

Green advocates pan Dilma Rousseff's appointees

Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Brazil has garnered favorable press in recent years for passing a climate-change law and reducing the rate of Amazon deforestation. But these successes stem from initiatives of the previous government, not that of President Dilma Rousseff, who was reelected last October to a second four-year term.

So a key question in recent weeks has been whether Rousseff in her second term will improve on her first-term environmental efforts, which have been widely criticized as lackluster at best. Judging by the composition of her new cabinet, many experts here say, the chances of substantial green-policy progress are unlikely.

Environment Minister Izabella Teixeira, a technocrat who has not challenged large-

scale Amazon highway and dam projects, was reappointed. Meanwhile, Rousseff picked new leaders for the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation (MCTI)—Senator Kátia Abreu and Congressman Aldo Rebelo, respectively—who green advocates fear could compromise environmental initiatives aimed at climate protection.

“Rousseff’s appointments of Rebelo and Abreu show she doesn’t take climate change seriously,” says Carlos Rittl, Executive Secretary of the Climate Observatory, a Brazil-based network of 35 environmental groups. “Neither minister will likely increase government investments in projects that promote low-carbon ini-

continued on page 9 ▶

Paraguayan Chaco's rapid deforestation continues

The Paraguayan Chaco, a vast expanse of dry thorn forest long considered the nation's last frontier, was cleared at a rate of 2,000 hectares (4,942 acres) a day by loggers and ranchers in October and November of last year, a record pace of deforestation that many experts believe could lead to large-scale desertification of the region over the next two decades.

Guyra Paraguay, a leading Paraguayan environmental group that uses satellite data to track land clearing, estimates that Paraguay's Chaco will have lost 250,000 to 300,000 hectares (620,000 to 740,000 acres) in 2014 when year-end figures are tallied, a deforestation rate that is among the highest in the world.

The group blames a combination of high beef prices, land speculation and misguided government policy for the destruction of the wilderness, which is home to one of Latin America's last uncontacted indigenous groups as well as rare fauna such as the lowland tapir (*Tapirus terrestris*), the giant armadillo (*Priodontes Maximus*) and the jaguar (*Panthera onca*).

“We are losing biodiversity as well as the region's capacity for agricultural productivity at a tremendous speed,” says Alberto Yanosky, executive director of the Asunción-based Guyra Paraguay. “By 2035, there may be no forest

continued on page 10 ▶



Critics say President Horacio Cartes shares blame (AP photo)

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Inside

Around the region 2

Opposition continues to dam being built on the Magdalena River 3

Uruguay ombudsman to probe risks posed by agrochemical use 4

Prospects for tidal power studied in southern Argentina 5

CENTERPIECE:

With trade in mind, Hydrovia project is overlooking culture, environment in Peru 6

Q&A:

Brazilian expert says Amazon forest-policy shift needed in light of research findings 12

Rousseff appointees
continued from page 1

tiatives that reduce emissions.”

In her first term, Rousseff drew criticism for allowing the paving of Amazon highways and the construction of large Amazon dams, projects that typically lead to land invasions and illegal deforestation. She also drew fire for only minimally increasing the area of Amazon land under federal protection. And in 2012 she signed highly controversial legislation that revised the Forest Code, the country's central, forest-protection law. The rewrite, a victory for the farming and ranching lobby, suspended fines and replanting requirements for many landowners who had cleared forest illegally. Effectively, this amounted to an amnesty that some experts argue will encourage more illegal cutting—a key driver not only of habitat loss, but also of greenhouse-gas emissions in Brazil.

Green advocates worry such moves will undermine hard-won accomplishments made in recent years. In the climate legislation enacted under Rousseff's predecessor, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, Brazil pledged to hold its greenhouse-gas emissions from 36.1% to 38.9% below projected 2020 levels. The law marks one of the few such commitments by a large developing nation. Meanwhile, tighter woodland enforcement, also launched under Lula, helped decrease the Amazon deforestation rate substantially in five of the past six years, a trend that, if continued, will be key in enabling Brazil to reach its emissions-reduction targets.

Challenging climate

With Brazil's economy now sagging, pressure to favor development priorities over environmental concerns will only increase, green groups and scientists warn. In that context, they say, Rousseff's second-term appointments do not bode well for the country's ecosystems.

Drawing the keenest attention are Abreu and Rebelo, whose political parties—respectively, the Brazilian Democratic Movement and the Communist Party—form part of Rousseff's governing coalition. Rebelo was the main author of the Forest Code overhaul. Abreu, a senator and cattle rancher, recently stepped down as president of the National Confederation of Farmers and Ranchers (CNA), Brazil's main agribusiness lobbying group. She spearheaded the rewritten Forest Code in the Senate after Rebelo had pushed it through the lower house, the Chamber of Deputies.

“Rousseff's appointments of Rebelo and Abreu, perhaps the two congressional leaders most responsible for gutting the Forest Code, are a slap in the face to the scientific community, which opposed it,” says Philip Fearnside, an ecology researcher at the government-run National Institute of Amazon Research (INPA).

Nelson Pereira dos Reis, who heads the environmental department of the Industrial Federation of São Paulo State (FIESP), a powerful business lobby, portrays such concerns as overblown. “The policy of any government ministry reflects the policies of the government, and not of a particular minister,” he says. “So I don't see Abreu's or Rebelo's appointments as indicative of a change in the government's policies on agriculture, scientific research, or environmental protection. And Rebelo, in getting Congress to pass the Forest Code revision he drafted, has shown an ability to dialogue with all segments of society.”

Pereira dos Reis adds that two provisions in the revised Forest Code could help curb illegal deforestation if they are enforced by state agencies, a point on which green advocates agree. One requires landowners to register their properties with state authorities, pinpointing areas that have been illegally cut, and the other requires eventual restoration of that cleared land or a similar quantity elsewhere.

Commitment required

Yet critics argue that to improve protection of the Amazon and achieve other, related goals such as greenhouse-gas reductions, Brazilian authorities must possess an environmental commitment that Rousseff, by way of her appointments, appears to lack. They point in particular to the appointment of Rebelo, who asserted publicly that climate change is a hoax. In a July 2010 article entitled “Environmental Scam,” Rebelo wrote: “there is no scientific proof of global warming projections and even less that it [global warming] is occurring because of man and not because of natural phenomena. It [global warming] deals with a formulation, based on computer simulations.”

Rebelo's article was meant to rebut an article by Márcio Santilli, one of the founders and coordinators of the Social-Environmental Institute (ISA), a leading Brazilian conservation group. Santilli's article, entitled “Reactionary and Predatory,” said the Forest Code revision “fails to recognize the irrefutable role that a healthy forest plays in a healthy climate and in the well-being of its populations.”

Santilli says that while President Rousseff called climate change “a major challenge” in a U.N. speech last September, “the president's appointment of Rebelo, a climate change denier, to head the MCTI is particularly troubling...[B]oth Rebelo's and Abreu's appointments cast doubt on whether the government really plans to reach the emission-reduction targets of the climate change law.”

—Michael Kepp

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Documents & Resources:

July 2010 article by ISA founder Santilli criticizing Forest Code revision (in Portuguese):
www.sociambiental.org/pt-br/blog/blog-do-isa/reacionario-e-predatorio

Rebelo's July 2010 rebuttle (in Portuguese):
www.sociambiental.org/banco_imagens/pdfs/carta/201006/20100620_rebelo.pdf