Ivo Lubrinna has been wildcassing for gold in the jungle here for more than 30 years. It’s a notoriously messy business, as crews strip away topsoil in the forest and along riverbanks and use mercury and other pollutants to draw precious metal from mud.

For the past two years, Lubrinna has held a second job: environment secretary for this riverside city of 100,000 people, gateway to the oldest national park and half a dozen nature reserves in Brazil’s vast Amazon wilderness. As such, it’s his job to protect the area from the depredations of loggers, poachers, squatters – and gold miners.

His dual role neatly divides his workdays: morning as regulator, afternoon as miner. “I have to be good early
in the day,” the burly, bald 64-year-old says in
his stand-at-attention baritone. “In the after-
noon, I watch out for myself.”

Until recently, the seeming conflict of in-
terest wouldn’t have mattered much in this
free-for-all frontier of lax law enforcement
and often-violent conflicts among interests
competing for land and resources. It was the
job of Ibama, Brazil’s widely respected federal
environmental agency, to police the Amazon
as best it could.

But last year, President Dilma Rousseff
authorized a change that ceded much respon-
sibility for environmental oversight to local
officials. Of 168 Ibama field offices operating
a few years ago, 91 have been shuttered, ac-
cording to Ibama employees. Lubrinna says
Ibama agents used to fine him and other
miners for violations. Now, he leads a team
that inspects wildcatting sites. So far, he says,
he has levied few fines.

The shift to local control is one of many
changes implemented under Rousseff’s ad-
ministration that, taken together, constitute
an all-out retreat from nearly two decades of
progressive federal environmental policy.

In the 19 months since Rousseff took of-

21
dams are to be built in the
Amazon region through
2021 under current Brazilian
government plans.

fice, longstanding rules that curtail deforesta-
tion and protect millions of square kilometers
of watershed have been rolled back. She is-
sued an executive order to shrink or repurpose
seven protected woodlands, making way for
hydroelectric dams and other infrastructure
projects, and to legalize settlements by farm-
ers and miners.

And she has slowed to a near halt a pro-
cess, uninterrupted during the previous three
administrations, of setting aside land for na-
tional parks, wildlife reserves and other “con-
servation units.”

The president is clear in her reasoning:
Unleashing further development in the Ama-
zon rainforest, an area seven times the size of
France, is essential to maintaining the sort of
economic growth that over the past decade
lifted 30 million Brazilians out of poverty and
made Brazil the world’s sixth-largest economy.

The government intends to build 21 dams in the Amazon through 2021 at a cost of 96 billion reais ($48 billion), as planned under Rousseff when she was still working for her mentor and predecessor, President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. The dams are necessary, she says, to meet the energy demands of Brazil’s growing consumer class.

And Brazil still has 60 million people living in poverty. “I have to explain to people how they are going to eat, how they’ll have access to water, how they’ll have access to energy,” she said in a speech in April.

That message resonates with many Brazilians. Rousseff enjoys an enviable approval rating of 77 percent, according to a June poll.

She also received 83 percent of her campaign contributions for the 2010 election from corporations, mostly food, agriculture, construction and engineering businesses poised to benefit from opening the Amazon wider to development, according to a review of electoral filings by José Roberto de Toledo, a blogger and data analyst.

Rousseff aides dismiss any suggestion of a quid pro quo; other candidates received funds from the same companies in similar proportions.

WHAT’S AT STAKE
Brazil’s well-established environmental movement is aghast. Rousseff’s policies, they say, endanger the world’s largest forest, the storehouse of one-eighth of the planet’s fresh water, a primary source of its oxygen and home to countless rare and undiscovered plant and animal species, as well as tens of thousands of native tribespeople. The short-term economic gain, Rousseff’s critics say, isn’t worth the potential long-term cost to the global environment, as well as Brazil’s economy.

“This is a government willing to sacrifice the resources for thousands of years in exchange for a few decades of profit,” says Marina Silva, a former environment minister and a pioneer of Brazil’s green movement.

Already, the rush to exploit the region has spawned flashpoints.

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Dilma Rousseff
President of Brazil

The best-known is Belo Monte, a 26 billion real ($13 billion) project to build the world’s third-largest dam on the Xingu River, an Amazon tributary in Pará, the state where Itaituba is located.

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she heard rumors that one of Rousseff’s dams was to be built inside the park, on the Tapajós rapids. At a point where the river is three-kilometers wide, the rapids are renowned as a habitat for many species of exotic fish, a key transit point for migratory catfish, and a source of water for endangered wildlife including jaguar and the *ararajuba*, or golden parakeet.

A few months later, park agents caught workers for the state-run electric company conducting unauthorized survey work in the area and fined them.

After Carvalho spoke out on TV against the project, she was summoned to Brasília, the capital, by the head of the national park service. “I was told this is a government plan, and that I am the government, and that I could therefore not criticize the project,” she says.

The park service declined to comment on the meeting.

In December last year, Rousseff signed the law that gives state and local governments ultimate authority over non-federal lands. In Brasília’s view, locals are better-positioned to ensure that loggers, miners and others who tap forest resources are doing so with proper licenses in permitted areas.

Others, however, say local authorities lack the resources needed to police the Amazon and are more susceptible to intimidation and bribes. Scale alone makes enforcement a challenge in the Amazon.

Within months, Ibama forestry agents in Itaituba left, leaving Carvalho and park service colleagues on their own to police the area – but for Lubrinna, the Itaituba environment secretary who also happens to be a gold miner, and his small staff.

