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Executive summary

EIA’s groundbreaking investigation reveals how beef arriving for consumption in Bogota and other major Colombian cities brings with it an invisible stain of illicit deforestation. Due to the failure of supermarkets to conduct adequate due diligence on their beef sourcing, these companies and their unwitting consumers are fueling illegal deforestation in national parks and contributing to financing of armed conflict in Colombia.

This report documents evidence found during EIA’s investigation that supermarket chains such as Grupo Exito and Colsubsidio are purchasing meat from suppliers that source cattle that has been illegally raised in protected forests. Through innovative data analysis and extensive field investigations, EIA uncovered a system that is marred by corruption, extortion, cattle laundering, and illegal forest clearing in the Colombian Amazon.

The investigation covered areas in the northern part of Chiribiquete National Park - a UNESCO World Heritage Site and the world’s largest tropical forest national park - as well as areas in La Macarena National Park and adjacent protected Forest Reserves. EIA’s analysis shows that between 2016 and 2020 the areas investigated - where deforestation is illegal - lost 21,396 hectares of forest while the cattle ranching population grew more than seven-fold in La Macarena National Park and more than three-fold in the Amazon Forest Reserve bordering the northern parts of Chiribiquete. While this investigation was able to cover only a fraction of the Colombian Amazon, the
results point to serious systemic problems, the scale of which is likely exponentially larger and, if not addressed, threatens the future of Colombia’s unique forests and the communities that depend on them.

Through multiple trips and interviews, EIA investigators documented a complex web of factors that include ranchers, brokers, slaughterhouses, cattle markets, armed groups, and supermarket chains in Colombia’s big cities, where the beef is sold to consumers.

Meat production involves various stages from the birth of the cow to backgrounding, finishing, slaughtering, and meatpacking. During each stage, the animals can be moved around and sold multiple times, involving different actors throughout the supply chain. Despite the existence of cattle vaccination records and extensive transport databases that show cattle populations and movements, there is currently no system in Colombia that traces cattle back to their place of birth. Also, as confirmed during multiple conversations with different stakeholders, it seems that actors in the supply chain don’t even attempt to know where the cattle were actually raised. EIA’s analysis of official data shows how cattle coming from protected areas – where cattle ranching is illegal – are entering their supply chain that is sourced from deforestation and illegal activities.

The situation is exacerbated by weak institutions. A largely absent government in the region, and opposing factions of illegal armed groups, who de facto rule in the forest. Ranchers interviewed confirmed that they make payments to armed groups at a rate of 10,000 Colombian Pesos (COP) per cow per annum, in exchange for “protection.” As one rancher noted: “These people take care of you.” In exchange for payments, ranchers explain, they are able to move around freely and are protected from cattle theft. Such payments are one of the important sources of income for armed groups in the region and can add up to hundreds of thousands of dollars per year in the area of investigation alone. Illegal armed groups also appear to control the extent of deforestation by issuing so-called “permits” to clear forests for pasture. Companies such as Grupo Éxito have made “Zero Deforestation” commitments and claim they are conducting due diligence in their supply chains, yet, this investigation uncovered evidence of Grupo Éxito purchasing meat from suppliers who source it from farms located in protected areas where cattle ranching is illegal. One rancher linked to Grupo Éxito’s supply chain openly admitted to having deforested hundreds of hectares in 2019 inside Chiribiquete National Park and was planning to clear-out much more in the future. According to this rancher, the meat coming from his farm ends up at Carulla - Grupo Exito’s premium supermarket.

Voluntary company commitments in Colombia and other countries have proved to be insufficient to solve the problems of deforestation and illegal cattle ranching and movements in protected areas, unless it is for restoration or conservation purposes, as well as other land grabbing schemes.

Recommendations

To the Colombian government:

- Implement a mandatory national transparent system to register and trace individual cattle throughout their life cycle, starting at birth.
- Actively monitor the cattle sector and stop permits for cattle ranching and movements in protected areas, unless it is for sustainable livelihoods that are controlled by and benefit local communities.
- End militarized responses that hurt the local vulnerable population.
- Establish effective cooperation and information sharing between relevant agencies so that violations are reported and acted upon.
- Support economic alternatives and create opportunities for sustainable livelihoods that are controlled by and benefit local communities.
- End militaryized responses that hurt the local vulnerable population.

To Grupo Éxito, Colsubsidio, and Carnatural:

- Zero tolerance for paying armed groups.
- Indirect suppliers of Grupo Éxito, Colsubsidio and Carnatural with farms in both Chiribiquete and La Macarena National Parks.
- Bogota receives thousands of cattle for slaughter originating from the Amazon Forest Reserve, where deforestation is illegal.

To Grupo Exito, Colsubsidio, and Other Supermarket Chains:

- Implement a due diligence plan with appropriate risk assessment and mitigation measures, to ensure no cattle enters their supply chain that is sourced from deforestation, or subject to extortion from armed groups and other human rights violations. Given the extremely high risk in the Colombian Amazon cattle sector, such due diligence systems should include:
  - Full traceability throughout cattle’s life cycle, starting at birth.
  - Effective monitoring of the full supply chain, including indirect suppliers and their sources.
  - Zero tolerance for paying armed groups.
  - Zero tolerance for deforestation.

To Casino Group:

- Implement an appropriate due diligence plan to ensure that operations of Grupo Casino, its subsidiaries, suppliers, contractors and sub-contractors are not causing environmental harm or human rights violations in Colombia.

- Supermarket chains are contributing to illegal deforestation and the financing of violent conflict in Colombia’s Amazon forests.

- Bogota receives thousands of cattle for slaughter originating from the Amazon Forest Reserve, where deforestation is illegal.

- While the government collects a wealth of relevant data about cattle vaccinations and movements in protected areas, this information is not accessible to the public, nor does it appear to be shared with other relevant agencies, where it could help with oversight and enforcement.

- Indirect suppliers of Grupo Éxito, Colsubsidio and Carnatural with farms in both Chiribiquete and La Macarena National Parks.

- Casino Group’s apparent lack of due diligence concerning Grupo Éxito’s operations in Colombia is perpetuating the financing of armed conflict and fueling the destruction of some of the most valuable forests in the world.
Introduction

Deforestation has been described as one of Colombia’s main socio-environmental challenges. In addition to its role in decimating ecosystems and environmental services and generating greenhouse gas emissions, it also results in community displacement and increased poverty among rural populations. 1 Between 2000 and 2019, Colombia lost nearly 2.8 million hectares of forest, 2 an area similar in size to the entire country of Belgium.

