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Oil Palm Expands on Deforested Land in Brazil's Rainforest

By Fabiana Frayssinet

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African palm mixed with native vegetation along a road in Brazil's Amazon rainforest. Credit: Fabiana Frayssinet/IPS

MOJÚ/TOMÉ-AÇÚ, Pará, Brazil, Nov 13 2013 (IPS) - The green of the oil palm plantations is unbroken along kilometre after kilometre of red soil, devastated in the past by loggers and ranchers. The oil palm, a sign of alarm for some and of hope for others, is here to stay in the Amazon rainforest state of Pará in the extreme north of this country.

The vegetation along the road that sets out from Belém, the state capital, has lost the deep-green exuberance of the rainforest, which has been replaced by "dendê", as the African oil palm (*Elaeis guineensis*) is known in Brazil.

The traffic jams in the city give way to over 150 km of paved and dirt roads, lined by oil palm plantations and the occasional cattle pasture, and interrupted every once in a while by a small town.

According to the [National Institute for Space Research \(INPE\)](#), Brazil's Amazon region lost 111,087 sq km of forest cover between 2004 and 2012, including 44,361 sq km in Pará.

The [Agropalma](#) company, which sells palm oil to the food, hygiene and cosmetics industries, set up shop 27 years ago on this land initially cleared to make way for cattle pasture. It now owns more than 39,000 km of dendê in Pará.

More recently it was followed by other companies, interested in biodiesel: Belém Bioenergia (BB), owned by the state-run Petrobras and the private Portuguese firm Galp Energia, and Biopalma, a palm oil producer that was purchased by the Vale mining company.

"It is an economically sustainable, environmentally correct and socially enriching project," BB' agribusiness director, Antônio Gonçalves Esmeraldo, told IPS.

According to the executive, BB chooses the land it buys based on agroecological mapping by the Brazilian governmental agricultural research agency, Embrapa, which highlights areas that have already been deforested and degraded by cattle ranchers.

Rat poison

IPS had access to formal complaints that were investigated by the Pará public prosecutors office on the supposed use of banned rat poison in oil palm plantations.

The plantations reportedly use Klerat - authorised only for accredited companies, in urban

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- ▶ African palm mixed with native vegetation along a road in Brazil's Amazon rainforest. Credit: Fabiana Frayssinet/IPS
- ▶ Processing the fruit of the oil palm in Biopalma plant in Mojú, a municipality in the northern state of Pará. Credit: Fabiana Frayssinet/IPS

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farmers.

Oil palm employs 10,914 people in this state of nearly eight million people.

An 8,500-hectare estate leased by BB, which employed five people when it was dedicated to cattle-raising, will give work to 850 locals once it has been planted in oil palm, Esmeraldo said.

The company aims to plant oil palm on a total of 60,000 hectares by 2015. It has planted half of that so far, including 6,000 hectares tended by family farmers who will sell the company their output, and the rest of which are leased to large landholders.

Biopalma, for its part, will obtain oil from 60,000 hectares of its own, and from the harvest of another 20,000 hectares farmed by 2,000 small producers.

The aim is biodiesel to mix in a proportion of 20 percent with the gasoil used to run the mining company's machinery and the locomotives of Vale, César Abreu, the firm's director of bioenergy, told IPS.

According to Melquíades Santos Filho, Biopalma's communications manager, dendê helps restore the biological balance of degraded land by mixing with native flora. He said his company has managed to get native species that are nearly extinct, like the jaguar, to reappear in the plantation forests.

In 2012, oil palm covered 140,000 hectares in Pará, and 67 percent of the production went to the food and cosmetics industries and 33 percent to biofuels, according to a study by agronomist D'Alembert Jaccoud.

The private sector projects extending that surface area to 329,000 hectares by 2015 and expanding the portion destined to biofuel to 47 percent, Jaccoud told IPS.

The government of Pará says that by 2022, oil palm plantations for biofuel will cover 700,000 hectares.

The Programme for the Sustainable Production of Palm Oil determines which degraded areas are apt for planting with oil palm. According to Embrapa, some 10.4 million hectares of already deforested and degraded land are available.

settings - to combat wild rodents.

Klerat is a powerful anticoagulant that causes internal bleeding and does not kill immediately. If people hunt and eat an animal that has ingested the poison, they run the risk of being poisoned as well.

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Processing the fruit of the oil palm in Biopalma plant in Mojú, a municipality in the northern state of Pará. Credit: Fabiana Frayssinet/IPS

The expansion would make Brazil the world's third-largest producer of palm oil, after Indonesia and Malaysia, according to the government of Pará.

But the fear is that this country will follow in the footsteps of [Indonesia](#) and Malaysia, which today supply 86 percent of the global market thanks to intense deforestation, partly by forest fires that create clouds of smoke that even affect the rest of Southeast Asia.

After Africa, where legal insecurity paves the way for land-grabbing by Chinese and European countries, "the other great frontier is the Amazon rainforest, where Brazil has the biggest stock of land," Jaccoud said.

The National Biofuel Production Programme is fomenting the planting of oil palm. By law, gasoil vehicles in Brazil must use a mix of five percent biodiesel, and the goal is to reach seven percent. It would be "an obligatory captive market," Jaccoud said.

The Ministry of Agrarian Development has staked its bets on biofuel, which is obtained from soy, sunflower, castor, canola and oil palm, among other species.

Proponents point out that biodiesel releases fewer greenhouse gases than fossil fuels and that it contributes to

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diversifying the country's energy mix.

The government also hopes to reduce imports of gasoil.

And by promoting family farming of oil palm, it is working to generate income and jobs, while stimulating local economies in rural areas.

Jaccoud said that while the government's programmes are well-intentioned, the necessary controls and oversight are still missing.

He said there is a danger that land ownership will become further concentrated, that consumption of pesticides will grow, and that the areas on the outskirts of large cities will become even poorer and more dangerous as a result of rural migration.

Guilherme Carvalho, an educator with the non-governmental programme FASE Amazônia, is worried that palm oil companies are trying "to force family farmers to invest in this monoculture crop and abandon food crops, which would create food insecurity, a loss of autonomy over their land and dependence on market prices."

The contracts that Biopalma and BB sign with small farmers establish that they only have to use 10 hectares of their land for oil palm, while the rest remains free for growing food and other traditional crops.

But for now, family farms represent only a small part of the oil palm plantations in Pará.

João Meirelles, director of the Peabirú Institute, said oil palm is "an attempt to restore the jungle" in tropical areas, and is preferable to soy or cattle.

But he appealed to the "social responsibility" of companies, urging them to avoid the pitfalls of the sugar cane industry, where land is concentrated in a few hands and precarious labour conditions prevail among migrant workers.

Biopalma director Márcio Maia dismissed the argument that land ownership is overly concentrated.

"In the Amazon region there are major irregularities in land titling, which scares away important players who are interested in investing in this crop," he said.

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