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Fires burning the forests of Mato Grosso next to previously scorched land. Source: Planet Labs Inc.

## Here's Where the Amazon Is Burning and Why It's Going to Get Worse

By [Mira Rojanasakul](#) and [Tatiana Freitas](#)

August 23, 2019



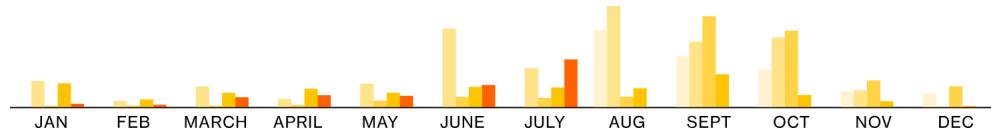
Climate change, deregulation and global trade disputes are perilously straining Brazil's Amazon.

Fires are raging across the country. Deforestation rates reached startling highs in July. An [escalating](#) trade dispute with the U.S. could force China to lean even more heavily on Brazil—already its top supplier of soy. And it all comes as Brazil's far-right populist president, Jair Bolsonaro, has pledged to open up the 2-million-square-mile forest—including in protected indigenous areas—to more farming and mining.

As Brazil's fires have renewed international concern about the Amazon, pressure is growing for Bolsonaro. He has accused—without evidence—non-governmental organizations of setting the blazes that have blanketed parts of the country in smoke. And he said figures showing a surge in tree loss last month were made up and fired the head of the government agency responsible for tracking the data.

Monthly tree loss within the Amazon

## Why the Amazon Rainforest Is on Fire—and Why it's Getting Worse



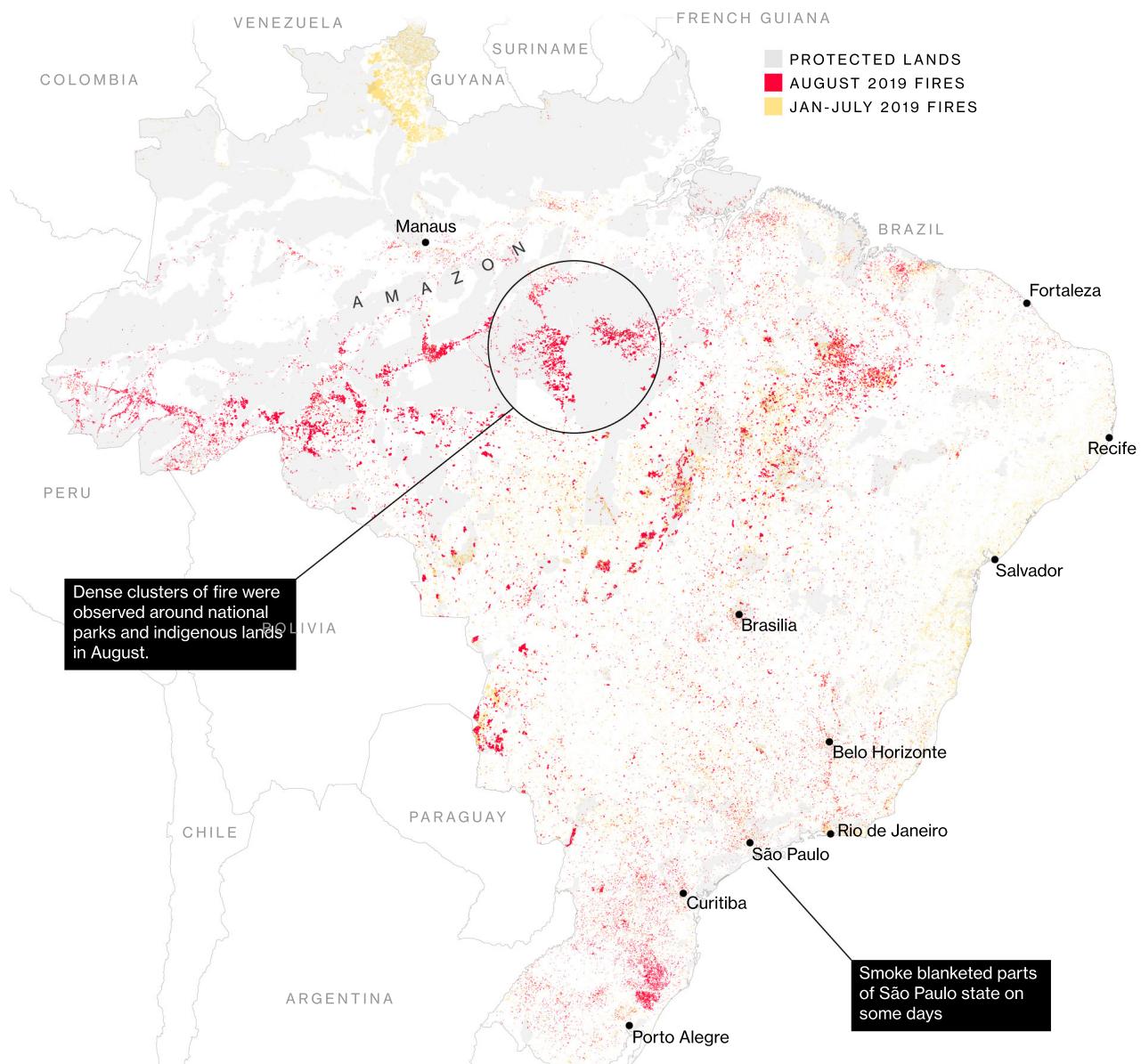
Note: Data starts from August 2015.  
Source: INPE