EIA’s field investigation focused on analyzing the links between deforestation of protected ecosystems, such as the Chiribiquete and La Macarena National Parks, cattle ranching as a production model, and the supply chain of beef that arrives in Bogota and certain supermarkets in Colombia’s largest cities. EIA’s data-driven investigation involved analyzing vaccination records and cattle movements in an area that accounts for 35,429 hectares within La Macarena National Park (5.7% of the total area of the park) and 81,946 hectares in the Amazon Forest Reserve in the Department of Guaviare (2.6% of the total area of the reserve in that department). This area was selected because of the availability of deforestation data from the region along with matches between geographic data from regional governments and cattle movement and vaccination data from the Colombian Agriculture and Livestock Institute (ICA). Between 2016 and 2020, an area equivalent to 21,596 hectares (30,246 soccer fields) of forest was illegally cleared in the area of investigation. Part of this investigation was carried out by analyzing databases on cattle vaccinations (2016-2019) and movements (2016-2020). This data was obtained through access to public information requests to the ICA. To complement it, EIA conducted a field investigation and verified its field data with official government sources and/or through the use of satellite-monitoring.

2 Ibid.

9
1. Context

1.1. Chiribiquete and La Macarena National Parks

The Northeastern Amazon is fundamental to the ecological connectivity of the Andean and Amazonian regions. It is part of a large regional ecological corridor that connects a number of ecosystems, from the summits of Colombia’s eastern mountain range to the plains of the Amazon River basin. The area contains ecosystems with exceptional biological wealth, and it is one of the few places where the flora and fauna of four biogeographical regions—Guyana, Amazon, Andes, and Orinoco—meet naturally.

Chiribiquete National Park was created in 1989 and expanded in 2013 and 2018. It is currently considered the world’s largest tropical forest national park. Given its biological, ecological, geomorphological, and cultural characteristics, UNESCO declared it a Mixed World Heritage Site in 2018. A large part of this cultural and natural wealth is located within the park’s 2018 expansion areas, which according to the Ministry of Environment, “contain the most important and significant natural habitats for in-situ conservation of biological diversity, including those containing threatened species of outstanding universal value from the point of view of science or conservation.”

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BOX 1: IMPORTANCE OF CHIRIBIQUETE NATIONAL PARK AND ITS AREA OF INFLUENCE

Significance of the Expansion Area (2018)

The 2018 expansion of Chiribiquete National Park aimed at ensuring protection of different habitats that support a great number of plant and animal species. 718 species of plants in the area are representative, unique, or threatened to some degree. 30 species of large and medium-sized mammals, 411 species of birds, 41 species of reptiles, 53 species of amphibians, 216 species of fish, and 370 species of diurnal butterflies. In total, 32 of these species are presently new to science and 57 have been recorded for the first time in Colombia, which indicates the good state of conservation in the area’s ecosystems. Researchers also recorded 51 plant species for the first time in Colombia.

The importance of conserving the 2018 Expansion Area is reinforced by its function as a habitat for the maintenance and reproduction of at least 17 species of short-distance migratory fish, eight of which are distributed throughout the Orinoco and Amazon river basins.

Importance of Regional Ecosystem Connectivity

The corridor that connects La Macarena and Chiribiquete National Parks is comprised mainly of humitropical forest ecosystems belonging to the Amazonian-Cerrado transition biomes. This region is strategic to maintaining connectivity between the two parks and is of great importance for the provision of ecosystem services, especially those related to water regulation, since it includes areas that supply three different freshwater streams in the region (Apaporis, Vaupés, and Guaviare rivers). Furthermore, its high level of ecosystem integrity contributes to regional climate regulation.

The Fauna and Flora of the Expansion Area

The protection of different habitats that support a great number of plant and animal species, including groups living in isolated in inaccessible parts of the park, consider Chiribiquete to be an ancestral long house (or “mataco”) for jaguars. The species’ survival is thus important for their cultural beliefs as it is for successful biodiversity conservation. The park is also home to iconic fauna such as the puma, the pink dolphin and the lowland tapir, which has a valuable status.

The protected area of La Macarena National Park was also established in 1894 and includes an area extraordinary for its isolated mountain range conditions, which support the presence of unique species and an important index for diversity in flora and fauna. Its ecosystems include rainforest, flooded forest, savannah, and the freshwater ecosystems from the Amazonian savannah.

Two of the species of flora registered in the 2018 Expansion Area are highly significant, both Cœcleodora arenosa (Spanish oyster) and Pachira quinata (cocoa) are endangered EN, mainly as a result of timber extraction. Cœcleodora arenosa is one of the most sought-after species in the world and has been included in CITES Appendix I effective in August 2020. P. quinata has a high demand in the departments of Atlántico, Casanare, and Magdalena.

Map 1. Legal status of territory


1.2. Socio-environmental Pressures on Chiribiquete National Park and Its Area of Influence

Chiribiquete National Park is located in a region of the country that has been heavily affected by the long-term armed conflict and where institutional capacity remains weak. It is common for illegal groups to co-opt weakened territorial institutions, allowing for the proliferation of illicit economic activities that feed into the direct causes of land-use change.

The lack of functioning government institutions in the region has resulted in a situation of generalized insecurity and violence. Following the 2016 Peace Agreement between the State and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia guerrilla group (FARC), there are still large areas under the control of illegal armed groups that compete with, substitute, or subordinate the State (see Box 2). This situation is intensifying the conflicts surrounding land use and is leading to the illegal accumulation of untitled land, for illicit activities like cultivating coca or cattle rearing.

Another aspect of the State’s scarce presence in the region is the government’s inability to implement its own-use and conservation plans for the forests administered under the Second Law of 1959 and the national parks regime. Weak institutions are unable to help resolve land-use conflicts, promote a regulated forestry sector, and more recently, to implement the Peace Agreement.

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The expanded park area and its area of influence have been historically affected by deforestation. In 2018, the government considered that if deforestation were not contained in this area, it would ultimately threaten key conservation areas. Per official documents, the expansion of Chiribiquete National Park was conceived as one of the strategies to halt deforestation (logging, establishing pastures, and burning) in the region.

1.3. Deforestation in the Northwestern Colombian Amazon

1.3.a Land-grabbing

Land-grabbing is considered one of the main structural causes of deforestation in the Northwestern Amazon, as it encourages new colonization processes and land use change. In this region, land-grabbing is primarily facilitated by extensive cattle ranching and the cultivation of coca crops.

Land-grabbing involves the process of artificially increasing the price of land (speculation) and a more recent phenomenon in which certain large landowners purchase land, through different means, from multiple smallholders (accumulation). The current process of land-grabbing and accumulation in the northwestern Colombian Amazon has historical roots and is able to happen largely as a result of the lack of presence by the State.

On one hand, the phenomenon of land accumulation and subsequent deforestation can be seen as a result of a historical process of failed land reforms; on the other, it currently stimulates an important part of the regional economy, despite its strong negative environmental impacts. Additionally, in the absence of policies to protect the rights of rural populations, land-grabbing increases the concentration of land in the hands of large owners while leaving behind a large number of local disempowered campesinos, who see their resources diminishing and their rights violated.

1.3.b Links Between Deforestation and Cattle Ranching in the Investigation Area

The initial investigation focused on two regions. In Chiribiquete National Park, the focus was in the north and northeast and the surrounding forest reserve. In La Macarena National Park, the investigation analyzed a selection of rural districts within the park.

