

7

Amazon Deforestation, Once Tamed, Comes Roaring Back

The New York Times

<https://nyti.ms/2IDLhva>

A decade after the “Save the Rainforest” movement captured the world’s imagination, Cargill and other food giants are pushing deeper into the wilderness.

By HIROKO TABUCHI, CLAIRE RIGBY and JEREMY WHITE FEB. 24, 2017

COLONIA BERLIN, Bolivia — A few months ago, a representative from Cargill traveled to this remote colony in Bolivia’s eastern lowlands in the southernmost reaches of the vast Amazon River basin with an enticing offer.

The American agricultural giant wanted to buy soybeans from the Mennonite residents, descendants of European peasants who had been carving settlements

out of the thick forest for more than 40 years. The company would finance a local warehouse and weighing station so farmers could sell their produce directly to Cargill on-site, the man said, according to local residents.

One of those farmers, Heinrich Janzen, was clearing woodland from a 37-acre plot he bought late last year, hustling to get soy in the ground in time for a May harvest. "Cargill wants to buy from us," said Mr. Janzen, 38, as bluish smoke drifted from heaps of smoldering vegetation.

His soy is in demand. Cargill is one of several agricultural traders vying to buy from soy farmers in the region, he said.

Cargill confirmed the accounts of colony residents, and said the company was still assessing whether it would source from the community. That decision would depend on a study of the area's productivity and land titles, said Hugo Krajnc, Cargill's corporate affairs leader for the Southern Cone, based in Argentina. "But if a farmer has burned down its forest we'll not source from that grower," he said.

A decade after the "Save the Rainforest" movement forced changes that dramatically slowed deforestation across the Amazon basin, activity is roaring back in some of the biggest expanses of forests in the world. That resurgence, driven by the world's growing appetite for soy and other agricultural crops, is raising the specter of a backward slide in efforts to preserve biodiversity and fight climate change.

In the Brazilian Amazon, the world's largest rain forest, deforestation rose in 2015 for the first time in nearly a decade, to nearly two million acres from August 2015 to July 2016. That is a jump from about 1.5 million acres a year earlier and just over 1.2 million acres the year before that, according to estimates by Brazil's National Institute for Space Research.

Here across the border in Bolivia, where there are fewer restrictions on land clearance, deforestation appears to be accelerating as well.

About 865,000 acres of land have been deforested, on average, annually for agriculture since 2011, according to estimates from the nongovernmental Bolivia

Documentation and Information Center, an area nearly the equivalent of Rhode Island in size. That figure has risen from about 366,000 acres a year, on average, in the 1990s and 667,000 acres a year in the 2000s.

Now, a new study by an environmental advocacy group points to fresh indications of large-scale forest-clearing by Bolivian and Brazilian farmers who trade soybeans with Cargill.

That organization, Washington-based Mighty Earth, used satellite imaging and supply-chain mapping information from the Stockholm Environment Institute, an environmental think tank, to identify deforestation in Brazil where two American-based food giants, Cargill and Bunge, are the only known agricultural traders. The supply-chain mapping by the environmental institute uses customs, shipment and storage data, as well as production data from Brazilian municipalities to trace agricultural exports back to producers.

According to Mighty Earth's analysis, the Brazilian savanna areas in which Cargill operates, a region called the Cerrado, saw more than 321,000 acres of deforestation between 2011 and 2015. Mighty Earth also linked Bunge, the other agricultural giant, to more than 1.4 million acres from 2011 to 2015.

In Bolivia, where supply-chain mapping is not available, Mighty Earth sent employees to areas where Cargill operates. The organization used drones to record the clearing of forests and savannas in areas where Cargill operates silos.

The study was funded by the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation and a nongovernmental organization, Rainforest Foundation Norway.

A reporter for The New York Times independently traveled to remote areas of Bolivia described in the environmentalists' report and interviewed farmers engaged in deforestation who said they sold soy to Cargill. The farmers described what they called Cargill's push to increase its purchases of locally produced soy and its attempts to enhance bonds with local producers.

The reports of fresh deforestation come despite a landmark deal signed three years ago by Cargill and other companies that included a target of "eliminating

deforestation from the production of agricultural commodities like palm oil, soy and beef products by 2020.” Experts at the time said the deadline, laid out in the New York Declaration of Forests, would require companies to start straightaway to make their sourcing more sustainable.

