



Fires in Brazil, Bolivia and Paraguay: the flames of agribusiness

Source: Agencia Tierra Viva

The forest fires in Brazil, Bolivia and Paraguay have affected the Amazon and other biomes such as the Gran Chaco, (Argentina, Paraguay, Bolivia, Brazil), the Pantanal and the Cerrado (Brazil). The common denominator is the influence of agribusiness on these fires.

In Bolivia, more than four million hectares have been razed in the departments of Pando, Beni, Santa Cruz and La Paz. In Paraguay, 70, 000 hectares have been consumed by fire. In Brazil, [5,132 fires](#) were recorded in a single day. The drought is accelerating the spread of fire in the region.

In Argentina, meanwhile, fires were reported in the provinces Córdoba and San Luis. The National Meteorological Service (SMN, as of its name in Spanish) issued an alert for smoke coming from neighbouring countries for 14



provinces. Greenpeace Argentina warns: “The degradation of the Ministry of Environment, the lack of environmental policy and denialism can only bring about the ruin of our native forests and with them worsen our existence.”

Brazil: deforestation in the Amazon, the Cerrado and the Pantanal

For weeks now, Brazil has been experiencing a season of fires that surpasses the so-called "Fire Sunday" of 2019 and the "Sea of Flames" of 2004. "The accelerated occupation of agricultural frontiers by agribusiness, since the time of the military dictatorship, has accustomed us to increasingly gigantic images of forests and other ecosystems devoured by flames over the course of months," contextualizes the Brazilian economist and environmentalist Jean Marc Von der Weid, in his [article "Queimada!"](#), of September 8.

Brazil is also facing one of the longest droughts in recent decades, according to the [National Centre for Monitoring Natural Disasters](#) (Cemaden) of the country. This has an impact on the fires, especially in areas such as primary (virgin) forests that lose their usual humidity and are therefore easier to burn.



Photo: Araquem Alcantara / WWF



Von der Weid explains that, due to the fires, the winds that carry the moisture evaporated by the Amazon rainforest to irrigate the central-western and southeastern parts of Brazil (the so-called "[flying rivers](#)"), carried the smoke to the less dense forests of the Cerrado and the floodplains of the Pantanal. These two biomes remain dry due to the seven months of drought. Added to this situation is the burning of sugar cane fields (59,000 hectares) in the state of São Paulo.

Burning is linked to deforestation, explains von der Weid. "Clearing processes begin with the removal of hardwood, followed by so-called clear-cutting, carried out with bulldozers dragging large chains, leaving the trees on the ground. The next step, after a period of waiting for the plant material to dry, is burning."

However, fires in the Amazon or other biomes are not limited to areas subject to deforestation. "Grasses are burned to stimulate grass growth and wooded areas at the edges of virgin forests. It is less common to burn primary forests, because they eliminate hardwood profits and because they are more difficult to burn due to their humidity," he explains.

While the levels of deforestation recorded have decreased in Lula da Silva's government, in comparison with those recorded during the presidency of Jair Bolsonaro, fires in the Amazon have increased significantly. In addition, this year, the fire season started earlier than usual. Between January and July, the burnt area increased by 83% compared to the same period in 2023. Taking into account the average of the previous ten years, it rose by 38%, says the economist.

Another significant aspect, underlined by the economist, is that between January and March 2024, fires in areas of recent deforestation accounted for 9%. In virgin forests, 34%. In 2023, only 5% of fires occurred in primary forests and 21% in areas of recent deforestation.

For Von dei Weid, two factors are influencing this trend. On the one hand, the drought. On the other hand, the fact that INPE's satellite control systems are now capable of locating in real time any area of forest over 30 hectares that has been cleared. He adds that the available satellite images of the fires show that 95% of the fires start on private properties, predominantly those intended for livestock.



Photo: Midia Ninja

The fires are not only affecting the Brazilian Amazon. Between 2022 and 2023, 665,000 hectares of native vegetation in the Cerrado, an ecoregion located in the centre of the country, were set to burn. In this biome, 500,000 hectares had already burnt between 2011 and 2015. It is estimated that today it has 50% less of its original vegetation cover, which is equivalent to 100 million hectares. According to a [report by Ecologistas en Acción](#) (Ecologists in Action), between 50% and 70% of the soybeans produced in Brazil are produced there (only 10 come from the Amazon, where livestock farming prevails). Agribusiness in this area is driven by [multinationals such as Cargill, Bunge, and ADM](#).