Prosecutors in Pará—a state in northern Brazil—are investigating a major fire that started on Aug. 10 along a key highway for grain transportation. The wildfire was allegedly caused by local producers, who wanted to show the president they wanted to work. Just after the so-called “day of fire,” wildfire reports jumped in the region, according to data from Brazil’s National Institute for Space Research, known as INPE.

Bolsonaro has dismissed European leaders’ concerns about his government’s environmental policies after Norway followed Germany and froze millions of dollars in financial aid to an Amazon rainforest preservation fund.

His latest clash with Europe involved French President Emmanuel Macron, who has said the increase in Amazon’s fires is an “international crisis” that G7 countries should discuss during their summit that begins on Aug. 24 and has threatened to block a trade deal between European Union and Mercosur countries, saying Bolsonaro lied about commitments on tackling climate change. Bolsonaro said Macron’s suggestion “evokes a misplaced colonialist mindset in the 21st century.”

Fires observed within Brazil in 2019, as of Aug. 23



  
Source:

More than 75,000 fires have swept across the country since January—an 84% increase compared to the same time last year, according to the INPE, and worse than during a severe drought in 2016. The totals are higher than expected, even taking into account that fires are common this time of the year, at the end of the dry season. Winds from a cold front have helped fires spread.

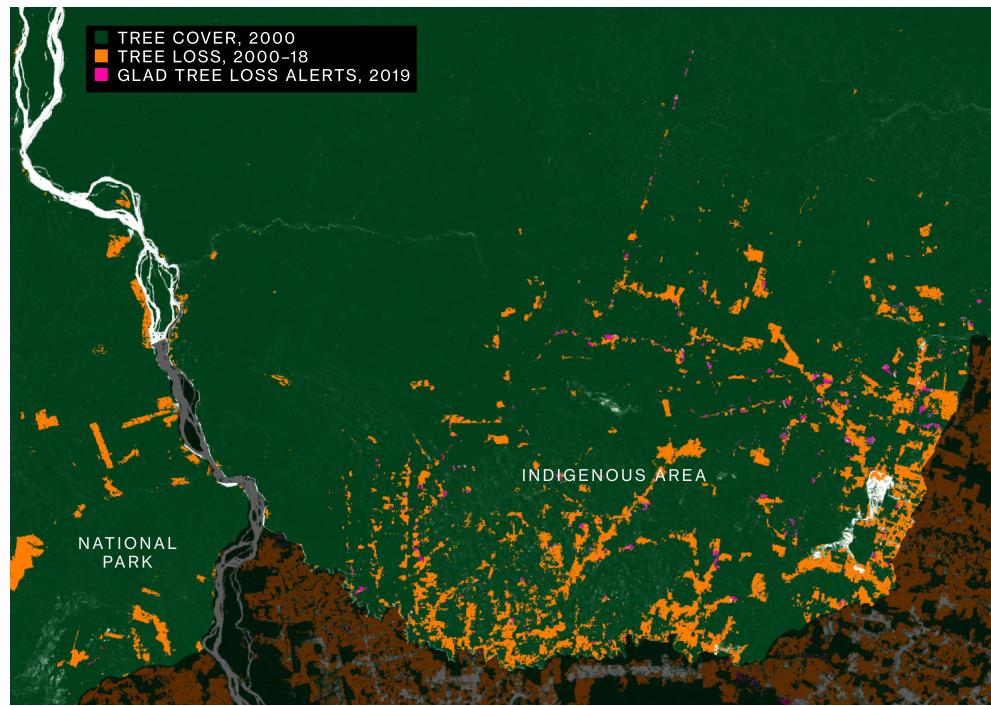
Brazil has long relied on agriculture for economic development. Stringent conservation efforts had limited farming's encroachment on the Amazon, though data from INPE show that trend broke in 2012.

