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Sugarcane threatens Amazon forest and world climate; Brazilian ethanol is not clean (commentary)

by Lucas Ferrante and Philip M. Fearnside on 18 November 2019

- *On November 6, 2019, Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro signed an administrative decree abolishing the environmental zoning of sugarcane which has until now restrained the advance of this crop — largely used to produce ethanol — into the Amazon rainforest and Pantanal wetlands.*
- *Sugarcane expansion into these two ecologically sensitive biomes will generate unprecedented impacts — including deforestation and carbon emissions adding to climate change — meaning that Brazilian biofuels can no longer be claimed to be environmentally “clean.”*
- *In 2018, the European Union imported more than 43 million liters of Brazilian cane ethanol. As with all commodities, importing countries need to assess the environmental impact that the production of these commodities have on the global climate via the destruction of Amazon and Pantanal native vegetation.*
- *This post is a commentary. The views expressed are those of the author, not necessarily Mongabay.*



John Deere sugarcane harvester at work in the production of ethanol, Piracicaba, Sao Paulo, Brazil. Mariordo Mario Roberto Duran Ortiz under the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported license.

On Wednesday, November 6, 2019, Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro and his Ministers of Economy and Agriculture jointly signed a [decree](#) that [extinguishes the environmental zoning for sugarcane](#) that had restrained the advance of this crop into the Amazon and the Pantanal (Brazil's famous wildlife-rich wetlands).

The change dramatically threatens these biomes. Sugarcane plantations have been shown to [threaten biodiversity](#) — their effects extending beyond the cultivated areas to adjacent forests.

In 2018, the Brazilian Senate considered revoking the 2009 decree that established zoning for sugarcane in the Amazon and Pantanal. As we pointed out in a letter published in *Science* at the time of the 2018 Senate proposal, allowing sugarcane to expand into Amazonia would affect biodiversity and ecosystem services, with impacts that extend to other areas of the country.

For fear of international boycotts, the 2018 proposal was even opposed by the Sugarcane Industry Union (UNICA), a position that has now changed. Thankfully, in 2018 enough senators in the key committees were convinced of the proposal's disastrous consequences that they ruled against releasing the crop. Now under President Bolsonaro, the same disaster is being unleashed by a simple presidential decree.

The president of the Sugarcane Industry Union, Evandro Gussi, recently published a note on [UNICA's website](#) that, ignoring all research on the subject, claimed that environmental zoning for sugarcane would no longer be necessary for sugarcane in the Amazon and Pantanal biomes, under the justification that Renovabio (the biofuels policy approved in 2017) would be sufficient to mitigate these impacts. This is clearly a delusional statement without scientific backing.



Sugarcane harvest in São Paulo state, Brazil. Image by Edrossini courtesy of English Wikipedia.

Sugarcane in the Amazon and Pantanal will generate unprecedented impacts, and we can by no means consider that Brazilian biofuels can be considered “clean” and unassociated with deforestation and environmental degradation in the Amazon.

In 2018, European Union countries imported more than [43 million liters](#) (11.3 million gallons) of Brazilian cane ethanol according to official data from the Brazilian Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Supply. As with all commodities, importing countries need to assess the environmental impact that the production of these commodities have on the global climate, for example through the destruction of the Amazon forest.

Sugarcane expansion in Amazonia would not only affect the world’s largest rainforest, it would also [undermine Brazil’s agricultural capacity](#). Amazon deforestation increased [by 85](#) percent in 2019 compared to the previous year, which is a result of the Bolsonaro administration’s [anti-environmental rhetoric and its dismantling of the country’s environmental agencies](#). This political climate makes the probable damage from the November 6 decree even greater.

Banner image caption: Harvester cutting row of Brazilian sugarcane. Image by Jonathan Wilkins Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license.