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Mongabay Series: [Amazon Infrastructure](#)

Brazil's BR-319: Politicians capitalize on the Manaus oxygen crisis to promote a disastrous highway (Commentary)

Commentary by **Philip Fearnside; Maryane Andrade; and Lucas Ferrante** on 7 February 2021

- *Brazil's proposed reconstruction of the formerly abandoned BR-319 highway is notorious for its potential impact on Amazonian deforestation and indigenous peoples.*
- *The highway would connect Manaus, in the center of the Amazon, to the "arc of deforestation" in the southern part of the region, opening vast areas of forest to invasion.*
- *The current oxygen crisis in Manaus has been a windfall for politicians promoting the highway project, using the false argument that BR-319 is needed to supply oxygen to the city.*
- *This text is translated and expanded from the first author's column on the Amazônia Real website. The views expressed are those of the authors, not necessarily Mongabay.*

Manaus, the capital of Brazil's state of Amazonas, has gained worldwide notoriety for its handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, first for the [collapse of its hospital system](#) in April 2020 when the city (population 2.2 million) became the first to bury its dead in [mass graves](#), and second in January 2021 when the city's hospitals [ran out of oxygen](#) during the second coronavirus wave, resulting in dozens of preventable deaths. The mayor of Manaus (David Almeida) [blamed environmentalists](#) for the lack of oxygen in the city, suggesting that the cause of the crisis is the poor condition of Highway BR-319 (Manaus-Porto Velho), whose reconstruction has not yet been licensed. Politicians in Manaus have jumped at the opportunity to use the crisis to promote immediately initiating road construction despite its being far from having fulfilled legal requirements, such as [consulting impacted indigenous peoples](#). The federal deputy from Manaus who has [just been](#)

[elected](#) to the second most powerful position in Brazil's Chamber of Deputies (Marcelo Ramos) is leading the [effort to pressure](#) the ministries in Brasília.

The National Department of Transport Infrastructure (DNIT) is the official proponent of the highway reconstruction project and has even [violated judicial decisions](#) in order to bring it to fruition. BR-319 is a highway that was built by Brazil's military dictatorship in 1973-1974, but was abandoned by DNIT in 1988. This marked the BR-319's [becoming impassible](#) to busses and other common vehicles, but since 2015 a "maintenance" program has greatly improved the road. The "reconstruction" project, which would build and pave a new road over the same route, has not yet been approved. With the oxygen crisis in Manaus, DNIT seized the opportunity to dispatch a truck convoy with a two-day supply of oxygen for Manaus, accompanied by a bulldozer and other machinery to pull the trucks out of the mud when they got stuck, [which, of course, they did](#) (Figures 1 & 2). The trucks reached Manaus after a three-day journey and no further truck convoys were dispatched, the media-coverage objective having been achieved.



Trucks bringing oxygen to Manaus via Highway BR-319. Source: [Rede Globo](#).



Trucks bringing oxygen to Manaus via Highway BR-319. Source: [Rede Globo](#).

The lack of the BR-319 highway is not the reason for the oxygen shortage, but rather the lack of action by the authorities to order oxygen shipments in a timely manner. The state government knew that the oxygen supply would run out [since November](#) 2020, the federal government's Ministry of Health was warned [five days before](#) the oxygen supply was exhausted on January 14th, and the minister of health himself (General Eduardo Pazuello) was in Manaus three days before the oxygen ran out and did nothing (for which, with authorization from the Supreme Court, he is [being investigated](#) for dereliction of duty).

The BR-319 highway does not make sense as a way to supply oxygen to Manaus. At the time of an emergency like the current one, freight comes by plane anyway. For freight under normal conditions, the cost is [much cheaper](#) for transport by water than it would be via BR-319. After an initial airlift, shipments have now begun to arrive in Manaus on barges coming up the Amazon River from Belém. The economic [unfeasibility](#) of the BR-319 has been clearly [demonstrated](#), and, not by chance, the reconstruction project is the only major proposed project that [does not have](#) an economic feasibility study (EVTEA).



BR-319 as seen from satellite. © Microsoft Zoom.

The reconstruction project has not yet been approved. One reason is the high impact of the highway, which, together with planned but little-discussed side roads, would open immense areas of unprotected forest for the entry of land grabbers (*grileiros*), squatters, loggers and other actors from the “arc of deforestation” where most of the forest is already destroyed along the southern and eastern edges of the Amazon region. The environmental and social impact that the reconstruction of the highway would be enormous (see [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)).

A second reason is the long history of the proponents’ attempts to carry out the construction project [without the required environmental studies](#) and the failure to comply with the measures required by the federal environmental agency (IBAMA). For example, IBAMA’s demand for two simple checkpoints (one at each end of the middle stretch of the highway) has still not been complied with after years of DNIT trying to offload this responsibility; DNIT’s most recent proposal is to ask the municipalities (counties) crossed by the road to pay for the checkpoints. This makes clear fictitious nature of claims that a massive governance program would be installed to control deforestation.



Manaus as seen from satellite. © Microsoft Zoom.

Another problem is the poor quality of the environmental studies. The [first EIA](#) was rejected by IBAMA in 2009 with the [following official opinion](#): “... the EIA does not meet the minimum conditions and provide information that would allow an assessment of the environmental feasibility of the project... even leaving aside the technical quality of the EIA/RIMA, the preliminary license cannot be issued.” The [second EIA](#), currently under analysis by IBAMA, also has many flaws, but at least it admits to some of the [severe impacts](#) of this highway.

BR-319 is a high priority for Manaus politicians, as long as, of course, the project is paid for by the federal government and not by local taxpayers. The [real raison d’être](#) of the project is to [win votes](#) in Manaus. This became even clearer with the mayor’s attempt to take advantage of the coronavirus tragedy to promote this political project.

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