

Ignoring science contradicts Brazil's best interests

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Published by the 160 Brazilian entities that make up Comitê Brasil in Defence of the Forests and Sustainable Development, the publication *Forest Law: what our legislators still need to know* is an unprecedented synthesis of three years of arguments against the draft reform bill now before Congress and the absurd provisions it contains.

The publication presents summaries of technical and scientific studies conducted by more than 50 top-level Brazilian researchers. The executive summaries signed by some of the leading names in Brazilian applied science underscore a strong warning of the dangers involved in approving a reform bill tailored to address the interests of a specific sector alone and ignore the wishes and interests of society at large.

The publication makes it very clear that the destiny of Brazil's National Forests cannot be decided on the basis of 'a dispute between environmentalists and *ruralistas*' (agribusiness and large landholding interests); it is a question of national interest and outreach and deserves a far more democratic treatment, embodying a strategic approach to the country's future. After all the *ruralista's* bill could very well deprive Brazil of its comparative advantage on the global scene, namely, the real possibility of coupling production and sustainability.

The publication has over a hundred pages divided into two parts: Wetlands, Risk Zones and Biodiversity; and Constitutionality, Legislation and Economics.

The first part makes it very clear that the bill now before the House of Representatives to be voted a second time jeopardises the existence of areas that are especially important for the maintenance of ecological equilibrium and the safety and survival of communities.

Altering the regulations governing the preservation of spaces surrounding wetlands, swamps, rivers and streams as well as slopes hilltops, mangrove swamps and intermittent water courses, the text of the draft legislation opens up the possibility of renewed deforestation and the reduction of biodiversity protection and environmental service provision as well as escalating the probability of tragedies occurring for those living in risk areas.

The catastrophic events that once again led to loss of life and property in some regions of Brazil at the beginning of this year reiterated and underscored the importance of preserving vegetation on steep slopes and along the banks of rivers because of the natural vegetation's capacity to retain water and counter erosion, among other benefits.

In terms of water resources, the National Water Regulatory Board itself has declared that "the current Brazilian Forest Law does not need to be altered" and that in fact there needs to be more effective protection for areas where major aquifers are recharged.

Brazil has the third largest area of natural mangrove formations in the world (7%) and half of all the mangrove swamps in Latin America. Now it may have to see the mass destruction of these natural nursery areas for marine life and sources of livelihood for extractive populations, if the draft bill is approved as it currently stands.

The legal text is sprinkled with traps and loopholes that will, in practice, leave such areas entirely unprotected. Brazil has already lost 50 thousand hectares of mangrove formations over the last 25 years.

The publication also insists that: agricultural activities conducted by traditional communities deserve specific consideration in the provisions of the law to ensure that their ways of life and livelihoods do not become unfeasible; Areas of Permanent Protection cannot be computed as part of the obligatory legal reserve areas of natural vegetation; rural proprietors must not be allowed to compensate for deforestation of legal reserve areas on their properties in other regions of the same biome; and that in no case can the definitive recuperation or restoration of legal reserve vegetation be done using 'exotic' species.

In the second section experts expose one of the greatest falsehoods propagated by those that defend what is beginning to be called the 'Deforestation Law', namely, that Brazil will be the only one, in the global context, with such strict legislation protecting forests along rivers and streams, around lakes, pods, reservoirs and springs, on slopes and hilltops, and in the mangrove swamps and coastal vegetation restinga formations.

In fact, countries like Paraguay, Chile, Panama, Venezuela, Bolivia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Mexico, the Dominican Republic, Germany, Belize, Australia and some North American states have legislation in place that places strong restrictions on deforestation and in some cases in proportions greater than those determined by Brazilian legislation.

Furthermore, to prove that 'deforested land is not a sign of development' the publication shows that the areas of forests in China, France, Germany, Japan, the United Kingdom, India, Holland, Poland, Sweden and the United States are all either stable or on the increase as a result of extensive conservation and reforestation programmes.

In Russia, which has the world's greatest area of forest vegetation, forests covered 34% of the land in 1950 but by 2010 they had expanded to cover 49%. Another country with huge forest areas is Canada. They remained stable from 1900 to 2010 covering 34% of the country. Malaysia's tropical forests covered 62% of the country in 2010 (73% in 1963) and in Papua New Guinea in 2010, they covered 63% (67% in 1958). In Norway, the forests covered 24% of the country in 1950 but were up to 33% by 2010.

Like various other tropical countries, Brazil has lost forest cover. In 1954, forested areas covered 76% of the country but by 2010 the figure had dropped to 56%.

Conciliating the points of view of scientists, businessmen, *ruralistas*, industrialists, environmentalists and other sectors involved in the central issue of land use and vegetation conservation is no easy task.

That is why this presentation of the discussions around the draft Forest law Reform Bill portrays so clearly the diversity of interests in play and takes pains to indicate the pathway to constructing Forest Legislation that is both modern and fair, and that will impede any further environmental degradation and ensure the provision of a decent quality of life to human populations especially smallholders in rural areas.