In some areas of Chiribiquete National Park, the conversion of forest into pastures for extensive cattle ranching is among the main causes of deforestation, according to the government’s Deforestation Early Warning Bulletins. Likewise, deforestation reports for the Amazon’s Northwestern Arc conclude that there is a significant increase in the number of cattle farms directly related to the appropriation of public land, expanding the agricultural frontier into the Amazon Forest Reserve. The report shows that the total number of cattle increased by 690,000 in the 2016-2019 period in Chiribiquete most affected municipalities neighboring the park, which lost 290,000 hectares of forest during that same period.

The other region investigated, particularly the municipality of La Macarena, was the second most deforested area in the country in 2018. This area’s deforestation and cattle trends illustrate a strong correlation between increases in deforestation and an increase in the number of cattle and cattle farms.
2. The livestock supply chain

The structure of the livestock supply chain in Colombia is complex and dispersed, especially in its production and commercialization phases. Different stages of production, continuous movement and a multitude of actors make traceability difficult and increase the risk that cattle linked to deforestation at some point in their lifecycle, especially through indirect suppliers, enter supply chains.

2.1. Livestock Production Phases

The cattle production process has three phases. In some cases, a single farm can carry out all three phases, in which case it is referred to as a full-cycle farm. Farms that only carry out one or two of these phases are called partial cycle farms.

Cow-calf phase: Begins with the cow’s pregnancy, followed by the birth of the calf, and ends with weaning. This phase has a total duration of 18 months.

Backgrounding phase: Begins with weaning—which takes place around the calf’s seventh month of life—and ends when the animal is 24 months old. This phase has a duration of approximately 17 months.

Finishing phase: Begins when the animal is 24 months old and extends until it is 36 months old. At that age, it is usually taken to slaughterhouses. This phase has a duration of 12 months.

2.2. Commercialization of Cattle

Cattle can be sold during any of the three phases in the production cycle, and it is common for cows to be moved from one farm to another after formal or informal sales at auctions or fairs. Brokers play an important role in the chain by connecting supply and demand at any given phase in the production cycle. These intermediaries have the financial means to negotiate with cattle ranchers and make payments in advance. Intermediaries can be classified as either collectors or brokers.

- **Collectors**: gather lots or groups of live animals to sell them in places like livestock fairs and cattle auctions. This common practice of grouping animals into lots, rather than registering them individually, complicates the traceability of cattle.

- **Brokers**: have direct relationships with wholesalers and retailers, restaurants, and butchers, among other buyers, and provide the logistical support needed to supply the so-called canals, or carcasses, to the final clients. 

Intermediation is barely regulated and creates both inefficiencies and high levels of informality in the supply chain. These factors make traceability and monitoring more difficult, especially for suppliers that are not full-cycle producers. Though it may seem that cattle coming from full-cycle farms are more easily traced than those from partial-cycle farms, even full cycle farms may purchase and sell livestock at different phases in the production cycle.

2.3. Transformation of Beef

The role of slaughterhouses in the cattle supply chain is to slaughter and butcher animals. These facilities can send the carcasses to other companies for further processing or receive technical specifications on special cuts and packaging.

In general, slaughterhouses are not involved in the retail of beef; however, some slaughterhouses in Colombia buy live cattle and then sell the beef and its byproducts to other buyers. Beef from municipal slaughterhouses can only be distributed in its respective municipality, while department-level plants can supply the entire country. All slaughterhouses, whether local or regional, must be approved by the National Institute for Drug and Food Surveillance (INVIMA).

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3. Data analysis
Vaccinations, movements and deforestation

3.1. Deforestation in Forest Reserve Areas and National Parks

The Forest Reserve Area surrounding the North and Northeast of Chiribiquete National Park\(^{39}\) has lost nearly 17,000 hectares of forest between 2016 and 2020. The worst year was 2018 when 5,590 hectares were cleared, followed by 2017 (5,294 hectares) and 2019 (2,430 hectares). Land-use changes that modify the nature of the forest reserve are prohibited in these areas (see Box 3).

Illegal deforestation is not limited to Forest Reserves. The Northern and Northeastern Area of Chiribiquete National Park\(^{40}\) lost more than 900 hectares of forest in 2019 and more than 500 in 2020. Forest destruction is also advancing in another area less than 10km away from the northern border of the park, in neighboring La Macarena National Park, where over 17,000 hectares were deforested between 2016 and 2020. Deforestation in La Macarena National Park intensified in 2020, when nearly 5,000 hectares of forest were lost.

The relationship between deforestation and cattle ranching becomes evident when comparing information on deforestation in the region, an increase in the number of head of cattle, and ICA’s records on the number of cattle transported from these protected areas (hereafter referred to as cattle “movements”).

\(^{39}\) This is one of the Areas in which EIA conducted its investigation. For the purposes of this report, it is meant to include 11 rural districts of the municipalities of Caño de la Cruz, Pueblito, Chiribiquete, Chiquinquirá, La Viga, Bello Horizonte, Caño de la Cruz, La Loma, La Esperanza, La Esperanza, La Esmeralda, and La Primavera. These rural districts were selected based on matches in geographic data from the Governments of Meta and Guaviare and cattle movement and vaccination data from ICA. Three of these rural districts (La Esperanza, La Primavera, and La Loma) are included in our analysis because data from two separate geographic locations that fall under the same name. In our report, we have grouped these two separate rural districts together as one rural district, given that both locations are inside of Second Law of 1959 areas, in addition to the fact that the rural district names for the two separate locations are indistinguishable in the cattle movement and vaccination datasets.

\(^{40}\) In this report, this area is understood to be the northernmost section of the 2018 expansion area of Chiribiquete National Park. As a reference point, the rural districts of San Jorge and Angolata in the municipality of San José del Guaviare are to the direct north, with the eastern side extending southward from the rural districts of El Chuapal until the border intersects with the Tunia River. The southern border extends along the Tunia River until it meets the rural district of Remediados, in the Indigenous Reserves. The western border extends along the borbor de la “N” in the south and the rural district of La Primavera. 


3.2. Cattle Population and Movements in the North and Northeast of Chiribiquete National Park

An analysis of ICA’s vaccination registry for the Forest Reserve to the North and Northeast of Chiribiquete National Park shows that the area’s cattle population increased by staggering 349% percent between 2016 and 2019. According to ICA’s registry, there were 10,386 head of cattle in 2016, 36,020 in 2017, 42,506 in 2018, and 47,696 in 2019. Likewise, ICA’s official records show a total of 23,853 movements between 2016 and 2020. The number of movements has also grown annually and intensified in 2020 with a total of 11,197 movements.

An analysis of the destinations of cattle movements from the Forest Reserve to the North and Northeast of Chiribiquete National Park indicates that 90% of the cattle sent from this area directly to a processing plant arrive in the city of Bogota. Between 2016 and 2020, this proportion was equivalent to 6,017 head of cattle, with the highest number of movements (2,360) in 2020. Only 6% of all movements from cattle farms straight to slaughterhouses went directly to the department of Guaviare and 1% to the department of Meta.

