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Gregory Scruggs

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Brazil's Largest Trash Dump a Symbol of Struggles to Follow Environmental Laws

by Gregory Scruggs

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The Brazilian capital has announced the impending closure of the largest open-air trash dump in Latin America, three years after the initial deadline under federal law. The belated move underscores how five years after the country hosted the world's signature environmental summit, Brazil struggles to apply environmental law uniformly throughout its territory. June will mark the fifth anniversary of Rio+20, a UN conference that laid the groundwork for the international body's ambitious 15-year vision known as the Sustainable Development Goals.

But while the largest country in Latin America has leaned on this legacy to promote itself as a global leader in sustainability, the reality remains uneven ([NotiSur, April 13, 1995](#), [Aug. 30, 2002](#), [May 30, 2008](#)). In particular, several states are struggling to close open-air landfills, which release large amounts of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere and pose public health dangers for nearby residents. Such challenges come nearly seven years after Brazil passed a landmark solid waste law whose national deadline for closing the country's trash dumps has been pushed back yet again, from the end of this year to 2018.

Dumping ground

In the northeastern state of Alagoas, 95% of household trash ends up in open-air dumps. It's the worst state in Brazil by that measure and an indication of the stubborn challenge to comply with the country's 2010 Solid Waste Law. Despite the law's ambitions, 1,559 municipalities were still sending their trash to open-air landfills in 2014, the first national deadline. In 2015, the Senate pushed that date back to 2018 for Brazil's largest cities, and as late as 2021 for municipalities of up to 50,000 inhabitants.

"It's been three decades of pushing this back," complained Carlos Silva Filho, president of the Brazilian Association of Trash Companies. "This latest postponement, from the form it has taken, will be very damaging."

Brazil's effort to rein in its trash dumps dates to 1981, when the country's first environmental law was passed. That legislation recognized the way that landfills contribute to pollution. Later laws declared such trash dumps "environmental crimes." But even though the 2010 law was heralded as a major step forward, the problem stubbornly persists. Just 20 km from the Palácio do Planalto in Brasília, where the president's offices are located, sits the Lixão do Estrutural, at 200 hectares the largest dump in Latin America.

On May 10, Rodrigo Rollemberg, the Federal District's governor, announced the closure of the infamous dump by October. "I consider this a civilizing step in the history of our city," Rollemberg said. "It was an embarrassment for Brasília to have the second largest landfill in the world, a landfill with a sad history that has attacked human dignity in every way possible."

The open-air dump will be replaced with a "sanitary landfill" that will feature an on-site waste separating system to sort out recyclables and organic materials. The remaining non-organic, non-

recyclable items will be buried in a facility lined with impermeable material to prevent chemicals from leeching into the soil or groundwater.

Some 2,000 waste pickers currently sift through the dump for materials they can recycle for a fee. The Brasília government will offer retraining, although many fear losing their livelihoods. In 2012, the Rio de Janeiro state government closed Jardim Gramacho, then the region's largest landfill, with promises to transform the area surrounding the dump into a "sustainable neighborhood." Residents complain that such promises were not kept, and the neighborhood has deteriorated into an informal dumping ground.

Modest improvements

While Brazil lags on landfills, it is making piecemeal progress in other areas. At the federal level, a proposed amendment to the national solid waste law will require better tracking of dangerous waste materials. For starters, a national registry will be created. Mercury thermometers are now banned, except for medical research purposes. Prohibiting asbestos mining is now being debated in the legislature. Brazil is the world's third largest producer of the dangerous mineral, responsible for 20,000 tons annually. 2,400 asbestos-related deaths were registered by the Ministry of Health between 2000 and 2011.

States have begun to make forward progress as well, albeit with some drawbacks. A new São Paulo state law under consideration will require all schools and hotels to add solar panels. Brazil is a potentially huge solar power, with vast swaths of the country receiving near constant sunshine. However, a three-year-old government plan to spur the industry is faltering because of high costs, burdensome regulation, and Chinese competition.

"Investors are disheartened," said Armando Abreu, who runs an energy consulting firm in Fortaleza. "Many of these projects, in my opinion and that of many others, probably won't get off the drawing board."

At a conference for municipal governments in Belo Horizonte in May, Motocar, a Brazilian company specializing in three-wheeled vehicles, premiered a trash collection vehicle much smaller than traditional trucks. With its diminutive size, it could potentially reach areas like favelas and unpaved roads more easily. Currently, Belo Horizonte's trash collection service only reaches 76% of the city. The hope is that employing such a vehicle could raise the rate to 100%.

In the 2016 edition of an environmental ranking prepared by Yale and Columbia Universities, Brazil ranked 46th worldwide, losing the most points for stubbornly high rates of deforestation. It ranked below other Latin America countries, including Argentina and Cuba. However, the ranking was a step up from the country's 2014 rank of 77th.

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