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Ferrante, L. & P.M. Fearnside. 2021.

**Brazil's deception
threatens climate goals.**

Science 374: 1569.

<https://doi.org/10.1126/science.abn0693>

[letter]

ISSN: 0036-8075

DOI: 10.1126/science.abn0693

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The original publication is available at
O trabalho original está disponível em:

<https://doi.org/10.1126/science.abn0693>

Brazil's deception threatens climate goals

Brazilian agribusiness has led a lobby responsible for dismantling the country's environmental and Indigenous legislation (1). In the lead-up to the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26), Brazil began proposing policies that were misleadingly presented as beneficial to the environment. The proposals made by Brazil's Minister of Environment at COP26 followed the same pattern (2).

In the prelude to COP26, a bill (PL 528/2021) supported by the "ruralist" (large landholder) lobby advanced through the National Congress to create the "Brazilian Market for Emissions Reductions." The proposed Brazilian market is not primarily to invest in reducing deforestation but rather for measures such as paying soy planters to use no-till methods, a subsidy that has no climate benefits [these methods are less expensive and therefore would be adopted even without subsidies (3)]. The market would also subsidize planting trees in deforested areas, in an effort to recover what are called "areas of permanent protection" (*áreas de proteção permanente*) that ranchers have illegally cleared (4). Luckily, the bill was put on hold on 9 November (5); if enacted, as is likely, it would have limited benefits for mitigating global warming. Effective policies would instead prevent deforestation, which would protect the water cycle, biodiversity, and the forest's traditional peoples. While Brazil's environment could have much to gain from a carbon market (6), the country would be better off without this bill (7). Three weeks before COP26, Brazil's presidential administration launched its "green growth program." The program contains no specific measures, numerical targets, or timelines (8). Brazil's main promise is to achieve "zero illegal deforestation," promised by 2030 in the Paris Agreement and again at COP26. However, this can be achieved either by halting deforestation or by simply legalizing the clearing that is taking place, and Brazil is opting for the latter (9).

In the country's COP26 presentation, Brazil altered its greenhouse-gas emission accounts by switching to a higher estimate for emissions in the base year before calculating its promised percentage emission reduction (10). In addition, Brazil's chosen base year (2005) misleads because it is near the notorious 2004 deforestation peak (10). This makes Brazil's promise to reduce its emissions by 50% by 2030, instead of just 43%, meaningless (10). Furthermore, the Brazilian COP26 proposal demands payment from other countries for Amazonia's environmental services (4). Yet the payment would apparently simply supplement the national budget rather than be earmarked for environmental actions (4).

Brazil's current stance on environmental issues should be seen as a global threat. Various legal paths exist to oblige compliance with the "non-binding" promises made at COP26 (10). Brazil can also be induced to comply by the countries that import Brazilian commodities, especially China (11). Given the threat that Brazilian agribusiness poses to global efforts to contain climate change, importing countries should condition their purchases on annual reductions in deforestation and emissions being in line with the COP26 promises.

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