The main destination of cattle movements to other farms in the department of Guaviare (for backgrounding) is the rural district or vereda of Altamira in the Municipality of Calamar, where 2,515 head of cattle arrived between 2016 and 2020. Altamira is located outside of the Forest Reserve Area. It is worth noting that 62% of the cattle that leave this rural district are bound for the city of Bogota (a total of 15,882 out of 25,377 head of cattle for the 2016–2020 period). Therefore, Bogota may be indirectly receiving a greater number than 6,000 heads of cattle that spent part of their lifetime inside the Forest Reserve Area surrounding the North and Northeast of Chiribiquete National Park.

Map 2. Area of Investigation to the North of Chiribiquete National Park
3.3. Cattle Population and Movements in La Macarena National Park

The percent increase was even greater over the same period within the bounds of La Macarena National Park. ICA’s vaccination registry shows that cattle population grew from 1,846 individuals in 2016 to 15,774 in 2019, a 754% increase in just four years. Regarding cattle movements that year, ICA reported the relocation of 10,022 head of cattle from six rural districts41 from the interior of La Macarena National Park to other destinations. The number of cattle movements increased significantly in 2017 and peaked in 2018 and 2020. Caño Indio, one of the six rural districts or veredas analyzed, accounted for 87% of all movements, or nearly 9,000 head of cattle.

**BOX 3. THE AMAZON FOREST RESERVE**

A portion of the territory bordering Chiribiquete and La Macarena National Parks forms part of an area known as the Amazon Forest Reserve (see Map 3). These forest reserves were established through the ratification of the Second Law of 1959 to promote the forest economy and protect land, water, and wildlife. Since 1976, several regulations and permits only land uses that are compatible with forest conservation inside the reserves. The Ministry of Environment later developed three distinct environmental planning classifications: Zones A, B, or C, depending on their specific purpose. The common denominator among these classifications is that they all ban land-use changes or other changes that modify the nature of the forest reserve. Cattle ranching is illegal in Zones A and B.

The main destinations of cattle movements from the interior of La Macarena National Park were other farms in the region. Between 2016 and 2020, 2,883 head of cattle (which represent 28% of the total number that left La Macarena National Park) were relocated from the rural district of Caño Indio to the rural district of El Jardín, in the municipality of El Castilí in the department of Meta. In turn, 14% of the cattle that left El Jardín, or 957 head of cattle, had processing plants in Bogota as their final destination. Though this percentage is low, it increases the risk that buyers in Bogota may be consuming cattle backgrounded inside of La Macarena National Park.

Between 2016 and 2021, there were 1,251 registered movements from the investigation area in La Macarena National Park to cattle markets (livestock fairs or auctions), and Cattle Market 1 was the main destination (see case study in section 4.5). During this period, Cattle Market 1 received 957 head of cattle directly from within La Macarena National Park. This number is likely larger though, for the same reason noted earlier: El Jardín received 2,883 head of cattle relocated from within La Macarena National Park, and records show that, during this same period, Cattle Market 1 received 887 head of cattle from El Jardín—one of the direct destinations of cattle from La Macarena National Park.

**Graph 5. Cattle Population in La Macarena National Park, 2016-2019**

**Graph 6. Cattle Movements from the Interior of La Macarena National Park to Other Farms, 2016-2019**

**Graph 7. Main destinations of cattle movements from the Interior of La Macarena National Park to Cattle Markets, 2016-2020**

**Graph 8. Hato Ganadero in 6 Veredas of PNN La Macarena.**

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41 The six rural districts or veredas analyzed (Caño Indio, Cafetales, Caño Ceiba Bajo, La Esperanza, Caño San José, and Nueva Colombia) account for roughly 95% of the total area of La Macarena National Park.

42 Resolution of July 10, 2018, the Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development banned all activities other than conservation, education, recreation, culture, recovery, and control inside of the national park. Likewise, it declared the park’s area as inalienable and not subject to prescription or seizure. The resolution also determined that activities carried out on the land neighboring Chiribiquete National Park must serve as a buffer and contribute to the protection, planning, and management of renewable natural resources and the achievement of the country’s general conservation objectives.43

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44 Article 13 of Law 1957 of 1974 prohibits livestock activities (including cattle ranching) inside the system’s areas. Related to Chiribiquete National Park specifically, in Resolution 1296 of July 10, 2018, the Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development banned all activities other than conservation, education, recreation, culture, research, recovery, and control inside of the national park. Likewise, it declared the park’s area as inalienable and not subject to prescription or seizure. The resolution also determined that activities carried out on the land neighboring Chiribiquete National Park must serve as a buffer and contribute to the protection, planning, and management of renewable natural resources and the achievement of the country’s general conservation objectives.44
4. Field investigation
Deforestation linked to supermarkets

The previous section shows how a significant number of cattle that spend their backgrounding or finishing phases in protected areas are then taken to and consumed in Bogota. Though many supermarket chains have explicitly stated\(^\text{45}\) that they do not buy cattle from deforested areas, this investigation found convincing evidence of the contrary and revealed that indirect suppliers represent one of the weakest links in the supply chain. In this particular case, one of the traders that supplies both Grupo Éxito and Colsubsidio purchases cattle directly from: a) a supplier who runs a farm located within Chiribiquete National Park, and b) a company that owns a farm located—at least partially—inside La Macarena National Park.

4.1. Deforestation in National Parks

4.1.a. Case No. 1: Indirect Supplier Linked to Deforestation in Chiribiquete National Park

Supplier A, who directly supplies Grupo Éxito and Colsubsidio, has a production capacity of around 2,000 head of cattle per month. He has self-owned farms as well as farms rented to raise cattle, and in addition to his own production capacity, he also regularly purchases cattle from indirect suppliers based on the demand from his clients. Supplier A has worked for at least 10 years with his two main clients, the supermarket chains Grupo Éxito and Colsubsidio.

Supplier A has had a business relationship with Indirect Supplier 1, who in turn has a business partner, Indirect Supplier 2. With whom he has worked for five years. As part of their agreement, Indirect Supplier 2 Background has all of Indirect Supplier 1’s cattle. Indirect Supplier 1’s farms are located in the department of Guaviare, outside of the Forest Reserve to the North and Northeast of Chiribiquete National Park. Cattle spends the first production phase on this farm before being transferred to Indirect Supplier 2’s farm. Indirect Supplier 2 runs a farm inside Chiribiquete National Park’s Northern Area. This area has formally been part of Chiribiquete National Park since 2018, following the park’s most recent expansion. According to Colombian legislation, any activity other than conservation is illegal within the park’s borders. Nevertheless, Indirect Supplier 2 holds around 800 hectares of land inside the park, 410 of which were deforested and turned into pastures for cattle raising in 2019, when the area had already become a national park. Through September 2020, Indirect Supplier 2 had, on average, 600 head of cattle in the backgrounding phase and openly expressed his wish to clear the rest of the farm in the near future. Supplier A purchases on average 100-300 head of cattle every 2 months from Indirect Supplier 1. These animals are backgrounded by Indirect Supplier 2 inside Chiribiquete National Park, and EIA investigators were told that the beef is sold in Carulla Supermarket.

