

One Man's Vision: How Ranching in the Amazon Can Become a Forest-Friendly Model to the World

Written by Rane Cortez on May 16, 2012

Editor's Note: Rane Cortez works for The Nature Conservancy and is based in Belem, Brazil. She has just moved for two months to the highly-deforested frontier town of São Felix do Xingu in northern Brazil to work with local farmers, ranchers, landowners, indigenous groups and city officials to together promote forest-friendly sustainable growth for the area.



I was recently able to catch up with Wilton Batista, president of the Rancher's Union in São Felix. I wanted to get the rancher's perspective to a previous conversation I had with Luis Araujo, the Environmental Secretary of São Felix do Xingu (Central Brazil) about stopping illegal deforestation in the Amazon (a conversation I blogged about on NewsWatch). "I am very satisfied with the work that I do," said Batista. "Every rancher feels passion for the work he does, for who he is, for what he produces. It's hard work, but we love it."

But, despite his satisfaction with work on the ranch, things get complicated for Batista off the ranch.

In 2011 the Brazilian Ministry of Environment produced a "blacklist" of those areas which are causing the greatest deforestation and has placed an embargo (ban) on buying beef from those areas. São Felix has been subject to that embargo. "Because of the embargo, we couldn't sell our product and we didn't have access to credit," explains Batista. "We didn't have any income, everything stopped." In order to have the embargo lifted, landholders in São Felix had to obtain a document known as the Rural Environmental Registry (CAR, for its acronym in Portuguese). This document maps the boundaries of, and logs information about each property. This gathers data such as areas of forest, and areas of land cleared, and head of cattle per hectare. "To sell our product, every producer had to have CAR," says Batista. "Now we're registered and we can begin to work on post-CAR."

One of the first "post-CAR" steps that Batista and others in the municipality (area) took, was to sign the Municipal Pact of Zero Illegal Deforestation. In my conversation with Araujo, he had told me with pride that the Pact was an important and unprecedented agreement between government, civil society, small landholders and large ranchers. The Pact is designed to help São Felix fulfill its other requirement to get off the blacklist of deforesters, i.e. to substantially reduce deforestation rates.

The Rancher's Union signed up to the Pact (along with 51 other landowners, and climbing) For ranchers, meeting the goal means intensifying production so they can maintain their income without having to clear more land. In São Felix, as in much of the Amazon, ranchers often have only one cow per 2.5 acres (or one per hectare). With some basic improvements in their practices, ranchers could increase to at least three cows per 2.5 acres (or per hectare).

"Some ranchers are making changes by themselves. But it doesn't help make big changes if only three or four ranchers are doing this – it has to be everybody." explained Batista

In order to be more effective in reducing deforestation, Batista identified five main things that rancher's will need.

"First, we need infrastructure. The government thinks that if they improve the infrastructure here, that deforestation will increase. But it's the contrary – without infrastructure the only thing that works here is ranching, and the way ranching works now is through deforestation," he explains. "Think about it, we don't have access to information, we don't have access to technology. We can't grow crops because we don't have roads to get them to market fast enough. We don't have grain elevators, we don't have electricity. In these conditions, the only thing that works is ranching." "Second – land title. No one here has title to their land, they only have informal rights. This makes it difficult for the government to police activities and also makes it less attractive for farmers to make costly improvements their farming practices." "Third, with regard to environmental compliance – now we have to have licenses for everything – but to get a license, everyone with more than 1,000 hectares [roughly 2,500 acres] has to go to Belem to get the license. It's 1,000 kilometres away – that's extremely expensive in time and money." "Fourth, access to credit." "And, last, access to information. São Felix has the largest herd of cattle in the Amazon, but EMBRAPA [the federal government agency whose job it is to provide technical assistance to ranchers] is never here. How is that possible? We should have a research centre here that provides information and assistance for improving practices." Batista said the future of São Felix will depend on how well the above resources are provided. "It doesn't depend only on the ranchers, or only on the government. If we can work together to do all of this, then we can be a model, not just for Brazil, but for the world."