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ENVIRONMENT

NOVEMBER 8, 2019 / 10:57 AM / UPDATED AN HOUR AGO

Rains bring some relief to surging deforestation in Brazil's Amazon

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BRASILIA (Reuters) - The pace of surging deforestation in Brazil's Amazon rainforest this year eased in October, government data showed on Friday, with the onset of the rainy season making the muddy forest tougher to penetrate and helping prevent fires.



FILE PHOTO: Smoke billows during a fire in an area of the Amazon rainforest near Porto Velho, Rondonia State, Brazil, September 10, 2019. Picture taken September 10, 2019.
REUTERS/Bruno Kelly/File Photo

Compared to October last year, deforestation for the month was up 5%, according to preliminary data from Brazil's space research agency INPE.

This was a minor increase compared to the 83% rise for January to October over the same period last year. For the first 10 months, deforestation totaled 8,408 square kilometers (3,246 square miles), an area more than 10 times the size of New York City.

“We've had several good rains,” said Philip Fearnside, an ecologist at the National Institute of Amazonian Research in Manaus, the largest city in Brazil's Amazon.

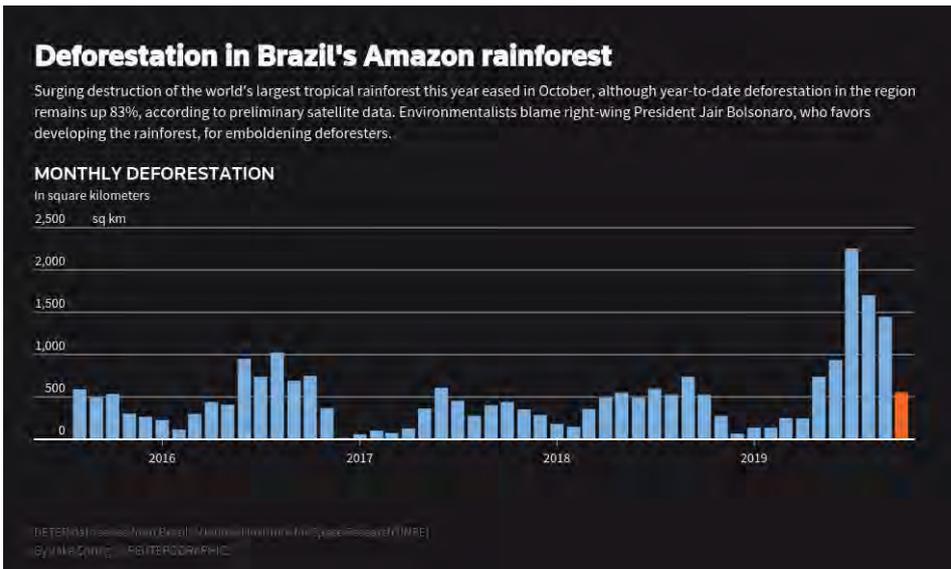
He emphasized that a 5% increase in October still represents a worsening from last year.

The Amazon is the world's largest tropical rainforest, absorbing vast amounts of greenhouse gases that contribute to climate change.

Fires swept through the Amazon in August, with the number of hotspots on a year to date basis surging to the highest point since 2010, drawing global outcry from world leaders and the public.

Deforestation in Brazil's Amazon rainforest - [here](#)

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Environmentalists and scientists have blamed the destruction on President Jair Bolsonaro - for emboldening deforesters with strong rhetoric in favor of developing the Amazon and also for reining in the country's environmental enforcement agency.

“There is no other explanation other than the government's constant discourse plus the actual concrete actions in weakening environment,” Fearnside said.

Bolsonaro's office declined to comment, while Brazil's Environment Ministry did not immediately respond.

The fires fell substantially year-on-year in September and October, after Bolsonaro temporarily banned setting fires in the region and sent in the military to battle the blazes. Year-to-date, the number of fires recorded in the Amazon has dropped back to only the highest since 2017.

But fires continue to rage in neighboring biomes like the Pantanal wetlands, an area renowned for its unique wildlife that draws tourists in search of jaguars and rare

birds. Roughly 12% of the Pantanal has gone up in flames from January to October, the most since 2007, according to INPE.

Scientists worry that the Amazon may be being pushed toward a point of no return, after which it will dry out and degrade into a savannah.

Research from U.S. space agency NASA released this week showed the atmosphere above the Amazon has dried out over the past 20 years because of human activity including fires, deforestation, farming and ranching.

“The trees need to transpire to cool themselves and to add more water vapor into the atmosphere. But the soil doesn’t have extra water for the trees to pull in,” said Sassan Saatchi, a co-author of the study, in a written statement.

“If this continues, the forest may no longer be able to sustain itself.”

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