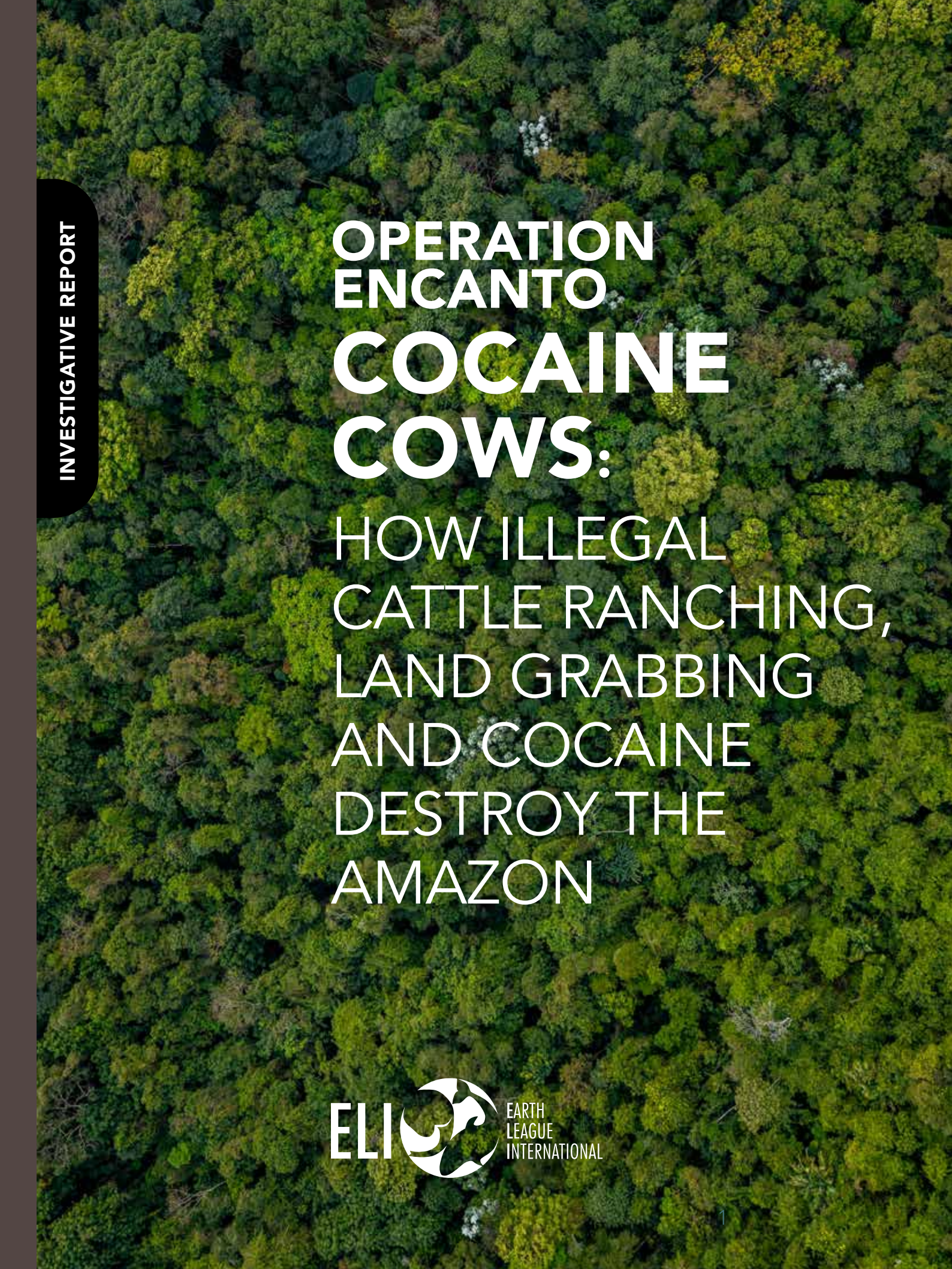


INVESTIGATIVE REPORT

OPERATION ENCANTO COCAINE COWS:

HOW ILLEGAL CATTLE RANCHING, LAND GRABBING AND COCAINE DESTROY THE AMAZON

ELI EARTH LEAGUE INTERNATIONAL

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report is produced by Earth League International. The findings, interpretations, conclusions, and views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of any partner organization.

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Citation

Byrd, N., Crosta, A., Talerico, C., McGraw, M. & Schieffelin, A. (2026). Operation Encanto Cocaine Cows: How Illegal Cattle Ranching, Land Grabbing and Cocaine Destroy the Amazon. Earth League International.

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Earth League International thanks IUCN Netherlands and Norway's International Climate and Forest Initiative (NICFI) for supporting part of the fieldwork presented in this report. Their commitment to advancing research and strengthening responses to environmental crime has been essential to this work. We are also grateful to the many other donors who supported this operation.

We thank Professor Mark Ungar of John Jay College of Criminal Justice for his crucial contribution in the field.

Finally, we thank ELI's intelligence operatives, whose identities must remain confidential. Without them, this work would not have been possible.

