

<https://news.mongabay.com/2024/02/brazils-2024-2027-transversal-environmental-agenda-the-elephants-in-the-room-commentary/>



Brazil's 2024-2027 "Transversal Environmental Agenda": The elephants in the room (commentary)

by [Philip M. Fearnside](#) on 4 February 2024

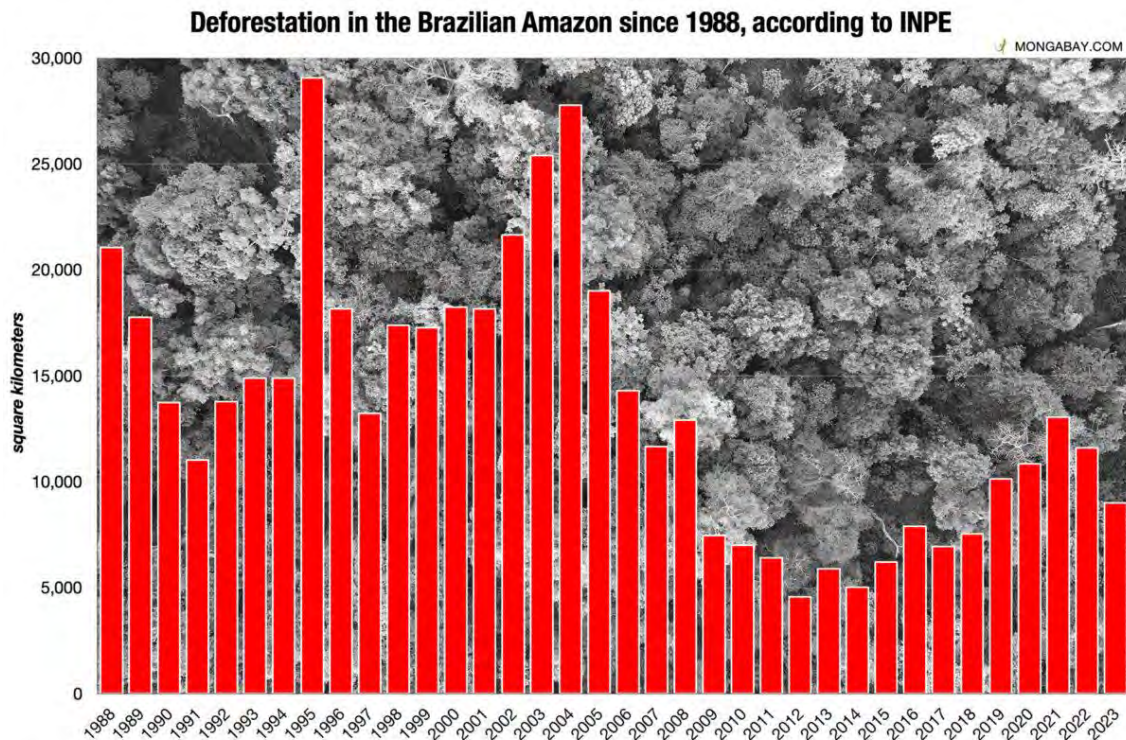


- *Brazil's current 4-year development plan is accompanied by a "Transversal Environmental Agenda," released last week, to coordinate environmental measures across the different federal agencies.*
- *While the agenda lists many worthwhile items in the portfolios of the various ministries, it fails in the most basic role such an agenda should play: ensuring that government actions do not cause environmental catastrophes.*
- *Missing subjects include foregoing building roads that open Amazon forest to deforestation, legalizing illegal land claims that stimulates an unending cycle of land grabbing and invasion, plans for hydroelectric dams in Amazonia, expanding oil and gas drilling and the burning of fossil fuels that must end without delay if global warming is to be controlled.*
- *An earlier version of this text was published in Portuguese by [Amazônia Real](#). It is a commentary and does not necessarily reflect the views of Mongabay.*

Brazil's "[Transversal Environmental Agenda](#)," released on 25 January 2024, contains many good things for the government to be doing, but it misses the opportunity to implant what a transversal agenda should be, namely a way of ensuring that the actions of the various federal agencies, at the very least, avoid provoking environmental disasters. The document's omissions show the lack of a real "transversal" effect to adapt actions throughout the government to the limitations imposed by environmental concerns. Instead, it lists the things that the various ministries are doing with an environmental label, such as promoting low-carbon agricultural practices. The unmentioned "elephants in the room" are the most important part, revealing how very far we still have to go to avoid impending environmental catastrophes.

Prevention and control of deforestation

The report rightly commemorates the [decline in deforestation](#) rates in 2023 as a result of command-and-control efforts on the part of the current presidential administration's Ministry of Environment (MMA). Command-and-control is indeed essential. However, completely lacking in the document are plans to address the major underlying causes of deforestation, such as building roads in Amazonia that open vast new areas to the entry of deforestation (BR-319 and associated side roads being the prime example (see [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)), legalizing illegal land claims in "undesigned" government land (see [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)), and subsidizing the transformation of cattle pasture to soybeans, which, in practice, means soy planters buying pasture land from ranchers who then move to frontier areas where they buy much larger areas of cheap Amazon forest land and invest in deforestation (see [here](#) and [here](#)).



