

# Brazil says Amazon destruction declining

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**RIO DE JANEIRO, Brazil** - The rate of destruction of the Amazon rain forest is slowing, although ranchers, loggers and soybean farmers are illegally removing thousands of square miles of trees each year, the Brazilian government said Tuesday.

The rain forest, as big as Western Europe, lost 6,450 square miles between 2005 and 2006, a decrease of 11 percent from the year before, the environment ministry said citing preliminary figures.

"We are now, once again, seeing a declining trend," Environment Minister Marina Silva told reporters in Brasilia, adding: "We have to combat illegal deforestation."

Silva credited increased law enforcement and stringent environmental regulation for the slowdown. In recent months, the environment ministry and federal police have carried out a series of highly publicized arrests of corrupt environmental protection agency agents accused of falsifying logging certificates to facilitate illegal logging.

The environmental group Greenpeace estimates three-quarters of rain forest logging is illegal, as ranchers ignore regulations requiring landowners to leave 80 percent of forested areas untouched.

Between July 2004 and August 2005, the rain forest lost 7,250 square miles, the government said Tuesday.

"We will have two consecutive years with a rate of less than 7,720 square miles, returning to the levels of the mid-1990s," said Joao Paulo Capobianco, the environment ministry's secretary of biodiversity and forests.

But environmentalists say there is little reason to celebrate, as the world's largest remaining tropical wilderness continues to be destroyed.

"The projection of a reduction of 11 percent would confirm something dramatic: What in the 1990s was the roof is now the floor," said Roberto Smeraldi, director of Friends of the Earth Brazil. "Even in a year with a marked reduction of planting crops and clearing pasture, we still have structural deforestation of around 17,000 square kilometers (6,564 square miles) which before was considered a record."

The highest rate of destruction in the Amazon was 11,200 square miles in 1995.

Environmentalists say deforestation has slowed largely because the price of soybeans has declined on the international market and Brazil's currency has strengthened against the dollar, making it much less profitable to cut down the rain forest to plant grain.

Destroying trees through burning contributes to global warming, releasing about 370 million tons of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere every year - about 5 percent of the world total - scientists say.

The rain forest covers 60 percent of Brazil. Experts say as much as 20 percent of its 1.6 million square miles has already been destroyed by development, logging and farming.