EARTH LEAGUE INTERNATIONAL

OPERATION ENCANTO

COCAINE COWS:

HOW ILLEGAL CATTLE RANCHING, LAND GRABBING AND COCAINE DESTROY THE AMAZON



TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY 4

INTRODUCTION: OPERATION ENCANTO AND KEY FINDINGS 6

I. ZONE 1: LAND GRABBING AND ILLEGAL CATTLE RANCHING IN META, GUAVIARE, AND CAQUETÁ DEPARTMENTS

1 Land Grabbing 10

2 Illegal Cattle Ranching 16

3 FARC Dissidents' Role in Illegal Ranching 20

II. THE CATTLE LAUNDERING MACHINE: RANCHERS, AUCTION HOUSES, INSURGENTS AND ENABLERS

1 Cattle Auction Houses 24

2 Cattle Export Companies 26

3 Cattle Sector Organizations 27

III. ZONE 2: COCA AND COCAINE IN PUTUMAYO AND AMAZONAS

1 Criminal Dynamics and Logistics Shifts in Colombian Cocaine Trafficking 28

2 Cocaine, Cattle, and Cash Ties between Zone 1 and Zone 2 31

3 Gasoline trafficking: an essential input for cocaine processing and mining 31

4 Illegal Logging 32

CONCLUSION 34

ABOUT ELI

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For over three years, Earth League International (ELI) field teams operated inside some of the most inaccessible and dangerous territory in the Colombian Amazon — national parks under the control of armed groups, jungle river corridors, and auction yards where illegally raised cattle in ostensibly protected areas — so-called jungle cattle — are laundered into legal supply chains.

Operation ENCANTO (2022 - 2025) was not a satellite study or a review of secondary sources. It was a sustained intelligence collection effort built on undercover operations, direct access to the people running illicit economies, and relationships with rangers, prosecutors, and officials who see the failures firsthand.

That access produced intelligence that is unusually granular. ELI teams met and recorded persons of interest (POIs) who buy, move, launder, and export jungle cattle. **ELI compiled a list of 315 businesses owned by dissident FARC columns inside three ostensibly protected areas — Chiribiquete, Nukak, and La Macarena — of which 230 are cattle ranches, attributable to nine separate dissident FARC (FARC-D) fronts.**[1] **ELI identified twelve entities involved in cattle laundering, only four of which were previously known to Colombia's *Fiscalía***, (public prosecutor's office). In Meta and Guaviare Departments, ELI teams travelled under FARC-D escort, and those escorts spoke openly: showing the team the ranching concentrations inside the parks, the routes cattle take, and how animals raised illegally are mixed into licensed herds and given new paperwork.

The findings describe a mature–and massive–laundering system, not opportunistic crime.

Cattle bought in the jungle for roughly $1 per kilo are auctioned for $20 — a gross of $7,220 to $10,450 per animal. A single auction house moves an estimated 500 such animals a month, **generating $3.6–$5.2 million in monthly profit.** The mechanism is simple and durable: jungle cattle are moved to licensed ranches that serve as fattening and document-laun-

dering stations, required certifications are obtained through bribery or falsified origin, and the animals enter the formal economy indistinguishable from legally reared stock. Certified exporters then carry them, or processed products from them, to markets in China, Russia, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia.

This system is not sustained by armed groups alone. It depends on ranchers, auction operators, export companies, veterinary and agricultural officials, notaries, and the sector's own trade associations. ELI documented the participation of institutions at the center of Colombia's legitimate livestock economy — evidence of regulatory capture rather than isolated wrongdoing.

Cattle and cocaine are financially and logistically fused. Coca revenue from Putumayo and Amazonas Departments is laundered through ranching in Meta, Guaviare, and Caquetá; the same rivers, roads, airstrips, and smuggled fuel serve both. The same FARC-D fronts tax both. Beyond Colombia, ELI documented the growing role of Brazilian transnational criminal organizations shifting cocaine flows toward Europe and Asia, the presence of Mexican cartel-owned cattle inside protected areas, and Chinese networks sourcing Colombian timber through identified intermediaries.

The consequences reach well beyond the Amazon. Because it is illegal to vaccinate cattle inside protected areas, the great majority of jungle cattle are never vaccinated — in some parts of Nukak, as few as one animal in sixty. In 2026, screwworm reached the United States through a parallel laundering pipeline in Central America and Mexico. **Colombia's unvaccinated jungle herd is a biosecurity exposure for every market that buys its cattle**.

Colombia passed a cattle traceability law in June 2026, partly to satisfy the EU Deforestation Regulation. Its intent is sound. But ELI's evidence shows that comparable requirements already on the books are routinely bypassed through bribery and falsified paperwork, and there is little reason to expect a new registry to succeed where the existing one has been captured.

Amazonian deforestation is usually framed as an environmental failure. The intelligence in this report shows it is **more accurately** a governance failure with an identifiable set of beneficiaries — many of them operating in plain sight, inside licensed companies and regulated institutions. They can be named, mapped, and prosecuted. This report is a step toward that identification, and toward accountability.

1 Dissident FARC fronts are those that have rejected the Colombian peace accords and refused to demobilize.

INTRODUCTION: ELI'S OPERATION ENCANTO AND KEY FINDINGS

In Operation ENCANTO, ELI's field teams spent three years in the Colombian Amazon (2022 - 2025) collecting firsthand intelligence on the criminal actors behind deforestation's main drivers: land grabbing, cattle ranching, drug cultivation and trafficking, illegal mining, and illegal logging.