Goverance in the Farm’s Surrounding Area and Control Exerted by Armed Groups

Indirect Supplier 2 explicitly recognizes that he knows his farm is located inside the national park, since he acknowledges that the National Parks Authority is the governmental entity with jurisdiction over the area. He told investigators that the park’s authorities occasionally “bother him so that he stops clearing the forest.” On the other hand, he also claimed that it is armed groups who in reality exert territorial control in the area. As an example, he mentioned that when landholders in the area want to expand a farm, these groups must first grant an authorization to do so.

Indirect Supplier 2 also stated that he must pay armed groups $10,000 COP per head of cattle each year. He usually must travel to the place where these groups are settled and make the payments directly, and he explains that in exchange, “these people take care of you [...] and that he can therefore “move freely anywhere and at any time [...], and “not have issues with anyone.”

According to Indirect Supplier 2, armed groups issue receipts with their respective seal after receiving the payments in order for the rancher to have a proof of payment and avoid being charged twice.

Indirect Supplier 2 was clear that it is not the only one who must make payments to armed groups. As he explained to investigators, all cattle ranchers in the area and, regardless of how large they are, must pay the corresponding fee. “If you have 100, you pay for 100. If you have 1,000, you pay for 1,000. If you have 5,000, well, you’ll have to pay more.”

Destination and Use of Timber Products from Chiribiquete and La Macarena National Parks

EIA investigators learned from indirect suppliers and well-informed sources that valuable timber spaces are logged selectively before clearing the forest entirely and sawn on site. (See photo on p. 31) At the farms, logs are cut into boards, referred to as “pieces,” that are 3-4 meters long in temporary sawmills set up for this purpose. Part of the timber is used for maintenance on the farms, and the rest is commercialized in the black market. Transports usually do not exceed 200 pieces per shipment, in order to make it easier to hide the timber and avoid checkpoints along the road. One of the collection centers for timber from La Macarena National Park is Granada, Meta. In the presence of investigators, Indirect Supplier 1 spoke with Indirect Supplier 2 about a shipment of 1,200 pieces that left the farm’s surrounding area in September 2020 to be commercialized in the region. Colombian law requires timber to be authorized prior to harvesting and/or documented by a transport permit when mobilized to any destination; otherwise, it is considered illegal.

Indirect Supplier 2: How many hectares do you have, Mr. Indirect Supplier 2: I have approximately 700, 800 hectares EIA: they don’t bother you about the castrator [back of land registration]? Indirect Supplier 2: no, nothing EIA: you have already established pastures this year? Indirect Supplier 2: soon we start clearing, when the summer arrives... EIA: but this area was cleared recently, right? Indirect Supplier 2: yes, this was cleared recently... two years ago... these pastures are even more recent... one year... yes, from 2019... EIA: how many hectares do you have, Mr. Indirect Supplier 2: yes, others can clear-cut, and then one creates the farm and the pastures EIA: so you cleared the 800 hectares [sic]? Indirect Supplier 2: yes, all of that has been cut down, and there is still more left to clear EIA: how much more are you planning on expanding? Indirect Supplier 2: well, until it is all cleared... EIA: the 800 [hectares]? Indirect Supplier 2: yes EIA: and if you need to expand more, would you be able to? Indirect Supplier 2: well, yes, because I can buy... I can continue to buy.
During the investigation, EIA also identified Company A, which has had a business relationship with Supplier A during the last four years for the purchase and sale of cattle. According to workers from Company A, the company’s most important farm has an extension of 2,000 hectares (1,800 of them are pastures) and part of it is located inside the limits of La Macarena National Park. The worker told EIA’s investigators that “the line that says ‘La Macarena Park begins here’ passes us [the farm] through the middle... around the farm, on the sides, the boundaries... that is virgin forest...”

In this case, EIA confirmed that armed groups also control the area and that they sometimes limit land-grabbing to 80 hectares [other sources claimed that the limit is 100 hectares]. People get in trouble with armed groups if they appropriate larger areas of land, and cattle ranchers must pay armed groups $10,000 COP per head of cattle each year.

In exchange for their payments, cattle ranchers receive protection from cattle theft, among other benefits, which reportedly occurs in areas that are not controlled by armed groups. On the other hand, ranchers lamented that payments made to armed groups cannot be included in the business’s bookkeeping, despite being a cost of production.

As a result of the location of the farm, cattle raised on this farm—and eventually purchased by Supplier A—has an extremely high risk of being raised on illegally deforested land and being linked to payments to armed groups.
4.1. Supply chain links to Grupo Exito and Colsubsidio

When EIA contacted Processing Plant A, which transforms part of the beef sold by both Grupo Exito and Colsubsidio, employees confirmed that Supplier A works with both supermarket chains. Moreover, they confirmed that Supplier A sells about 1,000 head of cattle to Grupo Exito every month, and they were aware of Indirect Supplier 1.

Through the verification of lot numbers of beef from Supplier A’s suppliers, investigators were able to confirm that beef sold as “beef” was indeed sold at Exito in the city of Villavicencio. A manager at the butcher department confirmed that it came from Exito’s processing plant in the same city. Meat from Supplier A and processes beef for Grupo Exito, according to Supplier A. Supplier A explained that the CARNATURAL brand is a strategic partner of Grupo Exito that supplies certain cuts when needed.

Supply chain links could also be confirmed in the case of Colsubsidio, where investigators were able to verify, through corresponding lot numbers that beef from Supplier A was sold at Colsubsidio supermarket in Riosoplo, Meta.

4.2. Other irregularities detected in Grupo Exito’s Supply Chain

In the Magdalena Medio region, in the department of Antioquia, EIA discovered another direct supplier of Grupo Exito (hereafter Supplier B), that sells the supermarket chain an average of 80 carcasses, per month (slaughtered cattle ready for processing). Supplier B purchases cattle from indirect suppliers, among them Indirect Supplier 3, to meet Grupo Exito’s demand.

4.2.a Cattle Laundering

How should cattle movements be registered?

Cattle farms and properties that specialize in beef or double-purpose cattle (beef and milk) must be registered in ICAs Sanitary Registry of Livestock Farms.47 To move cattle from one property to another, ranchers must obtain a Sanitary Guide for Internal Movement (GSMI). This guide is obtained to mobilize cattle only among farms that are already registered by ICA. The GSMI indicates a single origin and destination which is valid for a single trajectory and vehicle. The guide indicates a specific date, and its validity is equivalent to the trajectory’s expected duration.48

How does it sometimes work in practice?

Supplier B explained that occasionally—when ranchers need cattle from other farms, when an animal dies while being transported, or when “they [indirect suppliers] have not brought the license” [GSMI]—he himself issues a GSMI as if the cattle came from his own farm and then sends the animals to his clients, including the large retailers and supermarket chains: “I issue their license here, so the cattle enter the slaughterhouse from here, and that’s it.”

Below is a transcript of a conversation that Supplier B had with EIA’s investigators about cattle laundering aimed at obscuring cattle’s real farm of origin.

