

Brazil 'invites deforestation' with overhaul of environmental laws

Friday 9 March 2018, by [Reuters](#) (Date first published: 1 March 2018).

Sweeping changes to legislation, dubbed the forest code, are a blow for campaigners seeking to protect the Amazon and other rainforest areas

Brazil's supreme court has upheld major changes to laws that protect the and other biomes, reducing penalties for past illegal in a blow to environmentalists trying to protect the world's largest rainforest.

Congress agreed to sweeping revisions in the law in 2012, including an amnesty programme for illegal deforestation on "small properties" that occurred before 2008 and reduced restoration requirements in others.

The changes effectively reduced deforested land that must be restored under previous rules by 112,000 square miles (290,000 sq km), an area nearly the size of Italy, according to a 2014 study published in the journal Science.

Environmentalists said the revised laws, known collectively as the forest code, would create a culture in which illegal deforestation is acceptable.

"This awards the guy who deforested, the guy who disobeyed the law," said Nurit Bensusan, policy coordinator at the Brazilian non-governmental organisation, Instituto Socioambiental.

"With this amnesty you create a climate that invites deforestation in the future. It creates the impression that if you deforest today, tomorrow you'll be handed amnesty."

Farmers and the powerful agriculture lobby argue that the new laws allowed for continued growth of the sector key to the Brazilian economy, without bogging it down in adjudicating crimes of the past.

Rodrigo Lima, director of the agriculture consultancy Agroicone, said Wednesday's court decision brought legal certainty to rural producers by forgiving penalties for deforestation before 2008.

"If this apparatus had been struck down, for example ... everyone who submits information on the rural land registry could be fined at any moment even as they are complying with the [current] law."

The protections in question include those that apply to the Amazon rainforest, the majority of which lies in Brazil, which is vital to soaking up carbon emissions and countering climate change.

Beauty and destruction: the Amazon rainforest - in pictures

Deforestation in the Amazon fell in the August 2016-July 2017 monitoring period for the first time in three years, although the 6,624 sq km (2,557 square miles) cleared of forest remains well above the low recorded in 2012 and targets for slowing climate change.

Grace Mendonça, Brazil's attorney general, defended the 2012 revisions as constitutional saying they had been designed to strike a balance between environmental protection and economic development.

But many parts of the law designed to protect the environment have not been enforced, with measures such as a national registry of rural land still not fully implemented.

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P.S.

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<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/01/brazil-amazon-protection-laws-invite-deforestation-ngo>