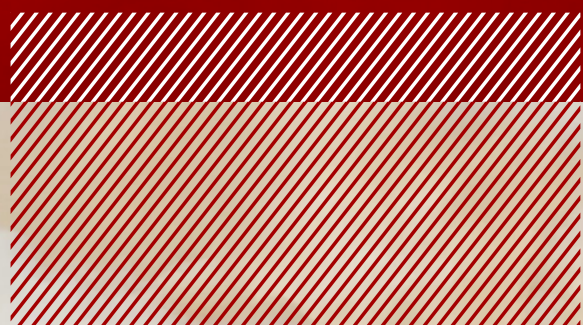
**Friends of
the Earth
Europe**



Deforestation in the Mercosur region has been a source of friction in the negotiations of the EU-Mercosur trade agreements, and one of the main reasons for stopping the ratification process during Bolsonaro's mandate. In the last months, the new Brazilian government has been emphasizing the recent gains on the fight against deforestation on the Amazon, which has indeed shown effective improvement over this year. However, other biomes in Mercosur often go overlooked in the discussions about environmental policies and climate change worldwide, without the same level of protection or attention that is currently granted for the Amazon.

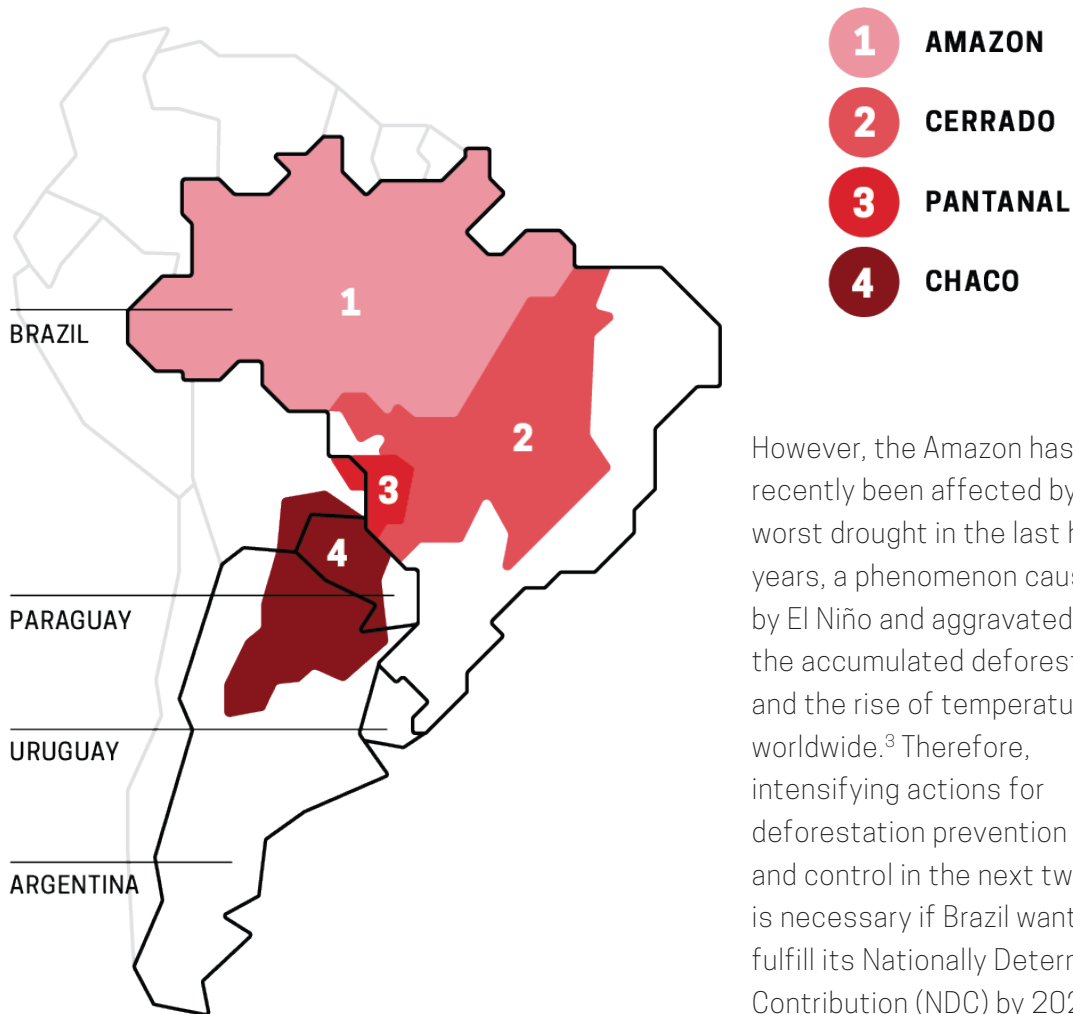
This factsheet aims to shed light on the recent changes on the other biomes that occupy Brazil, Argentina, and Paraguay. The Cerrado, the Pantanal and the Argentinian Chaco all face a critical situation, with alarming rates of deforestation. In common, all of them are the object of desire from a global connected agro industry that is still trying to hastily expand its areas within those ecosystems. This situation is expected to worsen with the signing of an agreement between the European Union and Mercosur, which facilitates even greater pressure for beef, soy, and other products that impact the Brazilian environment.