EIA: And they don’t notice anything at the slaughterhouse? They just relax?
Supplier B: Nothing. Everything adds up. What does the slaughterhouse care? All that matters is that they receive the categories they have to slaughter, and that’s it...
EIA: So you have to change out the cattle, or only the licenses?
Supplier B: Only the license
EIA: Only the license... and as you say, the slaughterhouse doesn’t care where they come from or...
Supplier B: No, nothing, because the slaughterhouse is a business that provides services.

The practice evidenced above is not limited to the cattle that Supplier B sells to his clients. The investigation compiled evidence showing how Supplier B sells beef to his farm and its ICA authorization to issue GSMIs for third parties in exchange for financial compensation.

This practice of cattle laundering is further evidence of the existing risk of cattle from deforested areas entering the supply chain at any given stage in the livestock production cycle without being detected.

4.2.b. Corruption

A conversation between EIA, Supplier B, and one of his suppliers (Indirect Supplier 3) revealed how influential actors may clear the forest without facing any consequences.

Supplier B, and Indirect Supplier 3 about complicity with the police

Indirect Supplier 3: To cut down a tree here you need approval, and they may grant it to you or not... you have to manage the situation...
Supplier B: What if [holds back] snitches?
EIA: Sure...
Indirect Supplier 3: Yes, you know how it goes...
Supplier B: The neighbor, who is a snitch, hears a chainsaw and calls the police right there. But if you’re in the police’s keychain [friend], you call and tell them, “Listen, I’ll be cutting down some trees over there. If they call you, you already know…”
EIA: And it’s okay...
Supplier B: Yes, you know how it goes....
EIA: For that you need economic muscle...
Supplier B: [nods]
5. Cattle Markets
A Critical Link in the Supply Chain

5.1. Findings related to Cattle Market 1
Cattle markets are physical spaces for the purchase and sale of animals in any phase in the production cycle (cow-calf, backgrounding, or finishing). In some cases, when buyers and sellers trade directly, the place of the exchange is called a cattle fair. In other instances, sale processes are more organized, and there is a third party in charge of connecting supply and demand and managing the event’s operations and financial movements. These transactions are known as cattle auctions.

EIA’s investigation revealed how cattle markets can serve as hubs for cattle laundering, especially for cattle brought from deforestation-prone areas or of animals whose supply chains are exposed to payments to armed groups. By analyzing ICA’s data on the movement of cattle between 2016–2020, EIA’s investigators identified four cases involving a high risk of deforestation and the presence of armed groups.

50 Ibid.
5.2. Final Destination of Cattle Sold in Cattle Market 1

These case studies show that Cattle Market 1 trades cattle that is coming from illegally deforested lands – including national parks – and helps to support armed groups in the region through forced payments.

An analysis of ICA’s cattle movement data shows that the main destination of beef coming from cattle sold in Cattle Market 1 is the city of Bogotá. Between 2016 and 2020, a total of 67,920 head of cattle arrived in Bogotá from Cattle Market 1. The busiest year was 2018, during which 15,215 cattle movements along this route were recorded.

Investigators were also told that major supermarkets and beef distribution chains receive cattle from Cattle Market 1.

Operator of Cattle Market 1 on Cattle Purchases Made by Large Retailers and Supermarkets

Operator: … the good thing about Cattle Market 1 is that it has several commercialization channels. We have a commercialization channel called frigorífico [refrigerated meat products], and what is frigorífico? Where we sell, for example, to MINERVA and ATHENA FOODS; we sell to MAKRO and sometimes to ÉXITO … we also sell to JUMBECOS; I mean, we also sell to the large supermarkets...

EIA: … So you sell to ÉXITO? You sell directly to them or through third parties?

Operator: … no, directly, we have sold directly to them, yes.

When contacted, Minerva provided information on the company’s activities related to sustainable cattle ranching in Latin America and stated they would conduct an in-depth review of the issues raised by EIA.

Operator of Cattle Market 1 About Arms Groups and Paramilitaries

Operator: … for example, here [region where Cattle Market 1 is located] it’s the paramilitaries

EIA: … the paramilitaries

Operator: … for example, here [region where Cattle Market 1 is located] it’s the paramilitaries

EIA: … the paramilitaries

Operator: … from here [Cattle Market 1] to here [region where another cattle market is located] … from there to there its guerrillas

EIA: … and the problem is that over there [in Guaviare] one doesn’t know who.

Operator: … no, in that sense we can also help you… here you need to mingle with the good and the bad… so you tell me, “hey buy in this place” and when you take you somewhere it’s because I already know.

EIA: … and it’s solved...

Operator: … yes, it costs this much and it’s solved, or to solve it, it costs this much...

EIA: … paramilitaries are well organized. It’s easier with them. Is it easy with guerrillas as well?

Operator: … they’re even more organized. …he (laughs) but in the Guaviare area, over there, and part of Puerto Rico, Meta, over here, one can talk with them...

EIA: … right, one is not going to take anything from them anyway, on the contrary, it’s an offer.

Operator: … yes, right, whenever you arrive, deep inside the main road, you’ll have to pay, start keeping that in mind.

EIA: … and, for example, what about Le Macarena? What’s up with that area?

Operator: … over there it’s guerrilla, guerrilla … La Uribe, Vista Hermosa, La Macarena, it’s all guerrilla...

EIA: … and one can arrange things over there as well?

Operator: … yes, everything

EIA: … no problem...

Operator: … everything, everywhere, can be arranged...

In Cattle Market 1, people seem to understand the dynamics imposed by paramilitaries and armed groups and appear to be well connected. One person even offered assistance in dealing with and paying off different groups when acquiring land in other areas to EIA investigators. Below is a transcript of a conversation on the subject:

When asked about his relationship to the armed groups, the person in Cattle Market 1 said:

Operator: … right now there are people in Guaviare who I can call, and they tell me, “they’re selling 2000, 3000 hectares without any problems for 5, 6, 7 million pesos.” They give you part of it with what is it? With a title, and the other part without it… you can negotiate...

EIA: … and it doesn’t matter? So the cattle that come from there...

Operator: … it’s fattened cattle… you have your land, you come here and given that you (already) bought your farm, you can sell you the cattle, and you can supply yourself here with us, and we can talk about the terms of payment, so you buy it here and send it over there...

EIA: … and you send it over… but if I want to have cattle in the meantime, it doesn’t matter that the land is entitled? I mean, how can we help me legalize that cattle? How does that work?

Operator: … the thing is… you don’t have to legalize the cattle… I will legalize it here when I send it… I will send it to you with their ICA. It is not a problem. The land itself is another matter.

EIA: … of course, but the cattle will be legalized

Operator: … you can pack the land with cattle even if its entitled...

The main destination of the cattle that are sent for slaughter from this cattle market is the city of Bogotá.
5.3. Hidden Impacts of Indiscriminate Beef Sourcing

This investigation demonstrated that large supermarket chains in Colombia are purchasing cattle associated with both deforestation and extortion payments to armed groups and are subsequently distributing the processed beef to consumers in Bogota and other major cities in the country. Since there is no traceability system in Colombia that allows consumers or buyers to know the true origin of cattle, final consumers are unwittingly supporting the destruction of protected forests and extortion by armed groups and paramilitary organizations that are responsible for major human rights violations in Colombia. Reports show that these same groups produce and traffic drugs that are sold in Europe and the United States, causing well-known social, economic, and health impacts throughout the supply chain of these illicit substances.

