

“Ethanol production Brazil is not causing deforestation in the Amazon” – University of Wageningen

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“Ethanol production in Brazil is not causing deforestation in the Amazon region,” says Peter Zuurbier, Associate Professor and Director of the Wageningen UR Latin America Office. According to him, the notion that sugarcane is displacing cattle and soybean production into the Amazon is inaccurate. “The real problem lies in illegal deforestation and lack of property rights, as around 50 percent of the Amazon region has disputed titles and this is an invitation for timber companies” he says.

In an interview with Ethanol Statistics, Mr. Zuurbier tries to explain a dynamic process between illegal activities in the Amazon rainforest and the expansion of agricultural lands towards that region. NGO’s often state that sugarcane production is displacing cattle and soybean production towards and into the Amazon, burning down the area to make it suitable for agriculture and pastures.

According to Mr. Zuurbier however, the process is slightly different. “Well organized groups and corporations with questionable land titles, but also official land owners began to chop down large acreages of forest to trade timber, both legally and illegally” he says. “Usually, after the empty strips of land were abandoned, cattle owners would move into these cheap lands. However, after 3 to 4 years of cattle breeding, the thin soil of the Amazon is completely useless without any form of fertilization and livestock owners usually move into the next abandoned area. Soybean farmers meanwhile replace the livestock in these areas, recognizing the opportunity to fertilize the area for soybean production.”

According to Mr. Zuurbier, the cause of deforestation and agricultural production in or near the Amazon, is simply illegal deforestation itself. The fact that Brazil still has questionable land titles, no set-aside policy and great difficulty to enforce existing laws to counter illegal timber trade, are the real reasons why the Amazon rainforest is in danger according to him.

Mr. Zuurbier made his comments in an interview with Ethanol Statistics, focussed specifically on the topic of the indirect effects of ethanol production in Brazil. In the article, he also discusses the steps that have been taken already, among which are Brazil’s satellite monitoring system and self-enforcing regulation large commodity traders such as Cargill and ADM.

The entire interview, titled ‘Brazilian Ethanol and the Displacement of Cattle’ can be found on

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