Lubrinna spends as much time overseeing his mining crews as he devotes to his municipal post, he says. He declined repeated requests to show a Reuters reporter his own wildcatting operation. He describes it as a 180-square-kilometer spread southwest of Itaituba – most of it in national forest.

Mining permits there are hard to come by, he says, and his permits don’t cover the entire area where he operates. “The government creates laws that are difficult to follow,” he says. “People like me need to make a living.”

Rousseff recently touted figures showing that the rate of deforestation in the Amazon fell to a record low in the 12 months ended July 2011, the most recent yearlong period for which data is available. Total land cleared – about 6,400 square kilometers, roughly the size of the state of Delaware – was down 77 percent from 2004, a trend that preliminary data suggests has continued in recent months.
Critics say it’s still too early to see the impact of the president’s agenda. “The numbers are bound to go in the other direction,” says Adriana Ramos, an executive at the Instituto Socioambiental, an activist group. “They are changing the architecture of regulations that led to the decrease in the first place.”

The foundation of that architecture is Brazil’s “forest code,” a set of laws unchanged for decades that lays out the percentage and type of woodland farmers, timber companies and others must leave intact when cutting.

Brazil’s powerful farm lobby has successfully pushed for changes that earlier this year made it through Congress. Though Rousseff vetoed parts of the bill that would have granted amnesty for past abuses, she is negotiating with lawmakers over changes environmentalists fear could make it easier to clear timber in areas that until now were off limits.

When a park ranger recently visited José Lopes da Silva, a squatter in the eastern margin of Amazonia park, the farmer complained about a 15,000 real ($7,500) fine he received last year for cutting trees abutting his corn field. “Why did I get fined,” he asked, “if they are about to change the law?”

“The law is still the law,” the ranger responded.

Near Campo Verde, a truck stop 30 kilometers southeast of Itaituba, Jeeps and beat-up pickups move along the highway by day. After nightfall, big-rig trucks emerge from logging paths cut deep into protected areas. Laden with tree trunks larger in diameter than the trucks’ wheels, the rigs race westward toward lumberyards along the Tapajós.

With few federal agents on the ground left to patrol the reserves, the destruction becomes apparent only once the area is big enough to be detected, cloud cover permitting, by satellites or rare and costly aerial surveillance. Because the state government grants the licenses for the lumberyards, federal officials inspect them less frequently now, too.

“What’s the point if we’re no longer the senior authority?” says one federal agent who asked not to be identified.

The job is also increasingly dangerous as landowners, loggers, and their henchmen clash over the jungle’s bounty. In March, gunmen ambushed park service agents returning from a raid on an illegal logging camp in a nature reserve south of Itaituba. The agents managed to fend off the attack.

Last year, assassins killed a prominent environmental activist in Pará and his wife after the couple decried illegal logging near their home. João Carlos Portes, a Catholic priest in Campo Verde, said gunmen recently threatened to “spray the congregation with bullets” after he refused to allow a funeral mass for a logger and confessed killer murdered by rival loggers.

Portes, who is also the local representative for the Pastoral Land Commission, a religious group focused on reducing violence, slave labor and other abuses in rural Brazil, says the recent changes in environmental policy mean “things here are only going to get worse.”

In January, Rousseff announced her executive order that slices chunks of territory from Amazonia and six other reserves to make way for dams and legitimize illegal settlements. Even though the measure still faces several court challenges.
FOR PROGRESS: Young cowboys (above, left) tend their herd on a patch of recently cleared land near Campo Verde; a federal agent (above, right) inspects illegally harvested logs confiscated in Pará state; these children (below) are among the 800 people of Pimental whose village is likely to be flooded by a dam planned for the area. REUTERS/NACHO DOCE/LUNAE PARRACHO/NACHO DOCE
The hydroelectric dam on the Tapajós River will inundate a large swath of woodland upstream, as well as Pimental, a village of about 800 fishermen and small farmers on the eastern bank of the river at the dam site.

Villagers are angry that the government has yet to provide details about the dam, whether they will be moved or compensated, or how the process might unfold. “We are completely in the dark,” says Luiz Matos de Lima, a 53-year-old farmer and grocer in Pimental.

Some villagers recently chased contractors for the electric company out of town and destroyed concrete markers the workers placed in the area.

Brazil’s energy ministry says final details for the project, planned for completion in 2017, are still under study.

It was Rousseff’s authorization of the dam that sapped what remained of Carvalho’s enthusiasm for her job as the Amazonia park’s manager. Recently, she put in for a transfer, seeking a park post in Brazil’s arid northeast. “They can’t build a dam there,” she says, “but who knows – maybe they’ll build a nuclear plant.”

Meanwhile, last month, Ibama agents at the airport in Belém, the capital of Pará, detained a man they found traveling with a Styrofoam cooler containing the frozen 22-pound carcass of an endangered Amazonian turtle. The agents seized the carcass, fined the man 5,000 reais ($2,500), and filed criminal charges against him.

The turtle-toting traveler: Ivo Lubrinna. The Itaituba environment chief told agents the turtle meat was to be served at a party for his son. Lubrinna says he will contest the fine and the charges in court.

He notes, too, that though the turtle is endangered, eating it, in the Amazon region, is “culturally acceptable.”

Luiz Matos de Lima, resident of Pimental, a village affected by plans for a dam on the Tapajós River.

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