

As Amazon deforestation shifts to smaller clearings, Brazil should adapt policies

August, 2015

Rio de Janeiro — Annual deforestation rates in Brazil’s Amazon fell by almost 80% between 2004 and 2012. However, a new challenge has emerged: deforestation now occurs on smaller tracts of land.

According to a new study from Climate Policy Initiative and PUC-Rio, while the total deforestation of smaller areas has remained constant since the early 2000s, smaller clearings grew as a share of overall clearings from a quarter in 2004, to more than half in 2012. In addition, clearings measuring 25 hectares or less — or approximately the size of 15-20 soccer fields — go mostly undetected by the remote sensing-based monitoring and enforcement program that has played a key role in reducing deforestation of large- and medium-scale areas.

“It is clear that Brazil’s efforts to curb deforestation are working,” said Juliano Assunção, Director of CPI’s Brazil operations and professor at the Department of Economics at the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro. “Our study shows, though, that there are still challenges. We need to step up forest protection strategies on smaller tracts of land.”

Regional differences and individual behaviors within regions hold important implications for how policymakers might adapt. CPI/PUC-Rio researchers looked at evidence from the states of Mato Grosso and Pará in an effort to better understand how deforestation occurs in different parts of the country. They found that landholders who owned smaller-sized properties measuring up to 350 hectares generally behaved differently than larger property holders.

In Mato Grosso, for instance, small-property holders tended to clear forest more frequently in medium- and large- scale tracts in the early 2000s, but they shifted their deforestation activities from larger to smaller tracts of land over time, most likely to escape detection. Meanwhile, in Pará, in the early 2000s, small property holders were much more engaged in small-scale clearings. By the late 2000s, their share of small-scale clearings spiked, especially when compared with Mato Grosso. In Pará, small-size property holders clearly emerged as the leading agents of forest clearing in that state.

“This observation is so important,” notes Assunção, “because it teaches us that we can no longer think about deforestation as a single, homogenous problem across the Amazon.”

The study recommends that new policies target the reduction of small-scale clearings, such as by strengthening the remote-sensing monitoring technologies. It also recommends tailoring policies to address regional differences and landholder behavior in clearing patterns.

For more information, and to download the full study, visit: www.ClimatePolicyInitiative.org

Climate Policy Initiative (CPI) works to improve the most important energy and land use policies around the world, with a particular focus on finance. We support decision makers through in-depth analysis on what works and what does not. CPI's Brazil program partners with the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro and focuses on a Production and Protection approach to land use.

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