The degradation of the Amazon is more apparent when you see exactly where trees have been lost. The rate of deforestation in the Amazon jumped 73% from 2012 to 2018.

Indigenous lands had largely been effective barriers against deforestation—their status is protected in the constitution. Amending this would be nearly impossible, but Bolsonaro has taken other measures, including defunding or reducing personnel from the agencies responsible for enforcing those protections.

Illegal farming has long eaten away at the edges of protected regions within the state of Pará. Farmers who illegally raze the forest often are not prosecuted, and a law passed in July makes it easier for them to claim legal ownership of land developed unlawfully. Bolsonaro, who was elected with massive support from rural areas, has claimed that environmental groups and regulators are an “industry of fines,” and a [New York Times investigation](#) found that his administration has not enforced laws on the books intended to preserve the Amazon.

#### Deforestation within protected areas

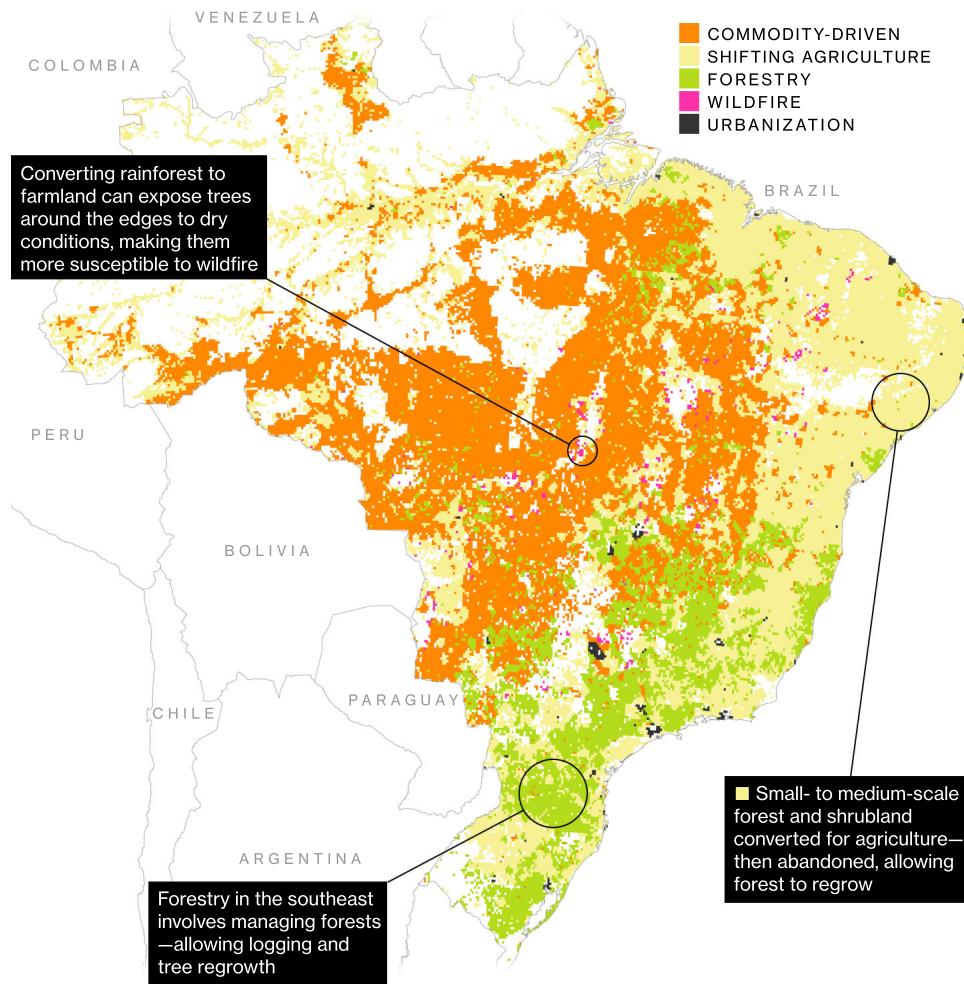


Source: Hansen, University of Maryland, Google, USGS, NASA, Protected Planet and GLAD alerts via Global Forest Watch

Commodities are key drivers behind the increased pace of deforestation. An [analysis of tree loss from 2001 to 2015](#) shows that most of the Amazon was lost to commodity-driven deforestation—or “long-term, permanent conversion of forest and shrubland to a non-forest land use such as agriculture, mining or energy infrastructure.”