Both Cargill and Bunge said the report seemed to inflate its role in the region’s deforestation. Cargill’s share of soy in the Bolivia municipalities in which it operates came to about 8 percent, Cargill said. Meanwhile, in Brazil’s Matopiba region, Bunge’s share was about 20 percent, the company said.

And soy is just one crop behind deforestation, said Stewart Lindsay, Bunge’s vice president for global corporate affairs.

“One company alone cannot solve this issue,” Mr. Lindsay said. “A positive step would be for more companies to adopt zero deforestation commitments, apply controls to block crops grown in illegally cleared areas from entering their supply chains, report publicly on progress and invest millions of dollars to support sustainable land use planning efforts, all of which Bunge has done.” (Bunge, however, is not a signatory to the New York Declaration of Forests.)

In an interview, Cargill chief executive David MacLennan said the company was studying the allegations of deforestation in Bolivia and Brazil linked to the company. “If there’s something there, if it’s substantiated, we’ll do something about it,” Mr. MacLennan said. “If that’s accurate, it’s not acceptable.

“We’re going to honor our obligations and our commitments,” he continued. “We’ve committed to ending deforestation and to do our part in ending deforestation. Our word is our bond.”

National Priorities

Forest loss is detrimental to the earth’s climate. The clearing of woodlands and the fires that accompany it generate one-tenth of all global warming emissions, according to the Union of Concerned Scientists, making the loss of forests one of the biggest single contributors to climate change.

Only about 15 percent of the world's forest cover remains intact, according to the World Resources Institute. The rest has been cleared, degraded or is in fragments, wiping out ecosystems and displacing indigenous communities, scientists say.

Behind the rise in deforestation is a strategy by multinational food companies to source their agricultural commodities from ever more remote areas around the world. These areas tend to be where legal protections of forests are weakest.

The Brazilian Amazon, a poster child for the global forest-conservation movement, has enjoyed increasing protections, like a moratorium announced in 2006 on forest clearing for soy production. Between that time and 2015, Brazil reduced Amazon deforestation by almost two-thirds, according to estimates by Mongabay, the environmental news site, based on data from the Brazilian National Institute of Space Research and the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization.

The uptick in forest loss since then, however, has raised concerns that the progress is far from secure.

Brazil was aware of the challenge of keeping deforestation at bay, Everton Lucero, the secretary of climate change and forests of Brazil's Ministry of the Environment, said in an interview.

"We are very uncomfortable with the bad news that we had a rise in deforestation, and we are taking every possible measure to reverse it next year," Mr. Lucero said. Budget shortfalls amid Brazil's recent economic and political turmoil, he said, had wreaked havoc with its policing of its rain forests.

When traveling to remote regions, "Sometimes our command and control units were without fuel for helicopters," he said. "Hopefully we are on a recovery path."

Bolivia, on the other hand, presents a different situation. President Evo Morales, a socialist, has made securing "food sovereignty" a major part of his agenda, driving Bolivia's agricultural expansion. There are relatively few forest

protections, and the government's Forestry and Land Authority is tasked with the potentially conflicting roles of regulating land use, forestry and agriculture, and issuing concessions for logging and farming. The landlocked country has declared that it expects to clear almost 14 million more acres of forest by 2025, to convert into farmland.

Bolivia's greenhouse gas emissions levels per capita exceed that of many European countries, despite having a far lower per capita income. Deforestation is responsible for more than 80 percent of Bolivia's total carbon dioxide emissions, according to a recent study by researchers at Insead, a graduate school based in Fontainebleau, France.

A major culprit is the cultivation of soy, which has jumped more than 500 percent in Bolivia since 1991, to 3.8 million hectares in 2013, according to the most recent agricultural censuses. Little of that soy is consumed domestically. The vast majority is processed and exported as animal feed in a commodities trade that serves a global appetite for hamburgers, chicken and pork.

"The forest is seen as useless land that needs to be made useful," said Nataly Ascarrunz, executive director of the Bolivian Institute of Forestry Investigation, a joint monitoring effort started by the Bolivian government and the United States Agency for International Development.

"There's a lot of pressure for economic development," Ms. Ascarrunz said. "When resources are flowing, production is happening and people have work. It's very hard to argue with that."

Looking Toward 2030

Victor Yucra, the director general of Bolivia's forest and land management at the Forestry and Land Authority, stressed the need for the Bolivian government to balance the protection of its forests with the needs of its agricultural sector.

“Our concern is in ensuring that intensive agricultural production takes place within a framework that also provides for sustainable forestry and protection for standing forests,” Mr. Yucra said.

