

Deforestation and Cattle in Colombia

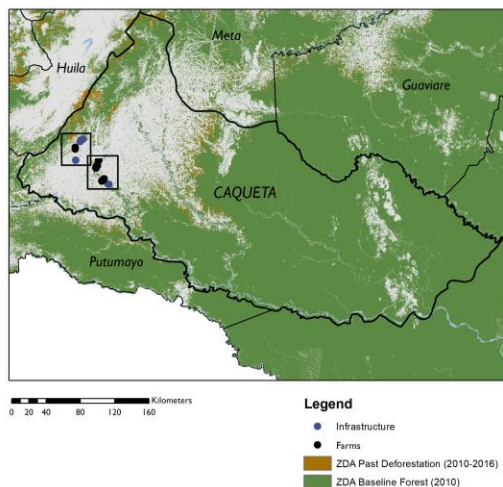
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Overview

I am studying the link between cattle ranching and deforestation in Colombia. A landmark peace accord in 2016 marks a new era for tropical forest governance in Colombia. Vast expanses of forests are newly open for both settlement and agricultural investment and deforestation rates have surged. At the same time, the government has made ambitious international commitments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 20% and protect its remaining 59 million hectares of tropical forest by eliminating deforestation by 2020 (FAO 2015; UNFCCC 2016). Can the country meet its post-conflict development goals while protecting forests?

Nowhere are these challenges more apparent than in Colombia's cattle sector. Cattle systems in Colombia are extensive, covering 36 million hectares. Cattle ranching is central to the country's cultural identity, but as the primary driver of deforestation, it is also a significant contributor to national greenhouse gas emissions. Low emissions development strategies proposed for the cattle sector, include sustainable intensification, avoided deforestation, and improved carbon storage in pastures. If effective, these strategies could reshape Colombian landscapes and supply chains. They aim to break the link between cattle and forest conversion, intensify and formalize the cattle sector and make the extensive, treeless pastures that are prevalent today, into greener, more productive pastures with silvopastoral systems and improved forages.

With the funding from IRIS, I was able to make a visit to an important cattle producing region on the deforestation frontier, Caqueta, Colombia to advance my dissertation research. During this trip, I made 14 farm visits and conducted 21 key informant interviews (including with extension agents, ranchers' unions, national and regional environmental policy makers, national and regional managers of spatial datasets on landholdings, ecosystems, and zoning, as well as important actors in the beef and dairy supply chain (local and national dairies, slaughterhouses, and cheese producers).



Map and Photo. Visits to cattle ranches in the Amazonian deforestation frontier, Caqueta, Colombia