Simultaneously, recent data indicates that the extremely violent situation that the Brazilian countryside faced in the last few years still doesn't show any sign of improvement. During the first six months of the year, conflicts involving rural communities, including indigenous groups, have even increased with 8% compared to the situation in the Bolsonaro era.



SOUTHAMERICAN OVERLOOKED BIOMES

The situation in the Amazon has seen undeniable improvement throughout this year, with a relevant decrease in deforestation as the country rebuilds its environmental policy and its enforcement. The deforestation for the first nine months of the year is equivalent to approximately one-third of the same period last year.¹²



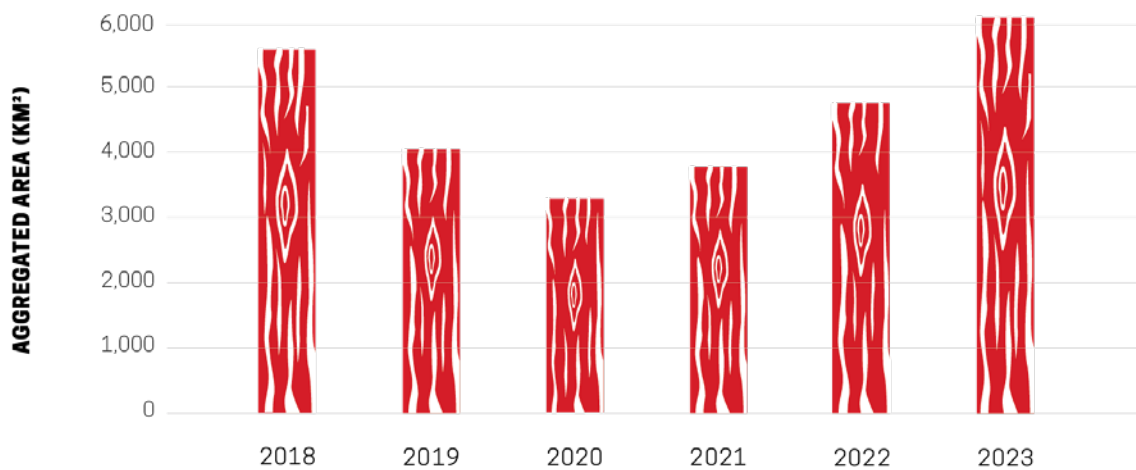
However, the Amazon has recently been affected by the worst drought in the last hundred years, a phenomenon caused by El Niño and aggravated by the accumulated deforestation and the rise of temperatures worldwide.³ Therefore, intensifying actions for deforestation prevention and control in the next two years is necessary if Brazil wants to fulfill its Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) by 2025, when it will host COP30.⁴

Those relatively good figures on the Amazon can be distracting from an increasingly dire situation in other Brazilian biomes and those of neighboring countries that also affects the carbon emissions in the country and beyond its borders. **The Cerrado, the Pantanal, and the Chaco have all exhibited significant deterioration this year, in contrast to Brazil's most well-known biome.**

Since the beginning of the year, the Cerrado has been subject to a succession of adverse data. The most recent shows that it has recorded the highest deforestation rate for the month of September ever. It has grown 89% compared to the same month last year, and the accumulated data for the year so far shows the worst situation since measurements began in 2018.⁵