Alongside all these are infrastructure projects such as road and airstrip building that support primary illicit economies and secondary ones such as gasoline trafficking. These activities are all deeply intertwined, and involved actors include Colombian armed groups, the cattle sector, foreign transnational criminal organizations (TCOs), and corrupt officials. A large proportion of these activities takes place in areas that are supposed to be protected by law, such as national parks and Indigenous territories.

ELI was able to pinpoint specific hotspots for criminal activity, identify which illegal enterprises belong to which group or person of interest (POI), and untangle some of the complex financial flows between the licit and illicit economies as they link cattle, drugs, timber, and minerals and metals. ELI's field teams were able to clearly link specific acts of environmental destruction with specific criminal enterprises, including those of groups that have been designated major TCOs or terrorist groups by the U.S. Government, such as dissident FARC columns and Brazil's biggest TCOs. **The level of detail and documentation provided by ELI's firsthand access to information adds actionable clarity to the body of research regarding the myriad environmental threats in the region**.

Dissident FARC columns (FARC-D) are deeply involved in land grabbing and illegal cattle ranching, taking advantage of territory that they still control after rejecting the 2016 peace accords. **The illegal cattle sector is lucrative on its own, but also provides ample opportunities for the FARC-D to launder money from their revenue streams that lack legal parallel markets, such as coca cultivation and cocaine production**. They are able to do this with the collaboration of actors in Colombia's licit cattle sector. The FARC-D also rely on "taxation" of the use of their controlled areas, including rivers that are essential to moving cattle from the jungle to legal ranches and auction houses where they are laundered into legal supply chains and sold at high profit.

When ELI investigated another driver of deforestation–coca cultivation–investigators were able to show how much of the proceeds from cocaine trafficking are laundered through the cattle industry. This money is reinvested in a variety of illicit economies, including illegal mining, that increases the scope and severity of ecological damage.

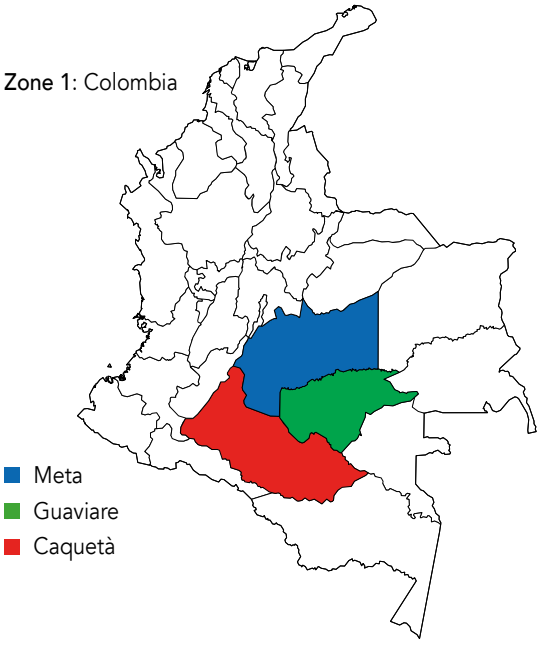
Given the breadth and complexity of criminal activity that ELI uncovered across the wide range of actors in the region, ELI returned to the field in 2026 for a follow-up to Operation ENCANTO, named Operation ANGEL. This operation expanded ELI's collection zones into Brazil and Venezuela, examined relationships between Colombian TCOs with those from other countries, and collected intelligence on these groups' collaboration on illegal mining of gold and critical minerals and on drug trafficking. ELI's expertise and contacts allowed the field teams to be in Venezuela for firsthand collection just a few months after the major shakeup caused by the extradition of President Maduro in January 2026.

ELI divided its geographic areas of focus for the two operations into four discrete zones, based on the concentration of specific illegal activities and the presence of specific criminal organizations. It is, however, essential for readers to understand that there is overlap between criminal actors and illegal activities in all four zones, as well as in neighboring countries. **The first two zones are the focus of this paper**.

ELI's Zones 1&2

In **Zone 1**, ELI investigations focused primarily on land grabs and illegal cattle ranching in areas that are designated as protected within Meta, Guaviare, and Caquetá Departments. This includes areas of interest such as Serranía de la Macarena National Park, Serranía de Chiribiquete National Park, and Nukak National Natural Reserve.

In **Zone 2**, ELI's findings were focused on coca cultivation and cocaine production, particularly along the floodplains of the Putumayo and Caquetá rivers in Putumayo and Amazonas departments. This includes Amacayacu and Río Puré National Parks and the tri-border area between Colombia, Peru, and Brazil. There is also rampant illegal mining along these rivers, which will be addressed more in-depth in the companion publication to this paper in late 2026.





ELI'S ZONES 3&4 (IN FORTHCOMING SECOND PUBLICATION)

Zone 3 covers the Colombian-Venezuela border zone (e.g., San Felipe to San Carlos) and the broader tri-border area between Colombia, Venezuela, and Brazil within Amazonas and Guainía Departments. **Zone 3** is characterized by illegal coltan and gold mining, its convergence with drug trafficking, and foreign TCO presence.

