

## Amazon dredging law exposes governance gaps

A recent federal decree authorizing large-scale water resources development in the Amazon exposed weaknesses in Brazil's governance of the world's largest river basin (1). Passed in August, 2025, Federal Decree 12.600/2025 opened stretches of the Madeira, Tapajós, and Tocantins rivers to private dredging and waterway expansion under Brazil's National Privatization Program (2). Indigenous communities and civil society organizations argued that the decree advanced without adequate consultation under ILO Convention 169 or environmental assessment, raising concerns about violations of constitutionally protected rights (3). The decree also threatened to modify more than 3700 km of river channels, increasing turbidity and degrading habitats fundamental to biodiversity, fisheries, and regional food security (2, 4-6). Amid mounting collective mobilization and public political pressure, President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva revoked the decree in February (7). To prevent similar decrees from passing in the future, Brazil should implement and enforce better protection of its rivers.

The initial passage of Federal Decree 12.600/2025 reveals a structural problem: Brazil's regulatory framework treats rivers primarily as economic infrastructure. Interventions proceed through licensing that assesses projects in isolation, whereas cumulative basinwide impacts are largely neglected. However, rivers are interconnected social-ecological systems that sustain biodiversity and cultural identity (8). Waterways play a particularly important role in the Amazon, where nature and people's livelihoods depend intimately on rivers and their seasonal flood pulses (9).

The presidential reversal of the Federal Decree 12.600/2025 is not an adequate substitute for durable legal safeguards. Brazil should adopt a national legal framework recognizing major rivers as rights-bearing entities. Granting legal standing to rivers would enable representation in court and require environmental licensing to address basin-level impacts rather than projects in isolation. Embedding these principles into federal law would reduce reliance on case-by-case political intervention. Subnational legislation in Minas Gerais demonstrates that enhanced legal status for rivers can be incorporated within Brazil's legal system (10). Supported by sustained civic engagement (11, 12), national reform could extend enforceable protections to major Amazonian rivers and provide a model for other biodiverse basins facing infrastructure expansion.

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