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## Smallholders and ecological restoration: Understanding local perspectives and priorities in southeast Brazil

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### Abstract

Brazil's small rural producers (RPs) play a critical role in ensuring food security, biodiversity conservation, and natural resource protection. However, complying with the Native Vegetation Protection Law (NVPL), the primary legislation for ecological restoration (ER), remains a challenge for most landowners. This study aimed to better understand the motivations and barriers faced by rural producers when deciding to engage in restoration activities. We conducted semi-structured interviews with 68 landowners in the working area of a local restoration NGO in Brazil's Atlantic Forest, out of which 31 were rural producers, making them relevant for this study.

Most of the RPs in our sample were smallholders engaged in the conventional production of coffee and horticulture. About 90% of respondents had restored at least a small area of native forest, primarily using natural regeneration as a restoration technique. Although agroforestry management is allowed in the restoration area, it was not mentioned by the participants. Protecting and increasing water availability was the main motivation for restoration, cited by 61% of respondents. However, loss of productive land and income were the most frequently mentioned barriers to restoration due to their anticipated negative impact. Almost 70% still need to restore their land to comply with the NVPL, with Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES) cited as the main incentive for restoration by RPs. The study results indicate that agricultural production is the primary focus of most RPs, and their decision-making is often based on this objective. Therefore, programmes that provide economic benefits, such as PES, could help incentivize restoration and compliance with environmental laws. Another incentive could be systems that generate alternative income from ER, including agroforestry. However, these techniques need to be promoted and analysed to assess their suitability and acceptance in the context. In conclusion, involving RPs in the design of ER projects is critical. This study has shown how understanding their characteristics and perspectives can lead to better strategies to support the engagement of landowners in the implementation of ER and, consequently, compliance with environmental laws.

**Keywords:** Atlantic Forest, challenges, motivation, restoration, rural production, small-scale farmers