Zone 4, added in 2026 as part of Operation ANGEL after the conclusion of Operation ENCANTO, covers Venezuela's Amazonas and Bolivar states (not to be confused with Colombia's Amazonas Department) and Roraima state in Brazil.



To present ELI's intelligence as clearly as possible, the information from Operation ENCANTO and Operation ANGEL will be published in two separate papers. As previously noted, there is overlap between the various illicit economies discussed and the TCOs behind them; the division of the material into separate publications is meant to assist in conveying complex information with greater clarity.

- This first publication focuses primarily on land grabbing, illegal cattle ranching and laundering, and drug cultivation by dissident Colombian armed groups, concentrating on Zones 1 and 2 of ELI's four operational zones in Colombia.

- The second publication will focus primarily on illegal mining, its convergence with drug trafficking, and the involvement of Brazilian and Venezuelan TCOs in ELI's operational zones 3 and 4 in Colombia, Venezuela, and Brazil.

The intelligence in this report has been shared with key stakeholders and government agencies in the United States, Colombia, and Europe through a series of Confidential Intelligence Briefs (CIBs).

KEY FINDINGS FOR ZONES 1&2

1. Illegal cattle ranching continues to be the biggest driver of deforestation in the Amazon Basin, as it is both inherently profitable and a major means of laundering the proceeds of drug trafficking and other crimes. The markup on jungle cattle is large: cattle bought for $1/kg in the jungle can fetch $20/kg at auction: approximately $7,220-$10,450 in gross profit per animal. ELI sources claimed that approximately 500 head of jungle cattle are sold each month via one of Colombia's main auction houses, providing roughly $3.6-5.2 million in monthly gross profit.

2. Narcotrafficking remains the one of largest source of illegal revenue in the region. Laundered drug money provides capital for the expansion of illegal mining, ranching, and logging, fueling the acceleration of environmental devastation.

3. ELI aggregated information on 315 businesses owned by FARC dissident groups in 3 ostensibly protected areas of Colombia, including national parks. Of these, 230 were cattle ranches. Nine dissident FARC groups were identified as the owners.

4. ELI identified 12 entities involved in cattle laundering, only four of which were previously known to the Colombian *Fiscalía* (public prosecutor's office).

5. Cattle illegally raised in protected areas are laundered via registered ranches, which are also used as pre-auction weight gain staging areas. Paperwork is falsified to look as though these cattle were reared on the legitimate properties, with the collusion of ranchers, auction house employees and Colombian officials.



ELI's investigator and cattle in a protected area

6. The small proportion of jungle-raised cattle that receive vaccinations, combined with the extent of cattle laundering in Colombia, creates serious vulnerabilities from its cattle exports abroad for health threats such as screw worm.

7. Illicit economies in the Colombian Amazon–including illegal mining, drug trafficking, logging, wildlife trafficking, and gasoline trafficking–often depend on the same transit routes, making the control of rivers major points of conflict between armed groups.

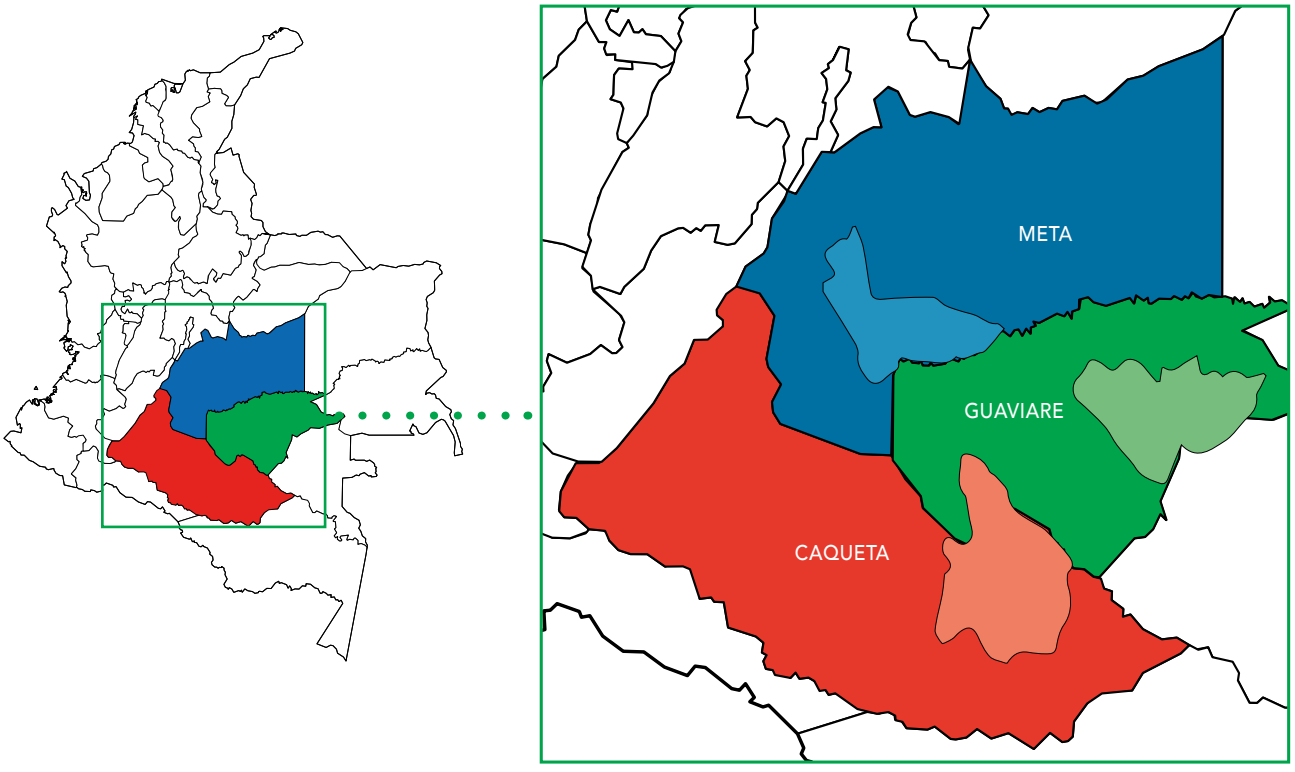
I.

