



*A report summary from the Economic Research Service*

# Land Use, Conservation Policies, and Agricultural Production in Brazil and the United States

Constanza Valdes, Eric C. Davis, Scott Callahan, Kate Binzen Fuller,  
Trina Weilert, Sara Scott, and Jennifer Bond



## Key Points

- Over the past 40 years, agricultural production has increased in both the United States and Brazil. Brazil's production gains are partially attributable to cropland expansion which occurred through the conversion of pastureland and forestland. For the United States, agricultural production has also increased. However, cropland acreage has declined and forestland has modestly expanded.
- Despite differing trends in cropland acreage, crop yields for Brazil and the United States have steadily risen over time, aided by agricultural research and development investments and increased adoption of biotechnology.
- Satellite-based measures indicate that between 2022 and 2024, the majority of States in Brazil experienced a decline in protected forest cover, contributing to widespread net forest loss at the national level.
- U.S. conservation policies include both programs that temporarily retire land and those that incentivize specific conservation practices, such as conservation tillage and cover cropping. The relationship between these policies, the practices they promote, and yields is unclear, as studies have found null, varying, and/or nuanced effects.
- While Brazil's land conservation policies are more limited than for the United States, new conservation policies have been enacted and are aimed at conserving forestland and revitalizing low-productivity pastureland.

## Why Does This Matter?

The United States and Brazil are among the largest contributors to global agricultural trade. However, their pathways to becoming leading agricultural producers and exporters over the last quarter century have been markedly different. Brazil, the world's fifth-largest country by area and the largest in terms of arable land, has significantly expanded the area under agricultural cultivation. Between 2000 and 2024, farmers in Brazil converted more than 128 million acres (52 million hectares) of natural vegetation—mainly in the Amazon and Cerrado biomes—into agricultural use (pastureland and cropland). The latest data show 0.5-percent annual deforestation rates for the vast Legal Amazon geographic region from 2020 to 2025. In contrast to the cropland

expansion indicated for Brazil, the land used for agricultural cultivation in the United States has declined since the mid-1980s, while grassland and forestland acreage has risen. Between 1987 and 2022, U.S. agricultural output increased 41 percent while cropland acreage fell by 19 percent. During the same period, grassland and forestland in the United States grew 10 percent and 1 percent, respectively. Brazil's agricultural output and cropland acreage increased over 437 percent and nearly 210 percent, respectively, between 1987 and 2022. During the same period, pastureland in Brazil increased 35 percent while forestland decreased 15 percent. As the United States increasingly faces competition from Brazil in international agricultural commodity markets,

particularly for soybeans and corn, interest in Brazil’s productivity transformation—and the associated environmental costs—has risen. To aide researchers and policymakers in better understanding the landscape of land-use differences and their links to production outcomes, this study compares land-use trends and related policies in the United States and Brazil.

## A Few More Details

Over the study period, 1985 to 2025, increased agricultural production in the United States has occurred concurrently with reductions in agricultural land use and expansions in forestland while increased agricultural production in Brazil has been driven primarily by land conversion through deforestation. Land conservation efforts in the United States are supported by the U.S. Government, which spends an average of nearly \$6 billion per year on agricultural conservation programs. Most U.S. conservation programs aim to promote regenerative farming practices, while others are established to retire land from cultivation. For many years, Brazilian Government-supported conservation instruments were limited in scope, but increasingly, they are incorporating sustainability criteria and aim to more effectively slow forestland conversion into agricultural use. Land conservation and reforestation efforts in Brazil are supported by the Brazilian Government which provided an annual average of about \$933 million, in subsidized credit for agricultural conservation programs in 2023–25. Given the large agricultural base in both countries, these changes in agricultural production and land use are reshaping international trade.

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