

POLICY BRIEF

Diagnosis, challenges and
pathways for a sustainable
transition: degraded pastures
in small properties

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Diagnosis, challenges and pathways for a sustainable transition: degraded pastures in small properties

Brazil has several solutions for the transition of its tropical agriculture to production systems with low greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and adaptation to climate change. The sustainable production systems presented in the 'Sectoral Plan for Adaptation to Climate Change and Low Carbon Emission in Agriculture, for Sustainable Development (2020-2030) - ABC+' are based on the concept of an Integrated Landscape Approach, connecting landscape elements in agricultural production with the objective of enhancing the conservation of natural resources.

The ABC+ Plan presents sustainable agricultural and forestry systems that connect climate change mitigation and adaptation to strategies for: soil management (such as no-till farming systems, degraded pasture recovery practices); productive diversification (such as integrated systems and agroforestry); waste management (for animal production); use of biologically-based inputs (bio-inputs); irrigation; reforestation for economic purposes (planted forests); and productive efficiency (such as intensive cattle finishing)

Brazilian agriculture has heterogeneous and coexisting local, land tenure, environmental, socioeconomic, and productive realities. These need to be evaluated in-depth, so that climate actions are pre-competitive and inclusive, taking into account this heterogeneous framework that involves the landscape, socioeconomic dynamics, and productive suitability.

Given this scenario, it is necessary to reflect on collective actions involving governments, rural producers and their representatives, and the other actors in the supply chains. It is fundamental to take measures to address the negative environmental externalities associated with agricultural production, in order to guarantee increased production, productivity, and income, alongside environmental conservation and the adoption of good practices.

In this context, the issue of degraded pastures gains prominence, since this land use covers a significant portion of already anthropized areas, besides being present on many rural properties. It is worth remembering that livestock farming is one of the main activities in rural areas, especially for Family Farming (AF).

Pasture degradation is a multifaceted problem with negative environmental, economic, and social effects that impact communities and producers' livelihoods. In light of the serious problems caused by degradation, it has become necessary over the years to develop agronomic strategies for soil correction and stewardship, with a view to reversing undesirable livestock production trends. In this context, pasture recovery and conversion practices have emerged, encompassing several sustainable production processes and systems.

With a growing awareness of the problem and Brazil's commitment to global agendas for combating climate change, several public policy initiatives have been implemented in recent years regarding this issue. The most recent one, in 2023, was the National Program for Converting Degraded Pastures into Sustainable Agricultural and Forestry Production Systems (PNCPD), which was renamed Caminho Verde Brasil (Brazil Green Way), which aims to provide new arrangements for financing degraded pasture recovery, in synergy with other policies. The program gave rise to a Plan for Prioritizing Areas and Estimating Investments for Pasture Conversion (Brazil, 2024¹).

The study quantified and located the problem, defined the amount of financial resources required for addressing it, and classified the properties where degradation is widespread, in terms of environmental compliance and suitability for the intensification/conversion of degraded areas. Furthermore, it opened the opportunity for a targeted approach toward small rural properties (up to 4 fiscal modules - MF) and family farming (AF).

By recognizing the heterogeneity in which small rural properties and AF are embedded, a holistic perspective was adopted to deepen the understanding of the degraded areas, analyzing the socioeconomic context, integration into agricultural policy (especially rural credit), and the suitability for the recovery or conversion of pastures into sustainable production systems.

¹BRASIL (2024). Conversão de pastagens degradadas em sistemas de produção agropecuários e florestais sustentáveis: Priorização de áreas e estimativas de investimentos. Ministério da Agricultura e Pecuária. Secretaria de Inovação, Desenvolvimento Sustentável, Irrigação e Cooperativismo; Centro de Inteligência para Governança de Terras e Desenvolvimento Sustentável; Agroicone; Imaflora; Grupo de Políticas Públicas da ESALQ. – Piracicaba, SP, MAPA, 2024. Available at: <https://agroicone.com.br/publicacao/conversao-de-pastagens-degradadas-em-sistemas-de-producao-agropecuarios-e-florestais-sustentaveis-priorizacao-de-areas-e-estimativas-de-investimentos-brasil/>

Based on the analyses conducted, it was possible to outline the different dynamics between small-scale, family, and non-family properties, identifying bottlenecks and opportunities for action, especially regarding public policy. The main findings are:

- Small rural properties account for a significant portion of pasture degradation, playing a strategic role in solving the socioeconomic and environmental problems of cattle ranching;
- There is regional, productive, infrastructure (household and collective), socioeconomic (income and education), and public policy access heterogeneity within Family farming and small rural properties;
- Territorial mapping is fundamental for diagnosing the situation, helping to understand the overall picture and the priority regions for the pasture conversion or recovery agenda;
- A more holistic analysis of the pasture degradation scenario, considering socioeconomic dimensions, is essential for defining more effective strategies to solve the problem, such as combining other public policies focused on sustainable rural development;
- In family farming, the limited land availability is an issue that demands greater attention, given that degradation processes tend to expose producers to greater productive, environmental, and socioeconomic risks;
- Properties with a history of contracting credit represent an opportunity for a short and medium-term response to the issue, understanding credit access as a tool for the productive transition. On the other hand, those properties not integrated into agricultural policy depend on joint medium and long-term actions, building the enabling conditions for a just climate transition;
- At the macro level, better collective infrastructure conditions, and access to and quality of education can create conditions for results at the micro level (for the rural property and its families), so that the productive transition reaches the most socially and economically vulnerable. Furthermore, environmental and land tenure regularization must be combined with actions and solutions for the productive transition that result in increased income, reversing the cycle of poverty and environmental degradation.

Degraded pastures pose a significant challenge for the Brazilian agricultural sector. At the same time, they represent an opportunity for increases in productivity, climate resilience, reduction of negative environmental externalities, and improvement in the lives of rural producers.

This opportunity is even more evident in the context of family farming, since livestock farming is the main activity of this group, in addition to the predominance of degraded areas on smallholdings. However, the challenges for promoting the intensification/conversion of these areas are significantly greater in the context of family farming.

O acesso aos instrumentos de política agrícola, como o crédito rural e a assistência técnica, ainda é limitado. Questões socioeconômicas como renda, educação e infraestrutura também constituem gargalos na recuperação de áreas degradadas, uma vez que produtores com limitações no atendimento de suas condições básicas podem ser menos propensos a se engajarem na transição produtiva.

Access to agricultural policy instruments, such as rural credit and technical assistance, remains limited. Socioeconomic issues such as income, education, and infrastructure also constitute potential bottlenecks in the process of recovering degraded areas, since producers with limitations in meeting their basic needs have less room to engage in the productive transition.

These bottlenecks appear to affect family farmers more acutely compared to small non-family producers. Even with a similar land tenure structure (area of up to 4 MF), both access to credit and the allocation of these resources toward investments in improving production processes show distinct patterns, highlighting the need for close attention to family farming and how credit can serve as an instrument of change, aiming to foster a just, resilient, and sustainable productive transition.

Furthermore, mappings such as the one suggested by this study allow for the identification of producers already engaged in the transition process; as well as those more likely to engage via credit instruments, and those who require broader public policy support, especially those who have never accessed credit.

This articulation between policies and the identification of different challenges for small producers must be specific, depending on the territory and its socioeconomic and productive characteristics. In other words, there are diverse, heterogeneous groups within the segment of small rural properties and family farming.

The definition of action strategies, as well as engagement with producers, must be carried out in a coordinated manner, through efforts by governments, cooperatives, the supply chain, the third sector, and the rural producers themselves, in order to identify local specificities and customize actions according to these characteristics.

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