

U.S.-Brazil ethanol alliance threatens Amazon rainforest

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A proposed ethanol alliance that President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva is expected to forge with U.S. President George W. Bush later this week poses both opportunities and [risks for the environment](#), a top U.N. environmental official said Monday.

Achim Steiner, executive director of the United Nation's Environment Program, said growing international demand for ethanol and other biofuels on the international market [threaten the Amazon rain forest](#) if safeguards are not put in place because the world's largest remaining [tropical wilderness is a target area for agriculture](#).

[Brazil's main biofuel is ethanol made from sugarcane. While sugarcane cultivation is minimal now in the Amazon, some environmentalists fear growing demand for the fuel could push cane growers into the Amazon.](#)

"I think at the end of the day ... it's a question of whether the Amazon is sufficiently protected and whether the expansion of the ethanol production happens in the context of government policies that try and direct that growth potential in a sustainable base," Steiner told The Associated Press after meeting with Brazil's ministers of environment, energy and foreign relations in the capital of Brasilia.

Steiner was to meet Silva later in the day, and said he was eager to learn more about Brazil's biofuels program.

Brazil has in recent years established itself as the world's leader in the use of renewable energy sources with eight out of 10 new cars capable of running on ethanol.

Brazil is the world's second-biggest producer of ethanol after the United States and is the biggest exporter. The country has also taken the lead in producing soybean-based biodiesel.

[But environmentalists fear growing demand for biofuel could put renewed pressure on the Amazon which in recent years has been losing forest to make way for agriculture.](#)

Steiner praised Brazil for reducing Amazon deforestation by 11 percent last year and said he was hopeful the government would develop sufficient safeguards to protect the wilderness.

[But many environmentalists say much of the reduction in deforestation was due to an overvalued currency and stagnant prices for soy beans on the international market, which made it far less lucrative to cut down remote forest plots to grow soy beans.](#)

[In the near term, soybean growers likely will continue to expand into the Amazon as farmland in the Brazil's south and central regions moved to sugarcane, which requires greater infrastructure.](#)

"While the whole process of alcohol fuel is less damaging to the climate than fuel from gasoline or oil, what can be positive for the environment can turn negative depending on the extension of the plantations," said Paulo Adario, director of the Greenpeace's Amazon Campaign.

[The Amazon region, which covers nearly 60 percent of Brazil, has lost 20 percent of its forest — 1.6 million square miles \(4.1 million square kilometers\) — to development, logging and farming.](#)