Palm Oil & Deforestation in Colombia

EUDR Context

Field	Value
eudr_commodity	palm
country_focus	Colombia
deforestation_risk	medium
last_updated	2026-05-26

Overview

The relationship between palm oil expansion and deforestation in Colombia is complex and regionally differentiated. Unlike Southeast Asian palm oil—where expansion into tropical peatland forests has been the primary driver of biodiversity loss—Colombian palm oil has followed diverse trajectories depending on the production zone. Research from the University of Wisconsin's GLUE program found that the majority of Colombian palm expansion between 2002 and 2018 occurred on previously cleared land (pasture, degraded areas), with direct forest conversion accounting for a smaller share of new plantings. However, this national average masks significant regional variation.

The EUDR's deforestation-free requirement (Article 3) applies a December 31, 2020 cutoff date, meaning that any palm oil linked to land that was forested before that date and subsequently cleared is non-compliant regardless of local legality. For Colombian producers, this creates a clear incentive to document the pre-2020 land use status of all supplying plantations—a task that is straightforward for established operations in the eastern plains but challenging in recently expanded areas near the Pacific coast.

An IUCN Netherlands assessment of Colombian palm oil supply chain risks identified Tumaco and the Pacific zone as the highest-risk areas for EU importers, followed by parts of Cesar and Santander where expansion borders cloud forest transitions. The eastern plains (Meta, Casanare) were rated as lower risk given the predominant conversion pathway from degraded grassland rather than standing forest.

Colombian Context

Three regional deforestation dynamics characterize Colombia's palm oil sector:

- **Pacific Coast / Tumaco (High Risk)**: Oil palm expansion in Nariño's Pacific lowlands has been linked to conflict-driven displacement, where communities were forced off land that was subsequently converted to plantations. A Mongabay investigation documented supply chain connections between deforestation-linked palm in this region and European buyers. The area's high rainfall forests and biodiversity (Chocó bioregion) make any forest conversion particularly damaging ecologically.
- **Llanos Orientales / Eastern Plains (Low-Medium Risk)**: The vast savannas of Meta and Casanare represent the largest palm production zone. Most expansion has occurred on existing cattle pasture or degraded grassland, presenting a favorable deforestation risk profile. However, gallery forests (bosques de galería) along rivers and streams within the savanna landscape require protection.
- **Caribbean / Magdalena Medio (Medium Risk)**: Palm operations in Cesar, southern Bolívar, and Santander have historically been associated with paramilitary-era land concentration. While recent expansion has been more formalized, legacy issues around land tenure and secondary forest regrowth create compliance complexity.

Colombia's national deforestation monitoring system (SMByC), operated by IDEAM, provides annual deforestation data at the municipal level. This system, combined with near-real-time alerts from Global Forest Watch and national early warning bulletins, gives operators access to the monitoring infrastructure needed for EUDR risk assessment. Colombia's overall deforestation rate has been declining since 2023, with the government's Comprehensive Deforestation Containment Plan contributing to reduced forest loss in key departments.

EUDR Compliance Requirements

Operators managing deforestation risk in Colombian palm oil supply chains must:

- **Baseline land-use mapping**: Establish the forest/non-forest status of all sourcing plots as of December 31, 2020, using satellite imagery archives (Landsat, Sentinel-2) at sufficient resolution to detect small-scale clearing.
- **Ongoing monitoring**: Implement continuous or periodic satellite monitoring of the sourcing base to detect any post-2020 forest loss, with protocols for excluding non-compliant supply if deforestation is detected.
- **Regional risk differentiation**: Apply heightened due diligence to sourcing from the Pacific coast and Caribbean zones, where deforestation risk is higher, while documenting the lower risk profile of eastern plains operations.
- **Conflict-sensitive sourcing**: In areas affected by Colombia's armed conflict, verify that land acquisition was not linked to forced displacement or illegal appropriation, as required by both the EUDR's legality clause and Colombian transitional justice frameworks (JEP).
- **Smallholder inclusion**: Develop support mechanisms for the 85% of producers who are smallholders to obtain documentation (land titles, environmental permits, geolocation data) needed for compliance, preventing their exclusion from EU-bound supply chains.

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