ZONE 1: LAND GRABBING AND ILLEGAL CATTLE RANCHING IN META, GUAVIARE, AND CAQUETÁ DEPARTMENTS

LAND GRABBING

Land grabbing for cattle ranching and crop cultivation–primarily African palm and coca–drives deforestation in Zone 1, which includes Serranía de la Macarena National Park, Serranía de Chiribiquete National Park, and Nukak National Natural Reserve in Colombia's Meta, Guaviare, and Caquetá Departments.

Land grabbing targets state-owned parcels (*baldíos*), protected areas such as national parks and nature preserves, and privately owned land alike. Both illegal armed groups and large landowners are guilty of land grabbing and clearing



ELI's designated Zone 1 for Operation

- Serrania de la Macarena National Park
- Serrania de Chiribiquete National Park
- Nukak National Natural Reserve

on a massive scale; land then often changes hands via sales–often coerced–or violence. FARC dissident factions (FARC-D) such as the Estado Mayor Central (EMC) and the Segunda Marquetalia (SM) secure land through coerced sales, threats, or outright seizures, later formalizing ownership through notarized documents that take advantage of procedural loopholes and/or with bureaucratic collusion. They sometimes then sell the land for cash.

Both dissidents and large landowners–who often are prominent in the business community–pay locals to deforest the land. For example, sources told ELI in 2023 that the FARC-D paid families in Tinigua National Park in Meta up to 5 million pesos, or approximately $1,400, per hectare (approximately 2.5 acres) to clear land for coca cultivation. Large landowners similarly pay locals to raze forests for which they later acquire deeds through dubious means, then sell at a markup. If anyone is caught and arrested for illegally clearing land, it is those hired to do the clearing, not those bankrolling the clearing. However, even this type of arrest is relatively infrequent: the Environmental Police Division (DICAR) reported fewer than 20 arrests in 2022, primarily for logging or the possession of chain saws. Most of these individuals returned to their activities after paying small fines.

ELI: *And if we want to get a farm inside the jungle part?*

POI Sa185, whose family owns ranches in Meta and Guaviare: *That part too, there are many farms with…with water resources…There are a lot of cattle ranches, and all equipped, you just have to invest money to raise the cattle.*

ELI: *These farms can be used for other purposes? Cultivation, livestock breeding, etc.?*

POI Sa185: *Yes, all, it's already yours, you see what to do.*

The exchanges reproduced in this report are excerpts from conversations recorded by ELI field operatives during meetings with persons of interest (POIs). They have been translated from Spanish and Mandarin and lightly edited for readability; the original recordings are retained by ELI and have been made available to relevant law enforcement authorities. POIs are identified by alphanumeric code to protect ongoing investigations.

As of mid-2024, one hectare of land sold for 1 to 3 million Colombian pesos ($300 to $700 USD). A large, ready-to-use farm (already deforested, equipped with lodging and all necessary facilities), sold for $300,000 to $400,000. The more remote the cleared property, the cheaper it is, incentivizing sales and use in previously untouched parts of the forest. Poor soils mean that this land is quickly depleted, and even more areas are subsequently cleared for grazing land. Cultivation sites are being created in increasingly remote parts of the Amazon as incursions reach further, and along with this comes additional deforestation and habitat destruction from the illegal building of roads. The roads also offer wildlife poachers, loggers, and miners easier access to formerly inaccessible areas, increasing threats to ecosystems and local communities.

ELI: *The deforestation is mainly because of cattle raising?*

POI Sa185: *Yes, the majority, nowadays, some 70%, 60%...the rest, is because of illegal crops…apart from the cocoa, there is coca, coca leaves…*

ELI: *Ah, right, coca, for cocaine.*

POI Sa185: *Yes, there were a lot of laboratories, nowadays, the situation has changed a bit. There are still these crops but not like before, now it's very calm here, the majority of deforestation is due to cattle raising…people have the habit of having a giant farm and putting a lot of cattle in, after a period of time, the grass becomes bad…and does not provide nutrients.*

Land grabbing cycle



Clearing

Residents cut and burn vegetation to rapidly clear forested areas

Occupation

Settlers establish visible productive activity to demonstrate "use" in forested areas

Commercialization

Once occupation is established, corrupt officials issue ownership documents, after which the land is often sold

Corrupt notaries facilitate the formal acquisition of land using both legal and falsified land vacancies, often falsely backdating occupancy claims to take advantage of various grandfathering laws in areas that are now protected.