DEFORESTATION IN THE CERRADO DURING THE FIRST 9 MONTHS OF THE YEAR



Source: Deter / Inpe

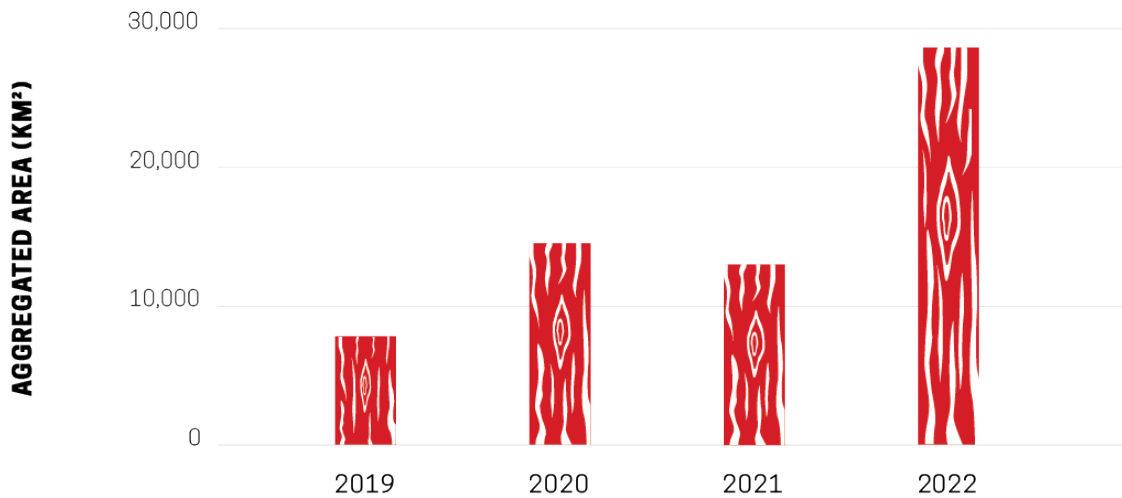
The Brazilian Cerrado is the world's most biodiverse savannah, home to traditional communities, including indigenous peoples, and hosting 5% of the planet's plant and animal species.⁶ Despite its importance, it is not subject to the same legal protection as the Amazon, as most of the deforestation that occurs in the biome is legal.⁷ The government has opened a public consultation for a conservation plan of the biome, but effective policies, like those implemented in the Amazon, are still lacking.⁸

The situation in the Pantanal biome is even more critical. Although relatively small when compared to other Brazilian biomes, it is the world's largest tropical wetland, stretching over Paraguay and Bolivia, with significant importance for the water resources and biodiversity.

The Brazilian Pantanal lost an area equivalent to the city of Rio de Janeiro in the last four years⁹, and some researchers say that it is facing the imminent risk of collapse if this course is not reverted.¹⁰

For now, the situation in the biome takes a different trajectory. **The deforestation in the Pantanal is accelerating, and increased by more than half in the first 7 months of the year.**¹¹

DEFORESTATION IN PANTANAL DURING THE FIRST 9 MONTHS OF THE YEAR



Source: Mapbiomas

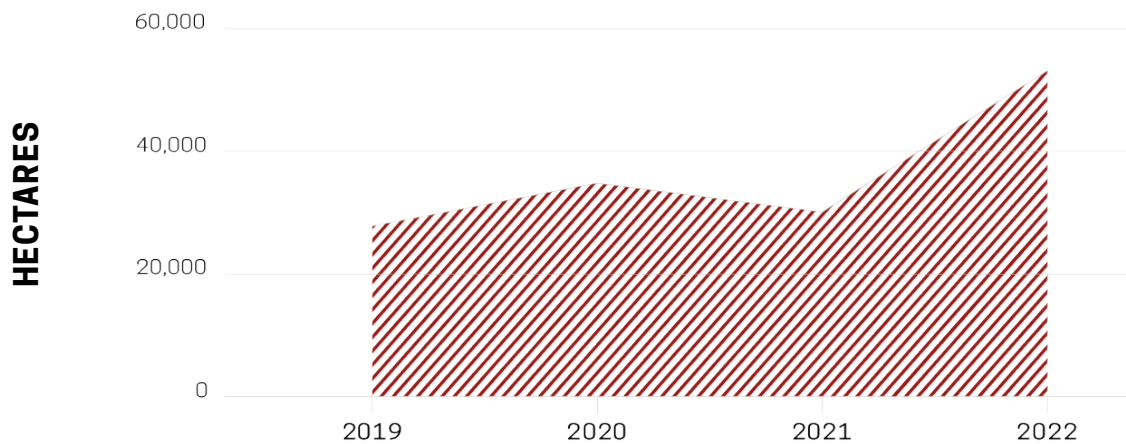
The area of the biome in Brazil is 93% privately owned, and, just as the Cerrado, it lacks the protection granted to the Amazon.¹² Most of this deforestation happens in the state of Mato Grosso, the state with the largest cattle herd in the country and where the highest soybean production is found.¹³ Its government is now under pressure to change and enforce a set of new policies to curb this problem.¹⁴

