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PERU ELECTIONS OFFER OPPORTUNITY TO ADVANCE THE AMAZON FOREST AGENDA

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While the Peruvian Amazon covers more than half of the South American country's territory, its remoteness and sparse population make it all but invisible in national elections. But under the Amazon's expansive green canopy, efforts are now underway to advance a low-deforestation model of rural development that is drawing broad support from all sectors.

As votes continue to be tallied in the wake of a bitterly divisive presidential race, the success of these efforts offers a path forward for the nation and our climate.

"Whoever comes out on top in this election will have to worry about Peru on the international stage, and this is where the Amazon can't be ignored," says EII Executive Director Dan Nepstad, noting that as one of the countries hardest hit by the COVID 19 pandemic, the pressure to liquidate natural resources to accelerate a post-pandemic recovery will be immense.

"Instead, there is a chance to put these development plans that are already created in place. There is a role for local and national governments, and the international community in this," Nepstad added.

Gustavo Suarez de Freitas, who directs EII's programs in Peru, agrees. "There is a risk that the post-Covid period unleashes deforestation and mineral extraction in the region; it is a critical moment to galvanize progress towards forest-friendly development."

Image available online: view image

The Peruvian Amazon covers more than half of the nation's territory but is largely invisible when it comes to national elections.

Designed over years by regional governments in close collaboration with farmers, the private sector, and indigenous communities, all six governments of the Peruvian Amazon are now poised to adopt low-emission rural development (LED-R) strategies. Once formalized, the strategies will provide a rare opportunity to secure the forest, attract foreign investment and firmly entrench a sustainable development agenda. EII coordinated five of these strategy development processes.

Importantly, these same regions established the Amazon Commonwealth, formally recognized by the national government in 2020, with the aim of gaining a greater presence in national policy making and to drive support for low emissions rural development and forest conservation.

According to EII Senior Policy Analyst Patricia Luna, who is based in Lima, the most important step—convincing producers that forest protection is important—has already been taken.

“For instance, cocoa producers in Peru are increasingly ready to adopt a low deforestation model,” explained Luna. “They’re watching demand side strategies in Europe take shape, including the EU Climate Pact (which in part seeks to limit the bloc’s exposure to deforestation through international supply chains). They’re worried about losing that market which will have a direct impact on their income.”

Even the larger agricultural companies in Peru are moving toward lowering deforestation, continued Luna, as they worry about potential trade restrictions on commodities like coffee and cacao. Many are turning their attention to the LED-R strategies, seeing them as potential engines of economic growth.

Luna credits the strategies’ broad-based appeal—drawing support from regional governments to large agribusiness and small, rural producers—to the “close collaboration with those in the regions who were part of their design. They are evidence based. They take into account education, public services, the economy. They reflect what rural people want.”

Governors in the Amazon are currently reviewing final versions before sending them off for approval by regional councils, an important step that will give the strategies staying power beyond the next round of regional elections scheduled for October 2022.

“Once these policies are in place and begin to deliver benefits, they will be hard to get rid of. But to get there, we need to win private sector support,” said Luna.

One effort now underway to win that support aims to offer a proof of concept for the LED-R strategies. EII is currently working with the Tropical Forest Alliance on a project to highlight the Peruvian cacao sector’s commitment to protecting the Amazon region’s forests and biodiversity. Part of that work has involved intensive interactions with local cacao producers, many of whom are eager to get their products into the market and need support to ensure they meet the increasingly stringent regulations on deforestation.

“These producers are contending with a lack of finance, of technical assistance, of innovation. There is still a major gulf between where they are and where they need to be,” Luna said. “But with partnerships and support this can be fixed.”

Image available online: view image

Peru's divisive presidential race has pitted former educator and union activist Pedro Castillo (R) against right-leaning candidate Keiko Fujimori.

Meanwhile, as votes in the presidential race are still being tallied, left-leaning candidate Pedro Castillo has opened a slim but growing lead against his rival Keiko Fujimori, the daughter of former authoritarian President Alberto Fujimori. According to Luna, it is still unclear what the outcome of the race will mean for the Amazon. Neither candidate has put forward concrete plans for the region, a fact Luna says is typical of Peruvian politics.

“The Peruvian Amazon accounts for less than 12 percent of the national vote, which is why the region is forgotten,” she explains. “Candidates have typically only looked to the Amazon when they want something specific… railroads, oil, gas. But when it comes to deciding who will win elections, the Amazon has been invisible.”

But according to Nepstad, the current moment offers a rare opportunity to build momentum behind the forest agenda.

“We have this window between the presidential election and regional elections next year to get these strategies in place. Every one of them has an investment plan. There is a huge amount of granularity in them that addresses the unique needs of each department,” he said.

Nepstad added that whichever candidate comes out on top, the Amazon region’s centrality to the country’s economic future is certain.

“They may not need Amazonian votes to win elections, but they will need a strong Amazon program to succeed once elected.”