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Q&A: COMMAND AND CONTROL POLICIES ALONE WON'T SAVE THE AMAZON

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The Brazilian state of Mato Grosso has achieved a 34% reduction in deforestation since August 2020 compared to the same period a year earlier. The decline is particularly important since most Amazon states had rising deforestation rates in recent years. State Secretary of the Environment Mauren Lazzaretti brings more than 20 years of experience in the sector. A key figure in the design and implementation of Mato Grosso's environmental policies, she credits the advances in forest protection to increased efficiency in monitoring, bolstered by funding from international donors, as well as to a robust dialogue with the state's farm sector. She spoke with EII Executive Director Dan Nepstad about her work, her vision for the state and the upcoming COP26 climate summit.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DKRqDTuvzKU

What steps has the government of Mato Grosso taken to achieve the recent reductions in deforestation?

We began by creating a consistent plan to reduce illegal deforestation, at the same time working to streamline processes for those who have a legal right to deforest. We started with these two pillars. I've worked in environmental management for 20 years, in both the public and private sector. Historically, for the government the challenge has remained the same: the number of staff is inadequate to the size of the state [more than twice the size of California], and accountability has been weak. So we focused on increasing efficiency, developing an online platform to improve the management and efficacy of inspections. That work started in August 2019 and by September deforestation began to decline.

How have these steps supported your efforts?

Through the platform we receive verified [high resolution] data in real time on where deforestation is happening and we use that data to assist field teams in formulating and issuing infraction notices. We're able to be in the field the moment an infraction occurs. We also remove machinery being used to deforest at the site of an infraction. Over the last year we removed more than 120 bulldozers and other heavy machinery, along with chainsaws, firearms and machetes. And we've also focused on holding violators accountable through a local task force. In 2019 we issued fines totaling more than R$300 million. In 2020 that figure climbed to more than R$1 billion, four times more than fines issued at the federal level, with more than 5000 deforestation-related cases tried.

You also mentioned streamlining the process for legal deforestation. What has that looked like?

In 2019 4% of all deforestation in the state was authorized. In the first half of 2020 that number increased to 14%, highlighting our efforts to support those who are legally entitled to clear forests while also inhibiting illegal activity. The numbers for the second half of last year are still coming in but they show continued progress on this.

What role did climate finance play in this reduction?

The REM (REDD for Early Movers) contract with Germany and the United Kingdom was essential to allowing us to achieve the results that we have. The State of Mato Grosso had one of the first climate change policies in the Amazon, and that allowed us to become part of the REM program, which made possible the development of the platform, the procurement of flatbed trucks for the removal of machinery as well as the other activities tied to combating deforestation and preventing forest fires. When we began our term the state was in dire financial straits. Then the pandemic hit. Without the REM program none of these initiatives [to slow deforestation] would have been possible.

The Produce Conserve and Include (PCI) strategy and Forest Code are pillars of Mato Grosso's environmental policy. What part have they played in this process?

Both are very relevant. The policy of command and control over the last three decades has not borne fruit. Only when we began to promote sustainable development and legalization along with command and control were we able to make change. PCI brings these together. The Forest Code, and more specifically the CAR (Rural Environmental Registry), is the instrument by which we implement this public policy. It is the only way we have to formally communicate with the world that rural producers are complying with the law in terms of forest conservation. This is why the state is focusing its energies on full implementation of the Forest Code, which will allow us to combat illegal activities while normalizing the process for those who operate within the law.

Mato Grosso has committed to achieving zero illegal deforestation, a PCI target. What are your plans for achieving this?

This is an ongoing process, and the pandemic—among other factors—could complicate our ability to realize this goal by the end of our term in 2022. But it remains public policy for the state, and at the very least we want to reverse the numbers so that, by registering more properties under CAR, we can see the percentage of illegal deforestation fall below that of legal deforestation. Still, we will continue to communicate zero-tolerance for illegal deforestation, which is the premise for all our public policies.

Last year saw significant fires in the forests and Pantanal region of the state. What are you doing to mitigate fire danger ahead of the next fire season?

