

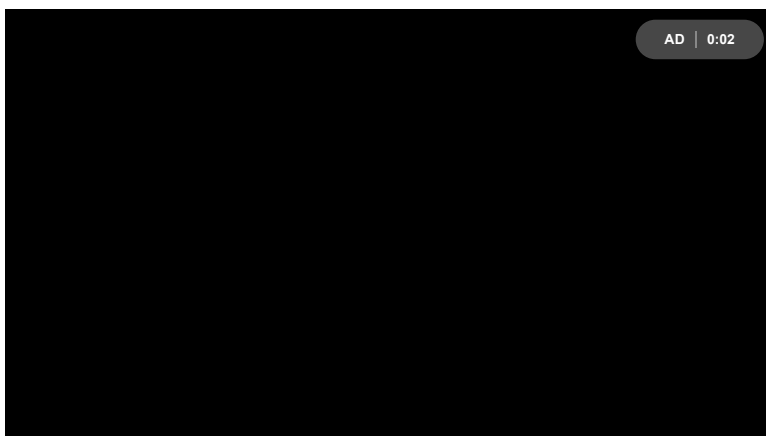
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Datum: 18 september 2019 om 00:04
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AMERICAS | Amazon Rainforest Fires: Here's What's Really Happening

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Amazon Rainforest Fires: Here's What's Really Happening



The rainforest, critical to absorbing the planet's carbon dioxide, has seen an increase in deforestation under President Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil. Ueslei Marcelino/Reuters

By **Alexandria Symonds**

Published Aug. 23, 2019 Updated Aug. 28, 2019



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The hashtag #PrayForAmazonas was the top trending topic in the world on Twitter on Wednesday, as images of a rain forest on fire spread across the internet. Here's what we know so far about the fires raging in the Amazon.

How widespread are the fires in the Amazon?

The number of fires identified by satellite images in the Amazon so far this month is the highest since 2010, according to Brazil's National Institute of Space Research agency, which tracks deforestation and forest fires using satellite images.

[Update: [Amid outrage over rainforest fires, many in the Amazon remain defiant.](#)]

The number of fires identified by the agency in the Amazon region so far this year, 40,341, is about 35 percent higher than the average for the first eight months of each year since 2010.

A fire in the Amazon rain forest on Tuesday near Porto Velho, Rondonia State, Brazil.

A fire in the Amazon rain forest on Tuesday near Porto Velho, Rondonia State, Brazil. Ueslei Marcelino/Reuters

The decade before that included several years in which the number of fires identified during the first eight months was far higher.

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How did the fires start?

Natural fires in the Amazon are rare, and the majority of these fires were set by farmers preparing Amazon-adjacent farmland for next year's crops and pasture.

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Much of the land that is burning was not old-growth rain forest, but land that had already been cleared of trees and set for agricultural use.

A satellite image showing fires burning in the Brazilian states of Amazonas, upper left, Para upper right, Mato Grosso, lower right, and Rondonia, lower left

A satellite image showing fires burning in the Brazilian states of Amazonas, upper left, Para upper right, Mato Grosso, lower right, and Rondonia, lower left, last week. NASA

[\[President Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil rejected millions in aid offered by Group of 7 leaders.\]](#)

How unusual are the fires? How dangerous are they to the rain forest?

INPE's figures represent a 79 percent increase in fires from the same period in 2018. There have been large numbers of fires in other recent years as well: According to a manager of Global Forest Watch, the number of fires in the Amazon this year is roughly comparable to 2016.

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Deforestation more broadly is [always a cause for concern](#). Last year, [the](#)

[world lost](#) about 30 million acres of tree cover, including 8.9 million acres of primary rain forest, an area the size of Belgium, according to data from the University of Maryland.

The destruction of the Amazon rain forest in Brazil has increased rapidly since the nation's new far-right president took over and his government scaled back efforts to fight illegal logging, ranching and mining.

Land scorched by fire in the state of Mato Grosso, Brazil.

Land scorched by fire in the state of Mato Grosso, Brazil. Rogerio Florentino/EPA, via Shutterstock

While campaigning for president last year, Mr. Bolsonaro declared that [Brazil's vast protected lands were an obstacle](#) to economic growth and [promised to open them up](#) to commercial exploitation.

Less than a year into his term, that is already happening.

Brazil's part of the Amazon lost more than 1,330 square miles of forest cover in the first half of 2019, a 39 percent increase over the same period last year, according to the government agency that tracks deforestation.

The Amazon is often referred to as Earth's "lungs," because its vast forests release oxygen and store carbon dioxide, a heat-trapping gas that is a major cause of global warming. If enough rain forest is lost and can't be restored, the area will become savanna, which doesn't store as much carbon, meaning a reduction in the planet's "lung capacity."

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Smoke from fires in the Amazon rain forest covering the city of Porto Velho, Rondonia, Brazil

SMOKE FROM FIRES IN THE AMAZON RAIN FOREST COVERING THE CITY OF PORTO VELHO, RONDONIA, BRAZIL.

Smoke from fires in the Amazon rain forest covering the city of Porto Velho, Rondonia, Brazil.
Roni Carvalho/EPA, via Shutterstock

[Read about the [backlash against Brazil's environmental policies](#), which have paved the way for runaway deforestation of the Amazon.]

Did climate change cause these fires, and how will they affect climate change?

These fires were not caused by climate change. They were, by and large, set by humans. However, climate change [can make fires worse](#). Fires can burn hotter and spread more quickly under warmer and drier conditions.

When it comes to the future of climate change, widespread fires contribute a dual negative effect. Trees are valuable because they can store carbon dioxide, and that storage capacity is lost when trees burn. Burning trees also pumps more carbon into the atmosphere.

Fire damage in Brasilia, Brazil.

Fire damage in Brasilia, Brazil. Adriano Machado/Reuters

How does deforestation work? Is this different?

Deforestation can be caused by natural factors, like insects or blight, or by humans. This is a typical case of human deforestation: Farmers cut down trees to plant or expand a farm, then burn the leavings to clear the ground.

Brazil had previously tried to portray itself as a leader in protecting the Amazon and fighting global warming. From 2004 to 2012, the country created new conservation areas, increased monitoring and took away government credits from rural producers who were caught razing protected areas. This brought deforestation to the lowest level since record-keeping began.

But as the economy plunged into a recession in 2014, the country became more reliant on the agricultural commodities it produces — beef and soy, which are drivers of deforestation — and on the powerful rural lobby. Land clearing, much of it illegal, began to tick upward again.

Listen to 'The Daily': Why the Amazon Is Burning

The number of fires raging in the Amazon rainforest this month is the highest in a decade, putting the environmental policies of Brazil's president in the global spotlight.



Are the fires the fault of President Jair Bolsonaro?

There is evidence that farmers feel more emboldened to burn land following the election of Mr. Bolsonaro.

[A New York Times analysis](#) of public records found that enforcement actions intended to discourage illegal deforestation, such as fines or seizure of equipment, by Brazil's main environmental agency fell by 20 percent

during the first six months of this year.

Mr. [Bolsonaro blames](#) nongovernmental organizations for the fires. He has cited no evidence, and environmental experts dispute the claim.

What is Brazil's government doing to fight the fires?

Some local governments have said they are shoring up their fire brigades. On Thursday, Mr. Bolsonaro said the Brazilian government lacked the resources to fight the fires, but on Friday he said he would direct the military to enforce environmental laws and to help contain the fires.

Ernesto Londoño, Manuela Andreoni, Henry Fountain and John Schwartz contributed reporting.