Also in these weeks, hectares of the Pantanal, considered the largest wetland in the world, are being consumed. This region is located in Mato Grosso do Sul and also extends to Bolivia and Paraguay. Its burnt area increased by 2,362% in 2024, compared to the first half of 2023 and by 529% compared to the average of the last five years.



Bolivia: State financing for agribusiness

The fires in Bolivia [affected more than four million hectares](#), according to a report by the Tierra Foundation. The most affected departments are Santa Cruz with 2.6 million hectares, Beni with 1.3 million hectares, and La Paz with 18,990 hectares, areas belonging to the Bolivian Amazon. The organization also reports health problems (respiratory, ocular, and diarrhoeal) as a consequence of the smoke.

“In these areas, there are places where fires occur frequently. But there are also new effects on primary forests that will require between 50 and 100 years to restore natural areas,” laments Efraín Tinta, a researcher at the Tierra Foundation, in the report.

Three million hectares of native forest were lost in 2023, according to the [World Rainforest Movement \(WRM\)](#). To expand the agricultural frontier, agro-industrial entrepreneurs (for example, those engaged in palm cultivation) carry out slash-and-burn, burning certain areas to then carry out agriculture. They do this indiscriminately and go beyond the agricultural frontier, according to the WRM.

Stasiek Czaplicki is an environmental economist specializing in agricultural issues. Consulted by Tierra Viva, he explains the relationship between forest fires and agribusiness through data related to land ownership. He points out that 16% of the land in Bolivia is considered "medium" or "business" land. And 44.9% of the fires occurred on that type of property.

"One might think that these fires are caused by malicious third parties, but the complaints received by the Authority for the Supervision and Social Control of Forests and Land (ABT, as of its name in Spanish) from businessmen are less than 500, out of a total of 50,000 affected properties in the country," says Czaplicki.

Fires are a phenomenon related to deforestation. "But in the particular case of Bolivia, they do not overlap," he clarifies. "In 2022, nearly four million hectares were burnt, and of that total, 60,000 were cleared. This means that the fires do not have a productive or land-use development purpose as one might think," he explains.



If the fires are taking place in territories belonging to businessmen, but are not necessarily aimed at clearing land, why else are these forests burning? "Because of controlled fires that get out of control, which indicates an inability to contain the fires, and also because the fires are used to intimidate indigenous territories," he answers.

