

Brazil does away with laws to protect large swaths of rainforest

Brazil's powerful agricultural sector has scored a major victory, with the approval by the lower house of Congress of a reform that would open up some protected forests to cropland and ranchers.



Environmentalists, scientists and ten former environment ministers fought to the bitter end to stop the bill Photo: LEE FOSTER/ALAMY

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The bill, which now goes to the Senate, was initially intended as a measure to rein in unfettered logging, and increase protections of Brazil's forested areas, which play an important role in reducing greenhouse gases.

But farm-based economic interests prevailed against environmentalists in reshaping the bill to ease restrictions that have been in place since 1965 and are credited with curbing deforestation.

"The Chamber of Deputies (on Tuesday) turned what was a forest protection law into something that will encourage deforestation and the uncontrolled advance of farming and ranching," the NGO Greenpeace charged in a statement.

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The development was seen as a first setback for President Dilma Rousseff who enjoys majority support in Congress but was unable to keep her party united as powerful rural lobbies managed to divide lawmakers.

[Amazon activist and wife shot dead in Brazil \(http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/southamerica/brazil/8534802/Amazon-activist-and-wife-shot-dead-in-Brazil.html\)](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/southamerica/brazil/8534802/Amazon-activist-and-wife-shot-dead-in-Brazil.html)

Izabella Teixeira, the environment minister, has warned that the president could veto points in the bill that might encourage deforestation.

But National Farm Federation chief Katia Abreu said, "Brazil's farm and ranch interests are celebrating the step forward."

Brazil's Forest Conservation Law dates back to 1965; it limits the use of woodlands for agricultural purposes, requiring owners to keep a certain percentage of their land in its natural state.

In the sprawling Amazon River basin region, the existing law requires that as much as 80 per cent be kept as woodland.

But the new law would allow huge areas to be farmed if they were illegally logged before July 2008; and it would allow farming along environmentally sensitive riverbanks.

"This is an amnesty that sends the message that environmental crimes are not punished. And that will foster more deforestation," argued Paulo Adario of Greenpeace.