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POLITICAL BACK-ROOM DEALS IMPERIL THE BRAZILIAN AMAZON

September 03, 2016 by Philip Fearnside

ALERT member Philip Fearnside, a leading expert on Amazonian conservation and development issues, tells us here about alarming efforts by some Brazilian politicians to push through shady deals that could greatly imperil the world's greatest rainforest.

In a [paper](#) recently published in *Science*, I explain how the country's environmental licensing is under threat from a flurry of proposed laws and constitutional amendments in the Brazilian Congress.

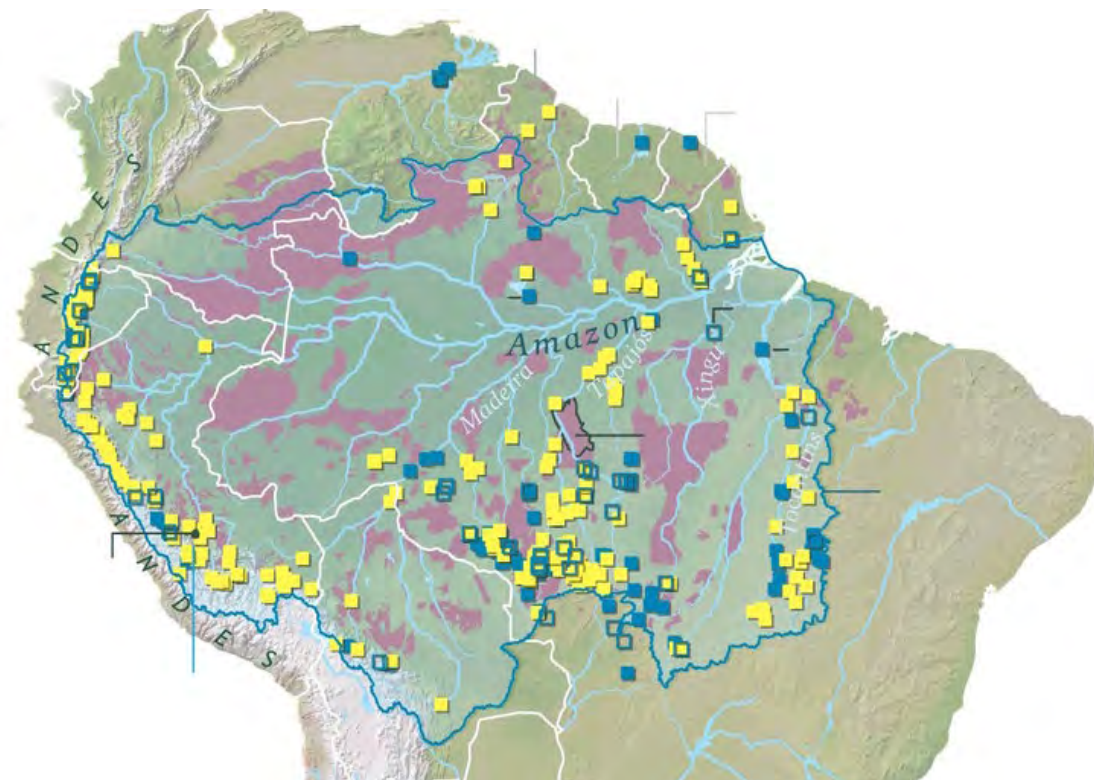
These dubious initiatives have jumped to the forefront as anti-environment politicians rush to exploit the opportunities offered by Brazil's current political turmoil, which led to the [impeachment of former President Dilma Rousseff](#).

Legislators are eager to help provide short-term stimulation to the country's flagging economy, in part by removing social and environmental restrictions on proposed development projects. But the way this is being advanced reeks of political shadiness and trickery.

EXPLOITING A POLITICAL CRISIS

Many recent legislative functions, such as attendance in committee hearings, were emptied out while attention was focused on the presidential impeachment proceedings. During such moments, groups of legislators appeared in force at key sessions to approve controversial items.

Among the most worrying of these is [PEC-65](#), a constitutional amendment that would greatly weaken Brazil's environmental licensing process for big infrastructure projects, such as major new [highways](#) and [hydroelectric dams](#).



Major existing (blue) and planned (yellow) hydroelectric dams in the Amazon Basin.

PEC-65 was introduced in 2012 but failed to gain adequate support. Then, this April, it was suddenly approved by a Senate committee. Opponents on the Senate floor managed to stall the amendment but it remains lurking in the background.

If passed, PEC-65 would essentially eliminate licensing for big infrastructure, making the mere submission of an environmental impact assessment an automatic and unstoppable approval for building a project.

Amending Brazil's highly detailed constitution is relatively easy: since the current constitution came into effect in 1988, it has been amended 91 times.

MORE POLITICAL PERILS

Other threats include a Senate proposal for a law ([PL-654/2015](#)) that would also gut environmental licensing, by condensing the existing three-step process into only one and setting a super-tight deadline for the nation's environmental agency to approve projects that is just one-seventh the normal time for licensing. If this greatly accelerated deadline were exceeded, the project would be automatically approved.

This alarming proposal has recently been approved in committee and awaits a full Senate vote.

Another pending law ([PL-1.610/1996](#)) and a proposed constitutional amendment (PEC-210) would open indigenous lands to mining. Yet another proposed amendment ([PEC-215](#)) would remove the power of the

government's environmental and indigenous agencies to create new protected areas, including indigenous lands.

Finally, a proposal backed by state governments ([Processo 02000.001845/2015-32](#)) is progressing through the National Council of the Environment (CONAMA) to allow “self-licensing” for many development projects.



Roads in the Amazon often promote large-scale forest loss.

BEWARE OF 'SLEEPING' PROPOSALS

My recent paper in *Science* predicted that the current political climate will cause other “sleeping” proposals to surge forth and to have increased chances of being passed.

And -- as if on cue -- another assault on Brazil's environmental licensing system has just sprung from the woodwork. This is a proposed law ([PL-](#)

3.729/2004) that had been 'sleeping' in the House of Deputies for a dozen years, but it has suddenly awoken. It would create greatly "simplified" licensing for "strategic" projects such as big dams.

And new language inserted into the proposed law would make it even more radical than before -- and very similar to the dangerous PEC-65.

TIME FOR KEEN VIGILANCE

The flurry of recent proposals, amendments, and laws -- including various 'sleeping' proposals that have lain dormant for extended periods - - underscores the current danger to Brazil's environment.

In a time of political instability, pro-development groups and lobbies are doing all they can to push through measures that would greatly weaken Brazil's capacity to assess and limit environmentally risky mega-projects.

The only way to combat these efforts is to maintain an exceptional degree of vigilance -- and to shine a light on the shady deals that could imperil Brazil's rich environments while the country is distracted by its

current political turmoil.



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