Annual deforestation in the legal Amazon since 1988, according to INPE's PRODES system. Note: 2023 data is preliminary.

The implication is that ministries such as Transportation (MT), Mines and Energy (MME), Agriculture and Ranching (MAPA) and Agrarian Development (MDA) are free to implement policies and build infrastructure with enormous impacts, and the task of trying to contain the consequences is simply handed over to the Ministry of Environment. Unfortunately, this won't work, despite the current ministry's heroic efforts and exemplary leadership. Much of what happens in practice is simply outside of the control of the government, and powerful deforestation drivers are being put in place that will destroy Amazon forest for decades to come (see [here](#) and [here](#)). Among other impacts, this would represent a key contribution to future climate catastrophes both [in Brazil](#) and [globally](#).

Energy policy

The document makes no mention of Brazil's plans for new hydroelectric dams in Amazonia. These dams, including the three large dams included in the Ministry of Mines and Energy's current 10-year plan, would have huge human and environmental consequences (see [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)). This led the [Science Panel for the Amazon](#) to recommend that no more dams be built in Amazonia with installed capacity of 10 MW or more. Brazil's 2050 National Energy Plan makes

clear that many more dams would be built in Amazonia if flooding in Indigenous lands is permitted ([p. 101](#)). A proposed law ([PL 191/2020](#)), which continues to advance towards a vote the National Congress, would allow dams in these areas and would also open them for mining, logging and agribusiness. The Agriculture and Ranching Parliamentary Front (FPA), representing agribusiness, has [58% of the seats](#) in both houses of the National Congress, and, together with the other interest groups in favor of the bill, forms a voting block that is not only sufficient to pass the bill but also well in excess of the 60% of each house needed to override a presidential veto or to amend the constitution. The Ministry of Mines and Energy's 2021-2030 10-year plan explicitly stated that the ministry awaits approval of PL 191/2020 to advance with much more ambitious dam plans ([p. 28](#)); see also [here](#)).



Dead trees in a canal constructed for the Belo Monte Dam project, near Altamira. Credit line: © Daniel Beltrá / Greenpeace

In addition to the devastating impacts wherever Amazonian dams are built, new dams are not “clean” energy from the standpoint of global warming. They have a large peak of greenhouse gas emissions in the first years after a reservoir is flooded, and these emissions include not just CO₂ but also substantial amounts of methane (see [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)). Methane has very high impacts on global temperature in the first few years after it is emitted: during the first 20

years, emission of a ton of methane has [80.8 times](#) more impact on global warming than a ton of CO₂ according to the last report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). Both the timing of the emission and the fact that a substantial part of it is methane mean that the impact of new dams is precisely in the narrow time window when global warming must be controlled, and that new Amazonian dams contribute to pushing us over catastrophic tipping points even in the case of dams that would have positive effects on emissions balances if one considers the fossil fuels displaced many decades in the future.

The dam plans are also relevant to Brazil's intended development of green hydrogen using the country's vast potential for offshore wind power. This potential is a key to replacing fossil fuels in electricity generation in Brazil and also to foregoing the plans for future Amazonian dams. If this potential is instead used to produce green hydrogen to export to Europe, [as is the plan](#), the hydrogen [will not be "green"](#)

The Transverse Environmental Agenda document states that "The challenge is not in cleaning the electrical matrix, but rather in issues such as increasing the resilience of the Brazilian electrical system in the face of hydrological fluctuations that affect the levels of hydroelectric plant reservoirs, enabling the integration of different energy generation systems, among others." ([p. 94](#)). Weaning Brazil from fossil fuels is clearly not on the radar. In fact, increasing Brazil's extraction of fossil fuels is one of the priorities of the 2024-2027 Pluriannual Plan (PPA) ([p. 186](#)), of which the Transversal Environmental Agenda is a part. Neither the Transversal Environmental Agenda nor the PPA contain any hint of foregoing plans for expanding gas and oil, including the disastrous Solimões Sedimentary Area project in the critical Trans-Purus area of the state of Amazonas (see [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)) and offshore in the estuary of the Amazon River (see [here](#) and [here](#)), in new areas along the coast of [northeast Brazil](#), and expansion of the [Pre-salt](#) offshore oil fields. This is also shown by recent events such as Brazil's joining the OPEC+ group of oil exporting countries in December 2023 (see [here](#) and [here](#)), the massive "[end-of-the-world](#)" auction of drilling rights in January 2024, and the constant discourse and political pressure for approving oil drilling in the Amazon River estuary (see [here](#) and [here](#)). The marginalization of the Environment Ministry (and of environmental concerns of any kind) in deciding energy policy became embarrassingly clear at the January 2024 economic summit in Davos, where environment minister Marina Silva

had to admit that her ministry has [no authority](#) over policy on fossil fuels, which instead is a decision of the “government.”