Image available online: view image

Fires in the Pantanal region of Mato Grosso. (Image via Flickr)

We began carrying out our action plan to combat deforestation and forest fires at the beginning of this year, including mitigation measures and organizing of fire brigade teams. On top of the more than 1500 firefighters in active service, we will hire another 100 brigade members for the most critical

period. In 2021 we will also increase investments to fight forest fires and deforestation from R$32 millon to R$73 million, with an added focus on caring for wild animals affected by forest fires. And we will begin these activities a month earlier than in previous years. Last year we were struggling to adapt to the pandemic when the fires occurred. This year we've taken that lesson into account and—with the pandemic still a reality—we are already working on preparations.

With respect to the Pantanal, the fires there became synonymous with the state's image abroad. It is among the biomes most affected by fire. In 2020 we issued a decree focused on clearing the region of invasive species that form much of the biomass fueling the fires. Our hope is that this will mitigate the potential for the kind of fires we saw last year. In drafting our plans for 2021, we've also engaged with local landowners in constructing water tanks. And we are working with local universities and Embrapa Pantanal, which has more than 30 years of expertise in the region, to ensure our efforts are aligned with the Pantanal's unique ecosystem. This is all in preparation for the coming fire season and with the understanding that we are likely facing drought conditions for at least the next four years.

Can you share a little of your own story? Where are you from, and what drew you to this position?

I was born in Mato Grosso, in the municipality of Alta Floresta, so forests have been with me since birth. My father was a logger and a staunch defender of the forest. He understood that rampant deforestation would wipe out the raw material that was his livelihood. That is the vision I grew up with: making a living from the forest by keeping the forest standing. It's a lesson I learned from my father.

The real turning point in my career came in 2005, when I was working for the State Foundation for the Environment [which would later become the State Secretariat for the Environment]. I was among those arrested as part of Operation Curupira [a sting operation of the federal government to crack down on illegal activities]. Although I was later exonerated the experience had a major impact on me. It was the beginning of my career, and I remember clearly what the head of Mato Grosso's Court of Justice told me upon my release: let this injustice motivate you to achieve your goals. I spent the next several years away from the sector, returning as deputy secretary under then-Governor Silval Barbosa in 2010. I was later invited to be part of the subsequent administration of Pedro Taques, whose former colleague had ordered my arrest. That was another major milestone for me. I was ready to move on

when Gov. Mendes took office and invited me to be part of his administration.

And how have you applied some of these lessons in your most recent post?

I have an insider's knowledge of the dynamics within the state's environmental agency, but I also share the perspective of those who have required the agency's services in the past and did not get them. I've tried to translate these perspectives into the administration's planning, balancing the demands of public management with environmental realities in a state that is a national and global leader in food production.

In addition, Mato Grosso now holds the presidency of ABEMA (Brazil's association of state-level environmental agencies), the first time in the association's 30-year history that an Amazon state has held this post. I preside over this group, as well as being the only female leader among member states in the Governor's Climate and Forests (GCF) Task Force. I am the President of the GCF in Brazil. In all these positions I look to understand all sides, eschewing ideologies that blind us to certain realities. I think this is the role of the public servant, to guide regions toward a common and shared vision.

Can you give a specific example of this effort to build consensus?

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Mato Grosso is one of the world's largest exporters of soy and other feed grains.

Dialogue with the farm sector is essential if we want to effectively implement policy. In the past that dialogue was frowned upon, and farmers were routinely demonized. Today we build our policies by listening, integrating the perspectives of those tasked with adhering to a specific policy. Dialogue is key here. Making farmers part of the process helps to ensure compliance, even if there are portions of a policy they might disagree with. We've changed tax laws, licensing processes for fisheries, and land clearing procedures. Likewise with CAR, we've continued to adjust and improve implementation. And

in all of this farmers have cooperated because they have been and remain part of the dialogue.

What is your message to world leaders with COP26 just around the corner?

I hope to highlight Mato Grosso's success as a leader in production while conserving our natural resources, in providing an income to our population from standing forests. I hope it will be possible to demonstrate to the world the strategies we are pursuing, and to emphasize that these strategies need investments, that the cost of this preservation needs to be recognized.

For COP, the idea is that we can come up with other projects like REM. Germany and the United Kingdom have already signaled the possibility of something like this. Then there is the question of payment for environmental services, which falls under Article 6 of the Paris Accord. We have to understand that production is limited to 20% in the Amazon biome. The cost of maintaining the remaining 80% of legal reserve needs to be demonstrated as does its value to the global environment. Broadly speaking, my hope is that we can demonstrate our strategy in such a way as to finance smart ideas that improve efficiency and contribute to the reduction of deforestation in the Amazon.