The Cerrado and the Pantanal are not only overlooked by the Brazilian government but are also the object of another common omission. The areas of these two biomes are not protected by the new deforestation law approved by the European Parliament.¹⁵ Approximately three-quarters of the area of these biomes do not meet the forest concept used by the law.¹⁶

Beyond Brazilian borders, the Chaco in Argentina is also following the same pattern. While the data shows a slight improvement in the forest of Paraguay in recent years, the situation in Argentina has shown a worsening trend.¹⁷ Recent estimates show that the Gran Chaco in Argentina has lost more than 50,000 hectares of forest in the first half of 2023.¹⁸ In the Chaco province alone, the destruction of trees has seen an increase of 74% since last year.¹⁹

Photo: Victor Moriyama | Greenpeace

TREE COVER LOSS IN THE CHACO PROVINCE



Source: Global Forest Watch

The failure to adhere to laws and court rulings, coupled with the leniency of sanctions against those responsible for forest loss, contributes to deforestation in the region. A new integrated livestock plan seeks to address this issue, but so far there's no concrete policy aimed to tackle this problem.²⁰

VIOLENCE IN RURAL AREAS STILL ON THE RISE

The violent situation that threatens traditional and rural communities in Brazil still has not shown any degree of improvement.

The initial figures regarding land conflicts released in 2023 do not indicate the urgent solution that Brazilian society needs in this regard. **Preliminary data on land conflicts for the first six months of this year revealed an 8% increase in the cases compared to the same period in 2022, marking the second-highest record in the last ten years.**²¹

The vast majority of them refer to conflicts over land (791), followed by rural slave labor (102) and conflicts over water (80). It estimates that 527,000 people were subject to violence during these six months.

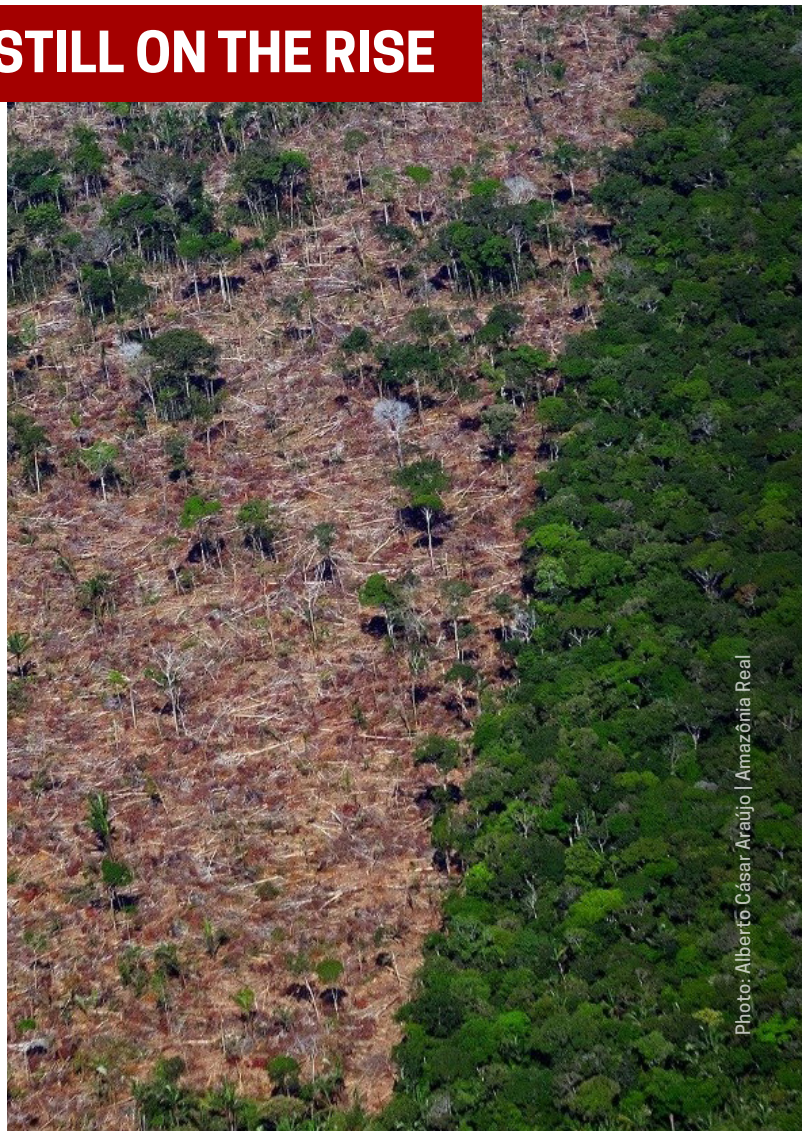
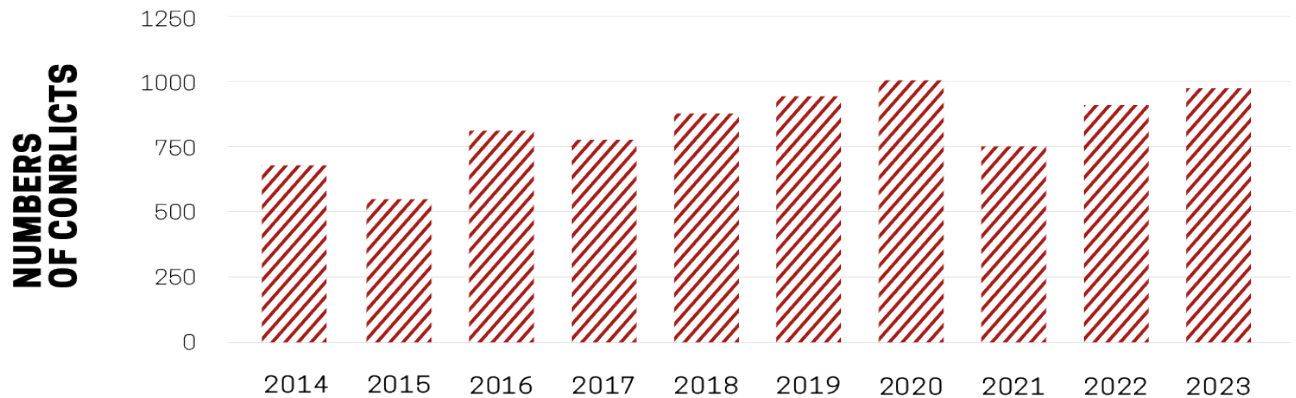