The oil-drilling plans clearly reveal hypocrisy in the announced intention of contributing to (and even leading) global efforts to contain global warming. It takes around five years to begin commercial production in a new offshore oil field, which means the new fields would be coming online exactly when the world must be well on its way to ending its reliance on fossil fuels, the alternative being a likely climate catastrophe. If global warming escapes human control, Brazil would [lose its Amazon forest](#), the country’s heavily populated semiarid Northeast Region would essentially become a desert (see [here](#) and [here](#)), coastal cities would be exposed to [unprecedented storms](#) and sea-level rise, and Brazil’s vaunted agribusiness would be severely impacted, as would family agriculture (see [here](#) and [here](#)).

The drilling plans are inconsistent with the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) [global stocktake](#) released in November 2023 at COP28. The stocktake indicates (Figure 1) that global anthropogenic emissions must be reduced by 43% by 2030 and 84% by 2050 in order not to pass the agreed 1.5 °C temperature-rise ceiling that represents an unacceptable risk of global warming escaping from human control. Even the International Energy Agency (IEA), which is by no means an environmental organization, has issued a [report](#) stating that no new oil or gas fields should be opened in the world, and extraction should be limited to existing fields where the volumes extracted must be sequentially reduced so that global emissions reach net zero in 2050.

Historical emissions from 1950, projected emissions in 2030 based on nationally determined contributions, and emission reductions required by the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change

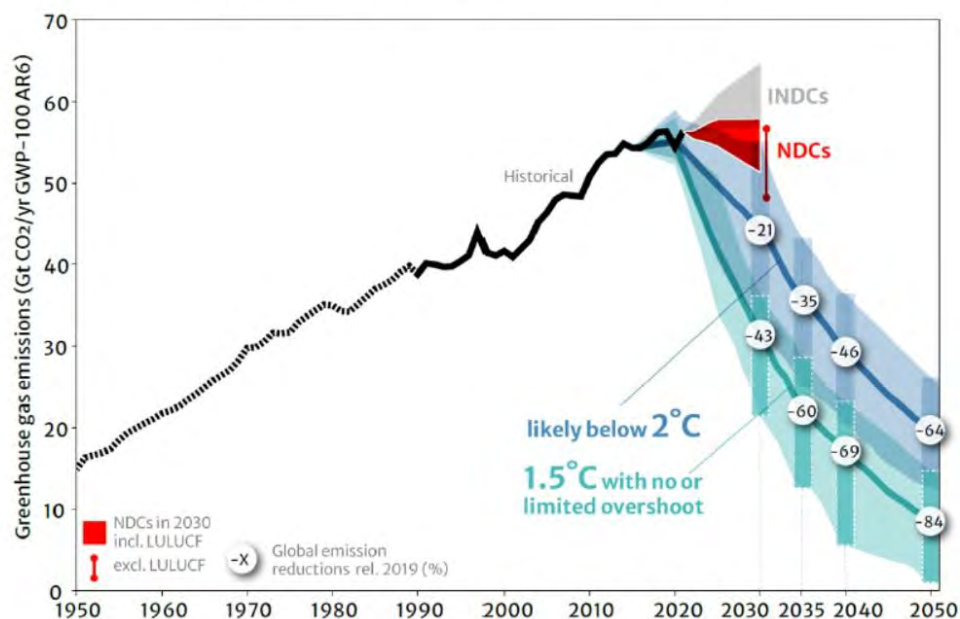


Figure 1: The trajectory of global anthropogenic emissions that needs to be followed to avoid exceeding the 1.5 °C limit that implies a great risk of global warming escaping human control. Source: [UNFCCC](#).

Politicians often dismiss the 1.5 °C ceiling and corresponding emissions limits as “unrealistic,” thus providing an excuse to avoid taking economically and electorally painful measures. Unfortunately, these numbers are not subject to negotiation, as is assumed in matters of politics, diplomacy, and commerce. For example, if I want to sell my car, if I can say I want “X” and a potential buyer can offer “Y”, leaving two options: negotiating a compromise deal or walking away with no deal. In the case of the Stocktake numbers, neither option is available. The numbers are simply fixed, unless someone conducts another scientific study showing that they should be different. Walking away is a decision to do nothing, which implies accepting a rapidly increasing probability of passing a tipping point leading to a “runaway greenhouse” ending in a “hothouse Earth.” We are [very near that point](#), and what happens in Amazonia in the next few years is a key part of the question of whether we cross that point of no return (see [here](#) and [here](#)). These facts simply represent environmental limits that must be adapted to by all of Brazil’s ministries, by the National Congress, and by President Lula.

An earlier version of this text was published in Portuguese by [Amazônia Real](#). It is a commentary and does not necessarily reflect the views of Mongabay.

Header image: Amazon deforestation. Photo credit: Rhett Ayers Butler