

# Brazil president defends ethanol boom

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RIO DE JANEIRO, Brazil --

Brazil's president said Monday that his nation's booming ethanol business won't hurt the Amazon rain forest, dismissing criticism that increased production of the alternate fuel could lead to deforestation.

Silva, referring to concerns raised during his European visit last week, said it is unjustified to think that increased production of sugar cane for ethanol could prompt more jungle clearing.

He said that Amazon weather conditions aren't favorable for the sugar cane used to produce ethanol and suggested critics are trying to prevent Brazil from advancing economically by taking advantage of rising demand for biofuels.

"The Portuguese discovered a long time ago that the Amazon isn't a place to plant cane," Silva said, and added, "The cartel of the world's powerful is trying to prevent Brazil from developing, trying to prevent Brazil from being transformed into a great nation."

While there are few sugarcane-ethanol plantations in the Amazon, environmentalists have voiced concerns that a global ethanol boom could accelerate rain forest destruction if trees are cleared to make room for crops.

Some soy plantations in central Brazil are being transformed to sugarcane ethanol operations and environmentalists say that could lead soy farmers to move into the Amazon for their crop, which is also in high demand worldwide, particularly from China.

Cuba's Fidel Castro and Venezuela's Hugo Chavez have said that ethanol production would cause hunger by shifting food crops to energy use - an allegation Silva denies.

Brazilian ethanol makers produced 4.5 billion gallons last year, and exported 900 million gallons. Billions of dollars are pouring into the nation to increase production.

Brazil is the world's No. 1 sugar producer and exporter, and the leading exporter of ethanol made from sugarcane. It is the world's second-largest ethanol producer overall, trailing the United States, and is ramping up production of soybean-based biodiesel.

Eight of every 10 new cars in Brazil are "flex-fuel" models that can run on ethanol, gasoline or any combination of the two. Ethanol is about half the price of gasoline in Brazil.

The bulk of the world's largest remaining tropical wilderness is in the Amazon, which covers nearly 60 percent of Brazil, or about 1.6 million square miles.

About 20 percent of the rain forest has already been cut down and while the rate of destruction has slowed in recent years, environmentalists say it remains alarmingly high.