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New hope for the Amazon?

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by *William F. Laurance*



[Caption]

A Brazilian report has concluded that the government should alter its aggressive strategy on Amazonian development. If implemented, the recommendations offer real hope for slowing unbridled deforestation, say Brazil's ecologists. But Amazon-watchers worry that the recommendations will not come to pass.

The Brazilian Amazon has the world's highest rate of forest destruction, averaging nearly five million acres a year since 1995 - the equivalent of eight football fields a minute. In addition, large expanses of forest are degraded each year by logging, wildfires, habitat fragmentation, overhunting, and illegal gold mining. Much of the forest exploitation is unlawful; for example, most Amazonian timber is harvested illegally, according to recent studies, with no environmental controls or payment of government royalties.

In 2002 the already-high rate of forest loss leapt upward, to 6.4 million acres per year. A key driver of rising deforestation is a wave of new government-sponsored roads, highways, and infrastructure projects, which are penetrating deep into the heart of the Amazon, along with a rapid expansion of industrial soybean farms. Land speculation and colonization have risen sharply along new roads and planned routes.

"These infrastructure projects provide perverse subsidies for frontier expansion and unplanned forest conversion and degradation," said Carlos Peres, a Brazilian ecologist at the University of East Anglia, UK.

The bevy of infrastructure projects was initiated by the previous Brazilian government, but many had hoped that the new administration, headed by center-left President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, would be more sympathetic to the environment. However, the Lula administration's three-year development plan, released earlier this year, promised only more of the same for the Amazon.

"Lula is facing many serious challenges, such as fighting poverty, and the environment is far from his main concerns," said Ana Albernaz, a Brazilian biologist with the Goeldi Museum in Belém who studies the effects of infrastructure expansion on Amazonian forests. "There is strong

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But new hopes for the Amazon have been raised by the report of the "Interministerial Working Group on Deforestation," which was created by Presidential Decree in July 2003. The report asserts that a number of planned infrastructure projects - including the vast Porto Velho-Manaus and Humaita-Labrea highways, the Urucu-Porto Velho gas pipeline, and the Belo Monte and Madeira River hydroelectric plants - should be re-evaluated. According to the report, such projects would "open a new front of occupation" and "reproduce the [destructive] model of development which has predominated in Amazonia over the last 20 years."

The value of the report is clear, says Mark Cochrane, an ecologist based at Michigan State University who has worked extensively in Brazil. "The report is vital because it highlights a direct link between new infrastructure projects and Amazonian deforestation," he said.

"In the past, the government tried, absurdly, to argue that you could criss-cross the basin with new highways and other projects and have little effect on deforestation," said Cochrane. "Now it has a more pragmatic view."

Environmental groups such as the Brazilian chapter of Friends of the Earth are praising the interministerial report. "It is good to know that the government intends to consider more closely the infrastructure works which would have the biggest impact," said Roberto Smeraldi, the group's director. The group says the report also emphasizes combating illegal forest colonization, which continues unchecked throughout much of the Amazon.

But others worry that the government will fail to heed the report's recommendations. According to Brazilian biologist Albernaz, many projects are likely to proceed anyway, although the government may employ "mitigating measures, such as protected areas to buffer highway effects." Because the projects depend on international investors, says Albernaz, it may be that certain projects can be delayed, if international pressure against these investments is applied and added to the internal pressures from concerned Brazilians.

Many feel that the future of the Amazon could be at stake. "This is a critical moment for the Lula Administration," said US-based ecologist Cochrane. "The government can either abandon the most destructive projects or ignore its own report and oversee a terrible loss of Amazonian forests. They can't have it both ways."

William F. Laurance is a staff scientist at the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute in Balboa, Panama.

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