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A Rain Forest Imperiled

The issue that most Americans identify with Brazil — the destruction of the Amazon rain forest — did not occupy a prominent role in the talks between President Clinton and Brazil's President, Fernando Henrique Cardoso. The issue deserved better, though neither man is comfortable with the subject. Washington still subsidizes logging in America's temperate rain forests. Brazil has abandoned some of its worst policies in the Amazon, yet it is not enforcing its laws and seems oblivious to a range of new and insidious threats from timber and agricultural interests.

The state of the world's rain forests is particularly distressing now that global warming has again become a major international concern. Growing forests help absorb the gases that warm the atmosphere. Burning those forests, of course, adds to the problem.

More of Brazil is on fire right now than ever before. The fires are not as widespread as they are in Indonesia, where smoke has spread to neighboring nations, nor is commercial logging the main culprit. Brazil's fires are largely the handiwork of agricultural interests that clear land for cattle ranching, with a modest assist provided by subsistence farmers who engage in small-scale slash-and-burn tactics. This year, cities like Manaus that have gone unscathed in the past have been blanketed with smoke. Manaus has also reported a 40 percent increase in respiratory illnesses.

The fires are increasing despite Brazil's efforts in the past few years to protect the forest. The Government ended its ruinous subsidies to the cattle ranchers, and now requires that settlers keep 80 percent of their land forested. Brazil has also set aside about 20 percent of the forest as parks, protected areas and indigenous reserves.

But the ranchers keep on burning, and the laws are not enforced. Brazil's environmental protection agency has only about 80 enforcement officers in the whole of the Amazon. Worse, Brazil's courts

have ruled that the agency does not have the authority to enforce the law, which means that it cannot even collect the fines it levies. A bill giving the agency authority to punish environmental criminals has passed the senate and is now before Brazil's lower house. It is a bill the Amazon obviously needs.

Tough enforcement is especially important now. There could be a major drought this year or next, leading to widespread fires, if the climate-altering weather pattern known as El Niño strikes as expected. A graver danger may come from industrial interests. President Cardoso favors cutting roads and blasting waterways through large swaths of the forest. This could provide a new transportation network for big farmers who want to clear land to grow soybeans for export to Europe.

New roads could also lead to increased logging. Already companies from Malaysia, China, Korea and other nations, many of which use clearcutting in Asia, are beginning to log part of the forest. As these companies pave roads deeper into the jungle, cattle ranchers may follow. The roads may make clear-cutting economically viable and tempt Brazil to sell off the rain forest for hard currency.

Although a muscular environmental agency is Brazil's most pressing need, it is not the only one. If Brazil goes ahead with the plan to improve Amazon transportation, it must simultaneously address environmental concerns and earmark more land for conservation. A worthy program to set aside indigenous areas, which both preserves the forests and protects Indian tribes, is only half-completed. Brazil must finish the job, which would protect 10 percent more of the Amazon.

The country also needs to develop zoning laws for the forests and to adopt sustainable logging practices. More broadly, Brazil, like the United States and Asia's forested nations, must abandon the view that the rain forest is only a commodity to be exploited for private gain.