Mr. MacLennan, the chief executive of Cargill, described a business trip to Brazil last year, during which he saw the Amazon from a plane window. “You look down and you see this beautiful forest,” he said. “Kilometers and kilometers of forest. But you also see these big chunks of dirt.

“The brown really contrasts with the green,” he continued, comparing the forest and deforested areas. “When you see it, it’s like, ‘Holy cow. That’s what’s happened.’ It just hit me when I saw it in broad daylight — the impact the deforestation has.”

Mr. MacLennan initially garnered praise among environmentalists for pledging to extend the no-deforestation pledge it had made regarding palm oil to cover every commodity the company handles. Cargill’s commitment was called one of the most sweeping environmental pledges ever made by a large agricultural company. It earned Mr. MacLennan a photo opportunity with Ban Ki-moon, the United Nations secretary general at the time.

Even before the New York Declaration, Cargill had made significant efforts to buy palm oil sourced only from land not linked to fresh deforestation, according to a supply-chain expert with extensive experience working on Cargill’s global sustainability efforts. The expert spoke on the condition of anonymity, saying that to do so openly would jeopardize professional relations with the company.

Cargill continued to invest millions of dollars adding extra staff members and hiring third-party auditors to verify that the palm oil was coming from established fields, not farmland freshly carved from the forest, he said. But Cargill has been less aggressive with other commodities, he said.

Part of the issue was Cargill’s decentralized setup, the expert said. Another problem was the resistance from commodities traders, whose incentive is to seek supplies from as many sources as possible in order to drive down costs. Buying only sustainably grown commodities would mean a more limited supply.

Now, environmental groups accuse Cargill of backtracking on its 2020 deadline. In recent statements, Cargill has adopted a 2030 deadline for elimination of deforestation from its supply chain — a separate deadline, mentioned elsewhere in the New York Declaration, that was meant to apply to ending all forms of deforestation, not just those related to agricultural commodities.

“They’re willfully misinterpreting the Declaration,” said Glenn Hurowitz, chief executive of Mighty Earth. “They’re breaking their own pledge.”

Cargill is committed, Mr. MacLennan said, to eliminating by 2020 deforestation from its production of palm oil, a commodity widely used in food, detergents and cosmetics. But, he said, Cargill had always understood the declaration to give all signatories until 2030 to tackle deforestation.

“I don’t think I or others appreciated the vast complexity of the task,” Mr. MacLennan said. “Let’s say that we are trading or buying and selling soybean meal. Where did the soybeans come from? And did they come from deforested land? Maybe we weren’t buying the soybeans directly. I don’t know.”

Holly Gibbs, an expert in tropical deforestation and agriculture at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, called the 2030 deadline interpretation devastating. “If we were to wait until 2030,” Ms. Gibbs said, “there would be no forest left.”

Fire and Water

In Mr. Janzen’s newly cleared field, a long strip of land flanked by vivid vegetation, blue-white smoke drifted from a smoldering landscape.

The German-speaking Mennonites, who live amid horse-drawn buggies and farmhouses that wouldn’t look out of place in rural Ohio or Pennsylvania, trace their origins to 16th-century Protestant reformists who migrated to Russia, the United States, Canada, Belize and Mexico in search of farming opportunities and religious freedom. Some moved to Bolivia in the last century, and about 57,000

Mennonites now live in 55 secluded settlements here, eschewing some aspects of 21st century technology, like modern cars, but enthusiastically embracing others, such as tractors and genetically modified seeds.

Their trade with companies like Cargill has transformed their communities into a bloc of relatively prosperous landowners. But in recent years, they have also been targeted by land reforms enacted by Mr. Morales, who has pledged to reverse the centuries of subjugation of Bolivia's indigenous majority.

The farmer, Mr. Janzen, with the help of two laborers, spent the day digging roots from the earth, between smoking woodpiles. There was a brown jumble of slender trees, saplings, shrubs, bushes, vines and roots. Occasional larger trees showed gashes where the bulldozer first made contact, pushing them to the ground.

Farther downfield lay more long, neat cordons of debris, waiting to be burned. "If the rain holds off, I'll burn the rest tomorrow," he said.

Correction: February 24, 2017

An earlier version of this article referred incorrectly to Bunge's operations in South America. The company says it has a 20 percent share of the soy crop in the Matopiba region of Brazil, not in Bolivia.

A version of this article appears in print on February 26, 2017, on Page BU1 of the New York edition with the headline: Deforestation Roars Back.

We're interested in your feedback on this page. **Tell us what you think.**