To quantify funding sources derived from extortion in the cattle supply chain, EIA analyzed ICA’s database for the 2016-2019 annual vaccination cycles. This database shows the recorded number of cattle during each vaccination drive. Since payments to armed groups are carried out on a yearly basis, the analysis only considered the number of cattle vaccinated in the second cycle of vaccination, which occurs in the second semester of each year.

The analysis shows that the total number of cattle in the rural districts or veredas that were the focus of the investigation in the Forest Reserve Area surrounding the North and Northeast of Chiribiquete National Park has been increasing year on year since 2016. The data reflects the existence of 1,225 head of cattle in 2016, 4,740 in 2017, 5,470 in 2018 and 6,470 in 2019. If, as investigators were told, ranchers may have paid $10,000 COP per head of cattle, the total amount of money derived from extortion and used to finance armed groups would have been close to half a million US dollars between 2016-2019, just within the limited area of investigation alone. According to some experts, extortion is the third largest source of funding for armed groups, after drug trafficking and illegal mining.

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6. Accountability
The Role of Supermarket Chains

6.1. International Norms and Colombian Law

In Colombia, deforestation has been declared to violate human rights like the rights to life, health, and a healthy environment, which are recognized in articles 11, 49, and 79 of the constitution54. Colombian supermarkets are therefore obligated to carry out due diligence concerning commercial relations that could affect forests, since these may be contributing to human rights violations. Colombia has also ratified the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights55. UN Principles 17 through 22 state that companies should proceed with due diligence. This means that companies should identify, monitor and mitigate potential impacts of their activities and commercial relations on human rights, and to report on the results.56

The principles of precaution and prevention are also legally and constitutionally recognized in Colombia and were included in the country’s legal system by Law 99 of 1993. The principle of precaution determines that the state and private actors must adopt measures to avoid environmental degradation caused by activities that may result in potential irreversible damages to the environment, even in the absence of scientific certainty about the impacts of a given activity57. Additionally, according to the principle of prevention, authorities and private parties must implement appropriate measures in advance to avoid or mitigate damages that are known with certainty.

54 In September 2016, the Supreme Court of Justice ruled in favor of 12 girls, boys, and adolescents from different parts of the country who called on the Colombian state to fulfill its commitment to stop deforestation in order to protect the plaintiffs’ rights from being gravely affected by the effects of deforestation on climate change.
6.2. Grupo Éxito in Apparent Violation of its Environmental Commitments

Grupo Éxito is a founding partner of the 2020 Tropical Forest Alliance in Colombia that leads processes for zero deforestation agreements, a member of the New York Declaration on Forests, which aimed to reduce deforestation by half by 2020 and entirely by 2030, and a member of the most important zero-deforestation agreement in Colombia. In August 2020, as part of its sustainable cattle ranching policy, the group decided that it would supply its users using satellite imaging to evaluate net deforestation and that all its suppliers would be encouraged to declare their commitment to the conservation of natural ecosystems in their farms and properties. If suppliers were to refuse to collaborate with the implementation of Grupo Éxito’s sustainability program, they would be excluded from the company’s supply chain.60

In 2015, Grupo Éxito financed the documentary Colombia, Wild Magic. The film shows a journey through 20 ecosystems in the country and was shot in 85 different locations to show Colombia’s biodiversity. The documentary encourages viewers to discover the “paradises that still exist” in places like Chiribiquete National Park, where new rock paintings were discovered during the film’s production. According to the British Police Force of the FARC, “It is also the first time in history that a Latin American brand, Éxito Group, finances a film about the country’s need to support conservation and unification.”61

In 2015, Grupo Éxito produced a declaration which specified the company’s strategy: “Grupo Exito makes public that it has 39 beef providers and that its farms have been evaluated for deforestation through Global Forest Watch. It claims to be the first retailer to implement a conservation model with all of its beef providers to protect forest and prevent the expansion of the agricultural frontier.”62 As this investigation has shown, indirect suppliers pose significant risk of exposure to deforestation.

In December 2020, Grupo Éxito’s Sustainable Cattle Ranching Policy63 claimed the company would “commercialize only tier one supplier’s beef that had compliance with zero deforestation and/or environmental restoration plans, that guarantee zero deforestation and meat quality on their farms.”64 As of May 2021, Grupo Éxito has deleted the zero-deforestation commitment from its policy, which now promotes vague minimum standards on ecosystem conservation and “activities aimed” at respecting the national agricultural frontier.

When contacted by EIA, Grupo Éxito respond by asking for more information.

However, as this investigation shows, there appears a significant discrepancy between Grupo Éxito’s public discourse and its practice. By purchasing from suppliers who source cattle from inside a National Park, Grupo Éxito is becoming implicated in the destruction of the very forests its documentary inspires to conserve.

In 2019, Grupo Éxito’s Procurement team informed EIA that it had several responsibilities and obligations under the French Due Diligence law, which require companies to do due diligence to identify and avoid risks in their supply chains. According to the French Ministry of Economy, the Grupo Éxito belongs to Casino Guichard-Perrachon, hereafter Casino Group.65

The Casino Group is a multinational French retail company operating in over 30 countries, predominantly in the United States, Argentina, Brazil, and Colombia. It also operates in the United States as Walmart’s joint venture.66

In 2021, the Grupo Éxito’s meat supply chain consists of one supplier’s beef that had compliance with zero deforestation and/or environmental restoration plans, that guarantee zero deforestation and meat quality on their farms. It is present in 23 departments and has nearly 40,000 employees distributed among its subsidiary brands: Éxito, Carulla, Super Inter, Surtimayorista, and Viva Shopping Malls. Additionally, Éxito has its own brands like Pomona, Ekono, and Éxito. Its first formal branding strategy allows the group to reach different socioeconomic segments of the Colombian population67 and to maintain its standing as the most reputable food retailer in the country.68

Due Diligence is the first semester of 2020 saw the highest increase in sales in the past three years (12.6% increase in food sales alone),69 cumulating the 1020 period with a gross profit of 6.72 billion Colombian pesos.70

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60 Ibid, Declaration Point 5.
61 Ibid, Declaration Point 2.
65 Grupo Éxito’s declaration of intentions in order to comply with the French Due Diligence Law. Available here. Consulted April 2021.
66 Grupo Éxito’s declaration of intentions in order to comply with the French Due Diligence Law. Available here. Consulted April 2021.
According to UNODC, 70% of the world’s coca crops are located in Colombia. For numerous reasons, including market prices, Europe has become the largest market for several Colombian cocaine producers. While a kilogram of cocaine may sell for up to $230,000 USD in the United States, the same amount is worth, on average, $40,000 USD in Europe. In select European markets, a kilogram of cocaine may be worth nearly $300,000 USD.