FARC dissidents are major actors in land grabbing in Zone 1. ELI's field teams were able to compile a list of 315 businesses owned by FARC-D within the borders of Chiribiquete, Nukak, and La Macarena. The FARC-D invest money from various criminal enterprises–not only drugs and mining, but also extortion and their taxation of passage through their controlled territories–into these businesses. The majority are cattle ranches, further discussed below. Other businesses include restaurants, gas stations, processing facilities for meat and dairy, stores, and nightclubs. **These businesses are used to launder illicit money as well as providing additional revenue streams. The laundered money is often invested in additional real estate and cattle, creating a cyclical expansion of deforestation and environmental damage**. Furthermore, the FARC-D groups have internal financial redistribution systems, by which wealthier groups sometimes subsidize less wealthy ones. Some fronts move and launder money for others as their main business activity. However, these arrangements are highly fluid as alliances and rivalries shift and sometimes turn into open conflict.

BUSINESS TYPE	COUNT
cattle ranch	230
stores (grocery, clothing, farm equipment, etc.)	33
cattle herd	10
nightclub/bar/pool hall/brothel	14
house	7
estate	5
lodging	5
gas station	5
mill	2
veterinary clinic	2
taxi company	1
cargo truck services	1
Grand Total	**315**

Table 1
A breakdown grouping the types of FARC-D businesses in the ostensibly protected areas in Chiribiquete, Nukak, and La Macarena.

FARC-D FRONT	COUNT OF FARC-D FRONT
Frente 32	67
Frente 15	50
Frente 14	45
Frente 49	43
Frente 48	39
Former Teófilo Forero Mobile Column	29
Frente 13	14
Frente 3	14
Frente 63	11
unknown	3
Grand Total	**315**

Table 2
A breakdown of business ownership concentration among difference FARC-D groups.

While illegal clearing is detectable through satellite imagery, fire-spotting, and other monitoring methods, national and local government responses face a number of challenges, allowing deforestation to continue. For example, in Guaviare, those responsible for responding to the Early Alert system are unable to travel freely within the Department without permission from the criminal actors in de facto control of the area(s).

Prosecutors told ELI that land grabbing is a difficult crime to prosecute. Wealthy landowners have land cleared in smaller parcels that are then combined, but prosecuting this requires investigations that show that all the small parcels are connected. The standard use of intermediaries and shell companies complicates efforts to identify beneficial owners who otherwise would be clear when deeds are arranged.

The lack of sufficient specialized personnel for environmental crime in key Departments–including Guaviare–further weakens enforcement. **ELI sources in the region report that the Guaviare prosecutor's office sometimes handles illegal logging cases, but not cases for land grabbing or illegal ranching**.

FARC billboard



ELI sources also explained their perception of weaknesses of various Department-level and federal agencies meant to play a part in protecting the Amazon. For example, Cormacarena, the agency responsible for approving environmental licenses for ranching, mining, and logging, grants requested permits without ground truthing with site visits. This incentivizes land grabs because those clearing it know their permits will be approved after the land has been worked for a given period of time. Cormacarena was criticized by ELI sources for being highly politicized, with little relevant expertise and frequent turnover because its positions are appointed as political patronage.

The primary environmental authority, the Corporación para el Desarrollo Sostenible del Norte y el Oriente Amazónico (CDA), holds a mandate to penalize illegal logging and fires but receives few reports per month, largely due to fear of reprisals. Allegations of rampant corruption create low public confidence and disincentivizes tip-offs. **An ELI source claimed that with enough money, permission could be obtained from the CDA to cut down 200 hectares of trees**.



Cattle ranching in a protected area.

ILLEGAL CATTLE RANCHING

Illegal cattle ranching has outpaced coca cultivation as the principal driver of forest loss in the Colombian Amazon for over a decade,[1] **though they are closely linked financially and logistically**. According to officers from DICAR, the most frequent environmental crime they encounter is illegal clearing of forest for grazing pasture. Colombia is a top exporter of cattle and cattle products, driven by the huge global demand for meat, dairy, and leather. Ranching is integral to Colombia's economy as it provides jobs for nearly half a million people and plays a particularly significant role in rural areas.[2]

Cattle are used to launder money, primarily from drugs but also from other illicit activities. Laundered drug proceeds are then used to invest in additional land and cattle, rapidly expanding the scope–and environmental damage–of this symbiotic relationship.

In addition to its prominent role in Colombia's formal economy, cattle ranching is integral to Colombia's illicit economy and its convergence with other major forms of criminal activity, both logistically and financially.