Photo: Alberto César Araújo | Amazônia Real

CONFLICTS IN THE BRAZILIAN COUNTRYSIDE ON THE FIRST SIX MONTHS OF THE YEAR



Source: The Pastoral Land Commission (Comissão Pastoral da Terra)

The expansion of agribusiness has been repeatedly identified as the cause of a significant portion of these conflicts. Recent studies have shown numerous issues, including land grabbing, deforestation, and violence, in areas where the US-based company Bunge operates. The company's business model implicitly incentivizes the violence associated with agribusiness expansion, as it plays a critical role in buying commodities and providing interest-bearing capital to the entire production chain.²²

In addition to conflicts, Bunge suppliers are also involved in deforestation itself, a connection that has been widely demonstrated in studies and reports.^{23,24} In a recent example that illustrates this connection, Bunge purchased soy from a family that was fined for illegal planting in a threatened area of the Cerrado.²⁵

Bunge's clients include major European supermarkets, such as Carrefour, Casino, Ahold Delhaize, Jumbo, and Aldi South – some of which have launched investigations regarding the company's deforestation impact.²⁶



Photo: Christiano-Antonucci | Secom-MT

CONCLUSION

Despite improvements in the Amazon environmental policy, a structural problem still threatens the environment in Brazil and other Mercosur countries.

Photo: João Paulo Guimarães | Repórter Brasil

The worsening conditions in the Cerrado, Pantanal, and Gran Chaco illustrate how the agribusiness continues to exert pressure to expand its frontiers and might just be shifting its deforestation from the Amazon to other areas that are less protected by environmental policies in Mercosur, and not covered by the new European deforestation law. Agricultural production is precisely the largest cause of greenhouse gas emissions in the region. This production doesn't occur in a vacuum, but is linked to a rising global demand for Brazilian agricultural products, including those from Europe. This situation is expected to worsen with the signing of an agreement between the European Union and Mercosur, which facilitates even greater pressure for beef, soy, and other products that impact the Brazilian environment.

This is the fourth factsheet in a series covering the most recent data and research on the situation of agribusiness and the environment in Mercosur throughout 2023.



Photo: Fernando Martinho | Repórter Brasil

ENDNOTES

Photo: Fernando Martinho | Repórter Brasil | WAP

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Photo: João Paulo Guimarães | Repórter Brasil

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COMMISSIONED BY Friends of the Earth Europe
CONTRIBUTIONS Gaëlle Cau, Julie Zalcmán & Paul de Clerck
LAYOUT & INFOGRAPHICS Débora De Maio | Estúdio AVOA & Bruna Cassim

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Friends of the Earth Europe
Rue d' Edimbourg 26
1050 Brussels, Belgium

+32 (0) 2893 1000
info@foeeurope.org
friendsoftheearth.eu
twitter.com/foeeurope
Facebook.com/foeeurope



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