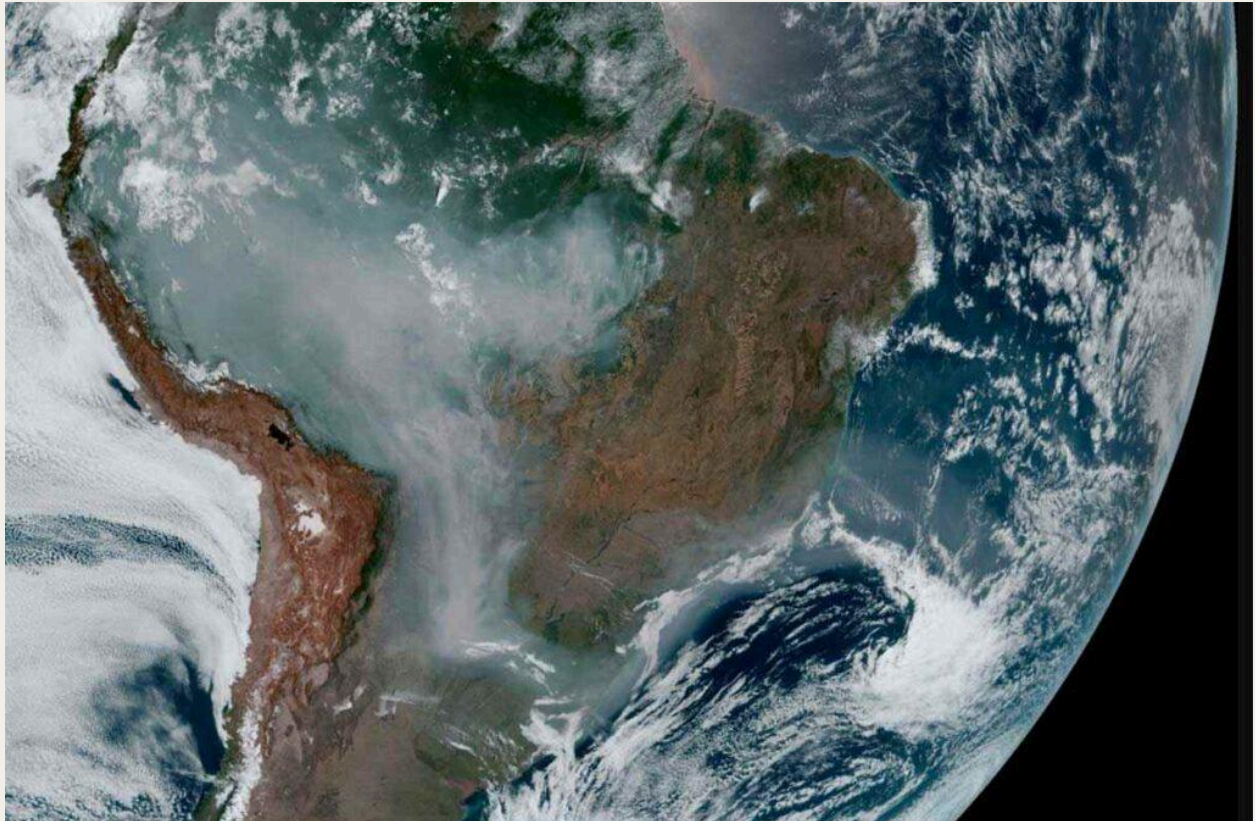


Photo: NOAA / NASA

Their Role in Deforestation. "The concept of "grey finances" refers—in contrast to "green" financing—to funds intended to support extractive activities such as burning or deforestation. "In Bolivia, the money of businessmen is not used for this, but rather the savings of Bolivian pension funds and banks. The sums amount to 2.5 billion dollars," says the researcher. The government is in charge of directing these funds to favour the agroindustry, particularly the soy, sugar, and cattle sectors.

In comparison, the funds allocated to preventing fires are only 1.4 million bolivianos, which is equivalent to 200 thousand dollars. It is less than the 1.4% of the budget managed by the ABT. The organization's reports indicate, for example, that in 2022 they collected about 140 million bolivianos (20 million



dollars). But the following year, their total budget for forest protection was 50 million bolivianos.

"There is a desire not to finance public institutions, not to give them the right tools to be able to deal with the current situation. In the context of a financial and macroeconomic crisis, the authorities have been implementing economic incentives to support agricultural expansion, particularly in Bolivian forests," explains Czaplicki.

Paraguay: a handful of businessmen against thousands of hectares

According to the latest official report, dated September 11, there are 118 fires in native forests in Paraguay, 37 in protected areas, 19 in palm groves, and three in forest plantations. The most intense fires are recorded in the west of the country, in the Paraguayan Chaco area.

With six million hectares deforested between 2001 and 2019, Paraguay is the country that lost the second most tree cover in the South American region, after Brazil, according to the Global Forest Watch satellite system. From 2001 to 2021, 466,230 hectares were lost due to forest fires. The worst was in 2019, with 121,000 hectares burned. The Paraguayan Chaco was the most deforested region in that country during the period 2001–2021. The years with the greatest loss of tree cover as a result of fires were 2017, 2019, 2020, and 2021.

A [study by the Brazilian organization Agro é Fogo](#) mentions that forest and field fires in the Paraguayan Chaco occur between the months of August and October, with a higher incidence from mid-August to mid-September. It confirms that the origin of these fires is due to human action, since they are used by the agricultural sector on a recurring basis to manage pastures, based on the practice of “controlled burning” of fields.

A report by the organization [Bases IS](#) on deforestation in 2023 also refers to land concentration. "If there is a lot of deforestation in the country, it is because that land is needed for pasture (for cattle) or for extensive agriculture. The element to be highlighted in this context is that said deforestation is carried out by a small handful of people," they warn. In Paraguay, 90% of the land is in the hands of 12,000 large landowners. The rest is shared among 280,000 small and medium-sized landowners.



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