#### Tree loss by dominant driver, 2001-2015

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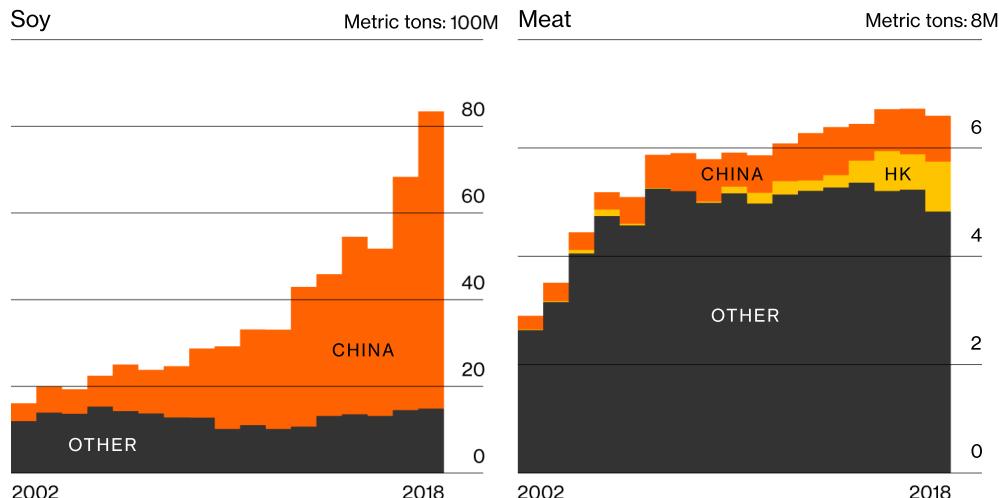


Source: Classifying drivers of forest loss, Curtis P., et al, via Global Forest Watch

Brazilian soy exports have increased more than fourfold since 2000—driven almost entirely by demand from China. Ongoing trade disputes with the U.S. have only increased demand in China: Soy shipments from Brazil increased 27% from 2017 to 2018, boosting domestic prices. Beef exports have surged as well. And as the African swine fever outbreak has decimated pork production in China, their demand for Brazilian beef is expected to increase.

Growing markets for Brazilian soy and beef meant producers needed more land. To meet demand, pastureland in central and southern parts of the country was replaced with soybeans, forcing ranchers to head north, clearing forests for cattle.

#### Brazilian soy and meat exports, 2002–2018



Source: Brazil Ministry of Agriculture

A decade ago, three of the largest meat-packing suppliers in Brazil—JBS, Marfrig and Minerva—signed an agreement with Greenpeace to no longer source from farmers involved in deforestation. But the environmental organization discontinued the program after a bribery scandal engulfed beef companies in Brazil in 2017. Large companies must deal with local suppliers, who then source from many small farmers—and short of tracking individual cattle, the chain is nearly impossible to verify.

The soybean industry has used satellite images to monitor deforestation and the conversion of forests into soy farms since 2006, when the country's soy-processor group Abiove created a so-called “soy moratorium.” Cargill Inc., Bunge Ltd., Archer-Daniels-Midland Co. and Louis Dreyfus Co. are among the companies that have committed to not purchasing soybeans from newly deforested land in the Amazon.

Still, since the start of the moratorium, soybean acreage in the Amazon is up more than fourfold, representing 13% of Brazil's total soybean area in the 2017-18 season—though only 1.4% of the plantings happened in newly deforested areas. That's largely because the oilseed is mostly grown in areas that had already been cleared for pastures.

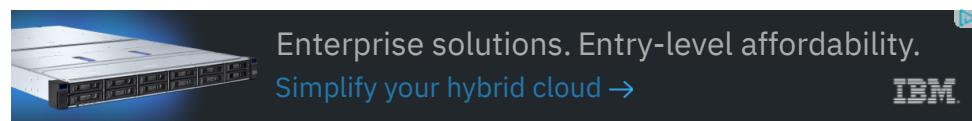
As international pressure over the Amazon fires has grown—with some countries considering bans on Brazilian exports—Bolsonaro acknowledged the increase in deforestation during a Aug. 22 live stream on social media, but said some countries are taking the moment “to undermine our agribusiness, our economy and repress Brazil to a subordinate position.”

“We have to respond to the world, show that we are responsible and say that the Amazon is ours.”

Editor: Alex Tribou

With assistance from Brittany Harris and Gerson Freitas Jr.

Additional sources: All country boundaries from Natural Earth

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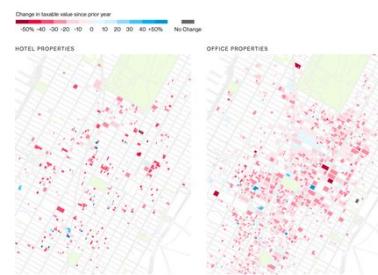
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