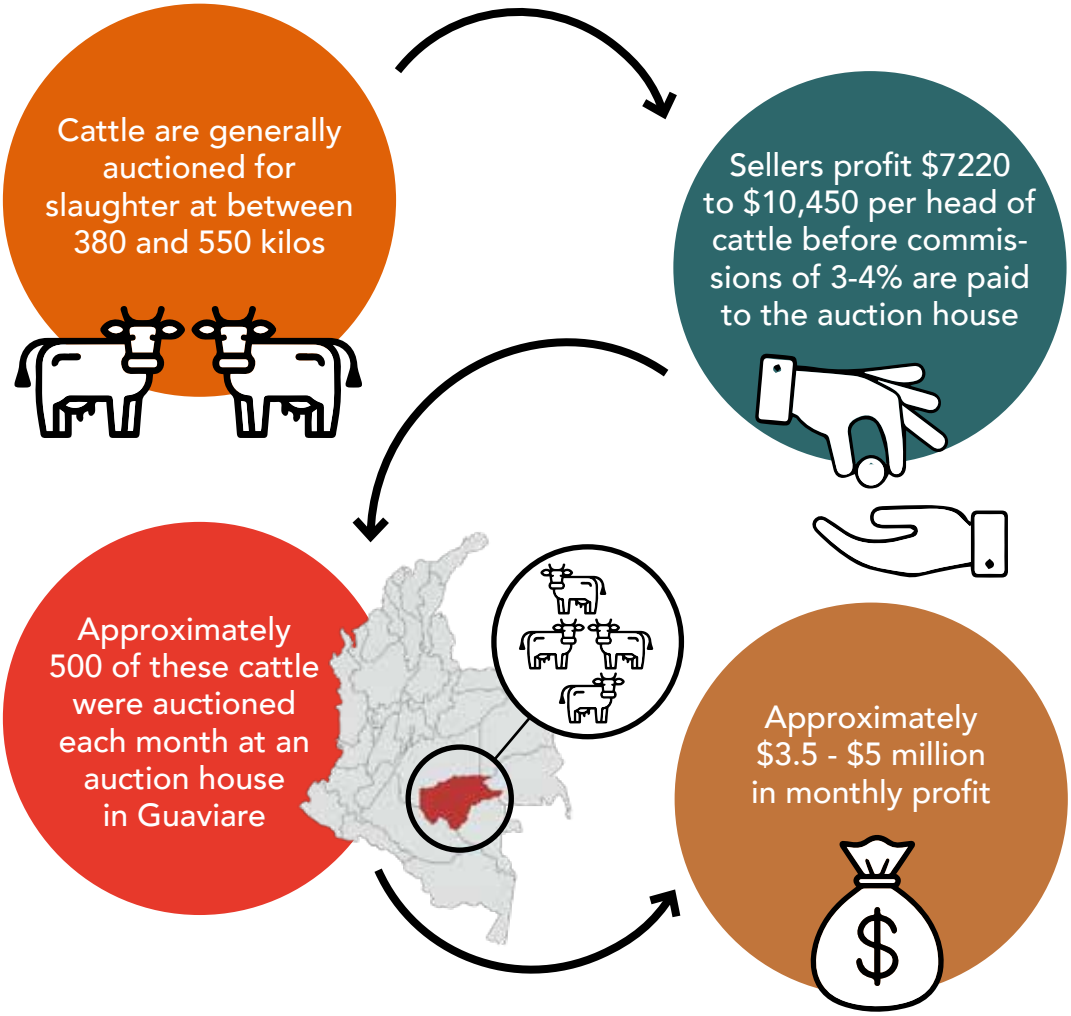
Airstrips and roads are often built in or adjacent to illegally cleared ranchland and used to move drugs, illegally mined minerals and metals, arms, fuel, and cash. **ELI's undercover operations tracked the movements of the illegal cattle and found that the same smuggling routes in the tri-border regions (Colombia-Venezuela-Brazil and Colombia-Peru-Brazil) were also used to traffic gasoline, narcotics, and illicitly harvested timber and mining products, all within ostensibly protected areas**. Even without illegal ranching's convergence with other types of crime and related money laundering, it's lucrative.

ELI sources found that "jungle cattle" sourced from areas that are meant to be protected sell for approximately $1/kg, whereas they are later auctioned for around $20/kg: a twentyfold markup.

For context, cattle are generally auctioned for slaughter at between 380 and 550 kilos, offering sellers a gross margin of roughly $7,220 to $10,450 per head of cattle before commissions of 3-4% are paid to the auction house(calculated on auction weight; the purchase weight is lower, and the report does not attempt to price the intervening year of fattening). **One ELI source reported that with approx-**

1 Garcia, Paula Andrea Sanchez & Wong, Grace Y. (2024). *The Political Economy of Deforestation in the Colombian Amazon*. Journal of Political Ecology, Vol. 31. https://journals.librarypublishing.arizona.edu/jpe/article/5230/galley/5642/view/#:~:text=Abstract,and%20pastures%20for%20cattle%20ranching

2 World Bank. (2021). *Building Pathways to Sustainable Cattle Ranching in Colombia: Why and how private sector should engage and support the sustainable transformation of cattle production in Colombia*. https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/653941623047310683/pdf/Building-Pathways-to-Sustainable-Cattle-Ranching-in-Colombia-Why-and-How-Private-Sector-Should-Engage-and-Support-the-Sustainable-Transformation-of-Cattle-Production-in-Colombia.pdf

