

The Guardian

Crops for animal feed destroying Brazilian savannah, WWF warns

Wooded grasslands of the Cerrado suffering ongoing deforestation as soy agriculture expands to feed growing demand for meat

Dan J Lloyd in the Cerrado, Brazil

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The rising global appetite for meat is contributing to the destruction of enormous wooded grasslands in southern America, WWF warned on Monday.

While satellite data and stronger law enforcement have led to a decline in deforestation in the Amazon rainforest, the Cerrado, a savannah that covers more than one-fifth of Brazil, has experienced ongoing deforestation due to the expansion of soy agriculture, led by demand for soybean to produce feed for factory-farmed animals.

Human activity through agriculture and cattle rearing has devastated 50% of the Cerrado, with only 20% of it still intact.

During her visit to the region last week, UK environmental secretary, Caroline Spelman, said: "The Cerrado is a huge area - as big as France, Germany, Italy, Spain and the UK put together. It's globally important in terms of biodiversity and storing the world's carbon dioxide, but it doesn't receive the same attention from the international community. Because of that, people are not aware of the uncertain future it faces."

Cultivation of the protein rich soybean - used in products such as margarine, cosmetics and meat replacement dishes - is causing the carbon sink, home to 5% of the world's species, to lose its dense vegetation. Nearly one-third of all soybean exports goes to the EU. Brazil, the second largest soy exporter, after the US, has seen soy expansion soar over the last 10 years.

Michael Becker of WWF said: "If you want to make a comparison to the Amazon, it's like the inverted forest. I think that in the last decades, a lot of the attention has been driven to the Amazon region. Now I think we need to look at other biomes in Brazil, such as the Cerrado, the Pantanal and the Atlantic forest, where you have similar patterns that will affect the biodiversity of Brazil in the long-term."

Deforestation in the region runs at around 14.2 square km a year, with the annual rate between 2002-2008 running at 4%.

The Cerrado is also a vital water source, with the rivers generating electricity for nine in 10 Brazilians. There are fears locally that the rising agriculture industry in the region is polluting water supplies.

José Correia Quintal, 52, runs a co-operative near the second largest national park in the Cerrado, the Grande Sertão Veredas, and has lived in the area his whole life. His co-op provides work to local communities, as they use the Cerrado's vegetation to make local medicines and foodstuffs.

"Agrochemicals used in the Cerrado are affecting people's health," he said. "It is also contaminating the rivers. There is a concern that if this keeps the way it is there will be a problem with the water resources, and we will live as the people in the north-east region of Brazil live now, where water is now scarce."

One proposed solution is the Round Table for Responsible Soy (RTRS), an association of industry, civil society and producers focused on environmental, labour and health issues involving soy farmers and industries.

Sainsbury's, Asda, Waitrose and Marks and Spencer have agreed to become RTRS members when the scheme comes into place. However, guidelines are only now being presented to soybean producers.

John Landers promotes responsible farming techniques in the region, and although an RTRS member, says there are difficulties with the scheme.

"There's no premium currently developed for responsible soy ... we have to see a return for the extra effort the farmer has to put in to demonstrate that he is being responsible."

Due to the current lack of a premium - not dissimilar to the Fair trade model - RTRS has yet to make a substantial impact on soy farmers in Brazil. Yet expansion continues: agriculture company SLC Agricola, said it had identified 71m hectares of land in Brazil still available legally for agriculture, including former pasture land.

With illegal and irresponsible agriculture also an issue, the race is on to put RTRS guidelines into place before any further development continues. "Three percent of the Cerrado is protected effectively," Becker added. "The environmental ministry of Brazil has agreed to the UN target of 14% [protection] for the Cerrado. If we reach a 14% protective area, that's an achievement."

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