As exposed by Intlight Crime, European mafia has been moving up the supply chain in Colombia and other Latin American countries to get closer to the source of production and steal better cocaine prices. Among these mafia is a collection of criminal groups from the Balkans. The presence of this particular mafia was felt in western Meta in April 2020 when, for reasons still unresolved, a Serbian national was killed, according to reports, belonging to the Balkan Cartel. The presence of this gang in Meta was found dead alongside a well-known former paramilitary, Jose Vicente Vivas Mendez, alsoalus, who was feared in the region for his ties to drug trafficking. The investigators carried out in April the tentative of cocaine bound for Europe. This incident took place in the area where El Viajero was investigated was carried out.

An official analysis of confiscated cocaine samples carried out by the Drug Enforcement Administration of the United States (DEA), which had a 97% efficacy rate in identifying the geographical origin of coca leaves used to produce cocaine, determined that 98% of the cocaine confiscated in France came from Colombia, compared to 68% of the samples for the European Union as a whole. In this regard, Casino Group’s seeming lack of oversight may very well be enabling, about indirectly, cocaine trafficking from Colombia to France and the rest of Europe.

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Likewise, paramilitary organizations allegedly still exert some form of control over the western region of the department of Meta, where Cattle Market 1 is located. According to a source familiar with the matter, like other armed groups, these paramilitary organizations require ranchers to make payments per head of cattle and remain involved in the cocaine trade. These irregularities are especially relevant to the European Union, since payments made to armed groups and paramilitary organizations may be linked to groups that form part of the supply chain of Colombian cocaine sold and consumed in Europe. Having robust mechanisms in place to ensure Group Extro and other companies are not sourcing cattle raised in protected areas or conflict-hit zones is paramount.

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Conclusions & recommendations

Conclusions

As this investigation shows, the current lack of transparency and traceability in the cattle sector combined with increasing unchecked expansion of cattle ranching in the Colombian Amazon pose a high risk that meat sold in supermarkets comes from protected areas or World Heritage sites. In addition, there is also a high risk that ranchers were subject to extortion by armed groups and that cattle herds form part of land-grabbing schemes. Through the failure of supermarkets and beef distributors to implement adequate due diligence, consumers may unwittingly be consuming beef that is contributing to the destruction of protected ecosystems and human rights violations.

It is important to note that what could be documented here is only a snapshot and represents but the tip of the iceberg of threats posed to the Colombian Amazon by uncontrolled land-grabbing and cattle ranching.

Structural reform is needed to address many of these issues, starting with declaring the principle of transparency and traceability in the cattle ranching sector a matter of public interest. EIA’s investigators attempted to obtain more information from suppliers to understand the risks present in their supply chains but met barriers due to the confidentiality and secrecy that prevail in the sector. Nevertheless, EIA was able to corroborate information gathered through multiple sources.
Though part of this investigation was made possible by ICA’s official data on cattle movements and vaccination drives, multiple requests over a period of two years and ultimate legal action against the government were necessary to obtain this information. While the government collects a wealth of data about cattle vaccinations and movements in protected areas and conflict zones, this information is not public, nor does it appear to be shared with other relevant agencies that have the mandate to take measures against illegal actors. Public transparency and access to information is essential to develop tools that are needed to solve some of the sector’s issues.

During its fieldwork, EIA frequently observed the normalization of serious environmental and human rights abuses and a culture of impunity in which influence and money allow influential actors to engage in questionable and illegal practices without facing consequences. Moreover, investigators found a lack of institutional presence in certain areas, as well as the absence of economic; alternatives and opportunities to implement sustainable productive models that are controlled by and benefit local communities.

The government and the private sector must take responsibility and implement measures that reduce the environmental and social risks present in beef supply chains, including those catering to Colombia’s major cities. The destruction is already well under way, but they wait any longer to act, their efforts may come too late.

**Recommendations**

**To the Colombian government:**
- Design and implement a mandatory national transparent system to register and trace individual cattle throughout their life cycle, starting at birth.
- Actively monitor the cattle sector and stop permits for cattle ranching and movements in protected areas, unless it is for restoration or conservation purposes, as well as other land grabbing schemes.
- Establish effective cooperation and information sharing between relevant agencies so that violations are reported and acted upon.
- Support economic alternatives and create opportunities for sustainable livelihoods that are controlled by and benefit local communities.
- End militarized responses that hurt the local vulnerable population.

**To Grupo Éxito, Colsubsidio, and Other Supermarket Chains:**
- Implement a due diligence plan with appropriate risk assessment and mitigation measures, to ensure no cattle enters their supply chain that is sourced from deforestation or subject to extortion from armed groups and other human rights violations. Given the extremely high risk in the Colombian cattle sector, such due diligence systems should include:
  - Full traceability throughout cattle’s life cycle, starting at birth.
  - Effective monitoring of the full supply chain, including indirect suppliers and their sources.
  - Zero tolerance for paying armed groups.
  - Zero tolerance for deforestation.

**To Casino Group:**
- In compliance with the French Duty of Vigilance Law, implement an appropriate due diligence plan to ensure that operations of Grupo Casino, their subsidiaries, contractors and sub-contractors are not causing environmental harm or human rights violations in Colombia.

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**Why is Cattle Traceability Not Guaranteed?**

**Causes**

- **Lack of legal framework**
  - There is no legal framework that obligates actors in the supply chain to maintain the traceability of cattle.
  - There is not a definition of illegal cattle or cattle linked to land grabbing/deforestation dynamics.

- **Aspirational voluntary commitments**
  - The commitments of the private sector have not been significant.
  - They have not analyzed risk or systemic problems, the lack of governance in some regions, and pervasive corruption.

- **Corruption and Lack of governance**
  - On facts or legal powers assume control functions in many regions.
  - There is a culture of corruption in which everything is possible: forgery of transport permits, logging, land grabbing in protected areas, etc.
  - There are areas of Colombia that do not have a cadaster.

**Effects**

- **Diffusion of responsibility**
  - Nobody is fully responsible for traceability, so everyone washes their hands.
  - Processing plants only request a GSAM for the last movement of cattle and are unaware of their origin.
  - ICA is only in charge of sanitary verification and transportation issues, regardless of their environmental aspects. GSAMs are indicative but do not necessarily represent an authorization.

- **Lack of a risk Mitigation system**
  - Sales at auctions and farmers hamper traceability.
  - Indirect suppliers are not monitored.
  - Buyers choose to ignore the fact that their supply chain funds armed groups and is linked to environmental impacts.
  - They do not use their leverage to change their suppliers’ practices.

- **Impunity**
  - Cattle ranching is used as a means for land grabbing.
  - Laundering is common, concealing the true origin of cattle.
  - Issuance of permits that should not have been issued.
  - There is a lack of control or oversight in areas that are not registered by ICA or the national cadaster.

- **Problem’s multiplier effect**
  - Lack of coordination and communication among ICA, regional environmental authorities, and EIA.
  - EIA about cattle ranching in protected areas (e.g. movement of cattle in national parks).