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## Argentina Slashes Forest Conservation Budget While Stimulating Soy Production

by *Andrés Gaudín*

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Argentina, one of the world leaders when it comes to deforestation, is entering into a dangerous new phase this year with regards to its treatment of natural resources.

For the 2018 national budget, the government of President Mauricio Macri significantly reduced the amount of money to be spent on native forest conservation. The move essentially sends the country back a decade, to November 2007, when the state didn't have any tools to protect its green lungs. It was then, just 12 days before the presidency of the late Néstor Kirchner (2003-2007) ended, that the legislature passed Ley 26.331, better known as the Native Forest Defense Law, which required that a fixed percentage of the national budget go to forest conservation. The portion should have amounted this year to US\$466 million. Instead, the government designed a budget that sets aside just 6.3% of that amount—less than US\$30 million—for conservation efforts.

The move coincides with a government decree that reduces taxes for soybean exporters by 0.5% monthly starting now and continuing until the end of 2019—for a total reduction of 12%. The measure is expected to stimulate production of the oilseed and thus extend the agricultural frontier (the dividing line between farmland and wilderness areas) at the expense of natural forests. Critics say that defunding the native-forest defense mechanism is an indirect way of promoting deforestation. And in a context dominated already by the expanding agricultural frontier, the budget cut couldn't come at a worse time.

As it stands now, Argentina accounts for 4.3% of deforestation worldwide, according to the most recent report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). And for the period between 2001 and 2014, the organization Global Forest Watch (GFW) ranks Argentina ninth among countries with the greatest tree cover loss.

### *Recurrent flooding*

An analyst with the cooperatively owned newspaper *Tiempo Argentino* recalled that in 2015, the government of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2007-2015) submitted a report to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change acknowledging that 22.1% of Argentina's greenhouse gas emissions stem from the shift in land use and its poor management of forests. The analyst cited various sources to conclude that the effect deforestation has on the climate and soil "is already apparent and can be seen in the increasingly recurrent floods [taking place in Argentina]."

A recent study by agricultural engineer José Paruelo, coordinator of the state-run Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas (National Council of Scientific and Technical Research, CONICET), argued that deforestation and soybean monoculture are largely responsible for the veritable oceans that form in the Argentine plains during rainy periods. The solution to the problem, Paruelo added, lies more in careful land-use planning than in construction of expensive hydraulic-works projects.

“It’s easy to blame climate change. But there’s no evidence that the rains we’re getting now are different from those in the past. What we can be sure of is that our use of the land is different,” the agricultural engineer wrote.

Paruelo noted that between 2001 and 2014, according to both GFW and the World Bank, Argentina lost more than 12% of its forest cover—at a rate that works out to a soccer pitch worth of woodland per minute. He concluded by saying that flooding is Argentina’s biggest natural disaster problem and accounts for 95% of all disaster-related economic losses.

A study by another CONICET researcher, Esteban Jobbágy, found that certain areas in the plains that weren’t prone to flooding in the past have become waterlogged in just the past five years. For example, a quarter of the eastern side of the fertile province of Córdoba is now under water. In 1970, the groundwater level in that part of central Argentina had a depth of 11 meters. By 2016, the area was covered in a meter of water.

Jobbágy noted that further north, in the province of Santiago del Estero—one of the oldest and most extensive farming areas in the so-called Dry Chaco forest—there has also been unprecedented flooding. Until the 1990s, only the banks of the area’s rivers would occasionally overflow. “Looking at the history of rainfall in this zone, nothing exceptional stands out,” the expert concluded. “The last few years have been wet, but there were wet periods in the past, too. While the rise of the water table may in part be due to fluctuations in rainfall levels, the fact that it’s happened at such a sustained rate points more to the change in land use.”

### *Poor planning*

The CONICET researchers noted that as the water table rose closer and closer to the surface, farmers were initially pleased, as it meant that their crops could absorb water directly from below. But the levels kept rising to the point that now, when it rains, the fields flood because there’s nowhere for the water to drain—even when channels have been dug to siphon it off.

One thing farmers might do to dampen the effect, according to Paruelo and Jobbágy, would be to alternate crops, switching back and forth between soy and wheat so there would be green growth (which favors evaporation) 12 months a year. They also recommend going back to a system where livestock rearing and crop farming are combined and alternated rather than kept strictly separate.

Land covered in native plants and trees absorbs 300 millimeters of water per hour while conventional pastureland (used for raising livestock) absorbs 100 millimeters per hour. A soybean field, in contrast, absorbs barely 30 millimeters of water per hour. “The water crisis isn’t due to a lack of infrastructure or an excess of rainfall. It’s because of agricultural development,” a study by the state-run Instituto Nacional de Tecnología Agropecuaria (National Institute of Agricultural Technology, INTA) concluded.

For its part, the powerful Asociación Argentina de Productores en Siembra Directa (Association of Direct Sowing Producers, AAPRESID)—which represents agribusiness owners and embraces the transgenic agricultural model associated with large, multinational producers of genetically modified seeds ([NotiSur, April 11, 2014](#))—calls the cyclical flooding of fields a “climatic catastrophe.” It says the flooding has “left the agricultural sector on red alert,” and is demanding subsidies from the state. The total land area of Argentina is roughly 2.8 million sq. km, approximately 340,000 sq. km of which (34 million hectares) is used for crop production.

## *Doing away with family farming*

Already in August of 2015, the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) included Argentina among the 10 countries in the world that cleared the most land over the previous 25 years. During that time, the country razed an average of 300,000 ha a year for a total of 7.6 million ha (76,000 sq. km), an area slightly larger than Panama and slightly smaller than Austria. At the start of the 20th century, Argentina had 100 million ha of natural forests. Of that, only 27 million ha remain today.

"The forest heritage has been reduced in both quality and surface area. There are provinces such as Buenos Aires and Córdoba where only 5% of the natural forests are conserved," the environmental group Vida Silvestre pointed out.

Miguel Ángel Taboada, one of the directors of INTA, noted that in the last 25 years, Argentina not only lost woodlands, but also millions of hectares of pastureland, all of which are now used for a single crop, soy, which keeps the land from being tilled, consumes far less water, and reduces the land's ability to absorb.

"The minimization of funds earmarked for the care and preservation of native forests is only the most visible aspect of a plan that aims to destroy the rural Argentine economy, doing away with family farming in the process so that the land can be used by a handful of growers who use genetically modified seeds," Jobbágy argued.

The researcher's statement was in reference to a resolution—introduced last September at the same time the Macri government sent Congress its proposed budget—that modified a 25-year-old technical assistance program for small- and medium-scale farmers called Programa Cambio Rural (Rural Change Program). The changes, put forth by the Agribusiness Ministry in Resolución 249, as the resolution is formally known, deprived 10,000 families who eke out a living growing vegetables for domestic consumption of benefits they desperately need.

Worse still is the way the cuts were made: through the introduction of new, blatantly discriminatory conditions. To access technical assistance, the rules now state that "the beneficiary must be born in Argentina or be the child of a native citizen." With that, the government excluded more than 81% of Cambio Rural's previous beneficiaries—Bolivian citizens who tend small plots of land outside Buenos Aires and other large cities.

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