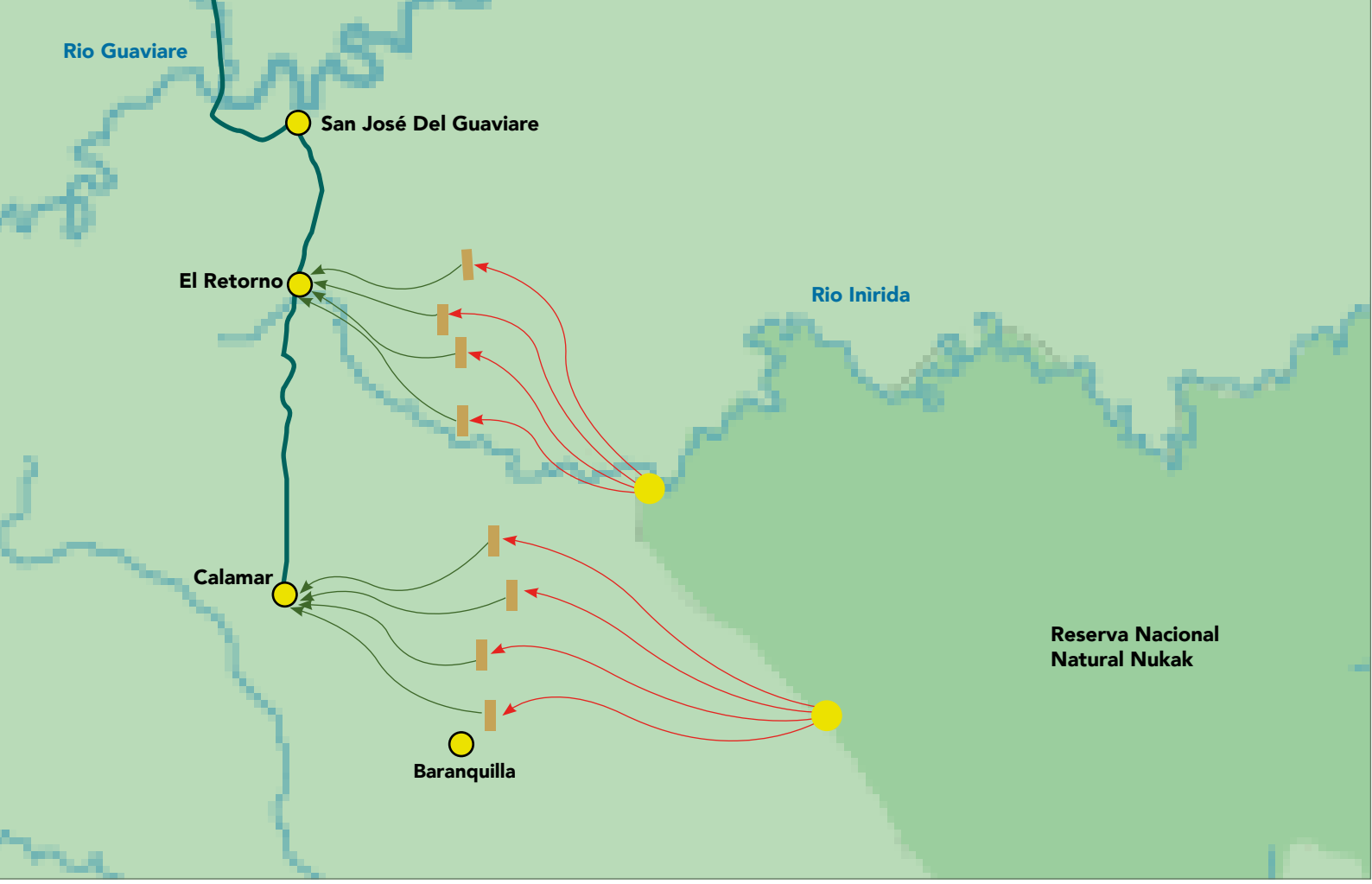


imately 500 such animals moving through a single auction house each month, this represents $3.6–5.2 million in gross monthly profit from one auction facility alone.

This profit incentivizes the laundering of illegally raised cattle through the auction system. Cattle are laundered when they are moved from illegal ranches to legally permitted ones that serve as pre-auction midway points. The jungle cattle normally stay on the licensed properties for around a year, usually from the age of two. This allows the cattle to gain weight that will raise their prices, and offers opportunity for the falsification of paperwork to make the cattle's sourcing appear legal and in compliance with Colombian Agricultural Institute (ICA) regulations.

The ICA is responsible for vaccinations, the sanitary registry, and the mobility registry that requires licenses to transport cattle, but primarily focuses on vaccinations. Sources claim that it does not investigate or share information with other agencies on cattle in protected areas, including unauthorized sales or transportation. Farmers report paying bribes for ICA certifications, and claim known guerrilla-owned cattle—identifiable by brands familiar to authorities—are routinely ignored. ICA staff allegedly tell farmers: "Give me money and I won't bother you."

As it is illegal for cattle to be vaccinated within protected areas, some ranchers bring jungle cattle to the borders of these areas for vaccinations in a compromise



Movement of jungle cattle from Nukak National Reserve to vaccination areas just outside the park, then onward to towns for aggregation, sale, and export

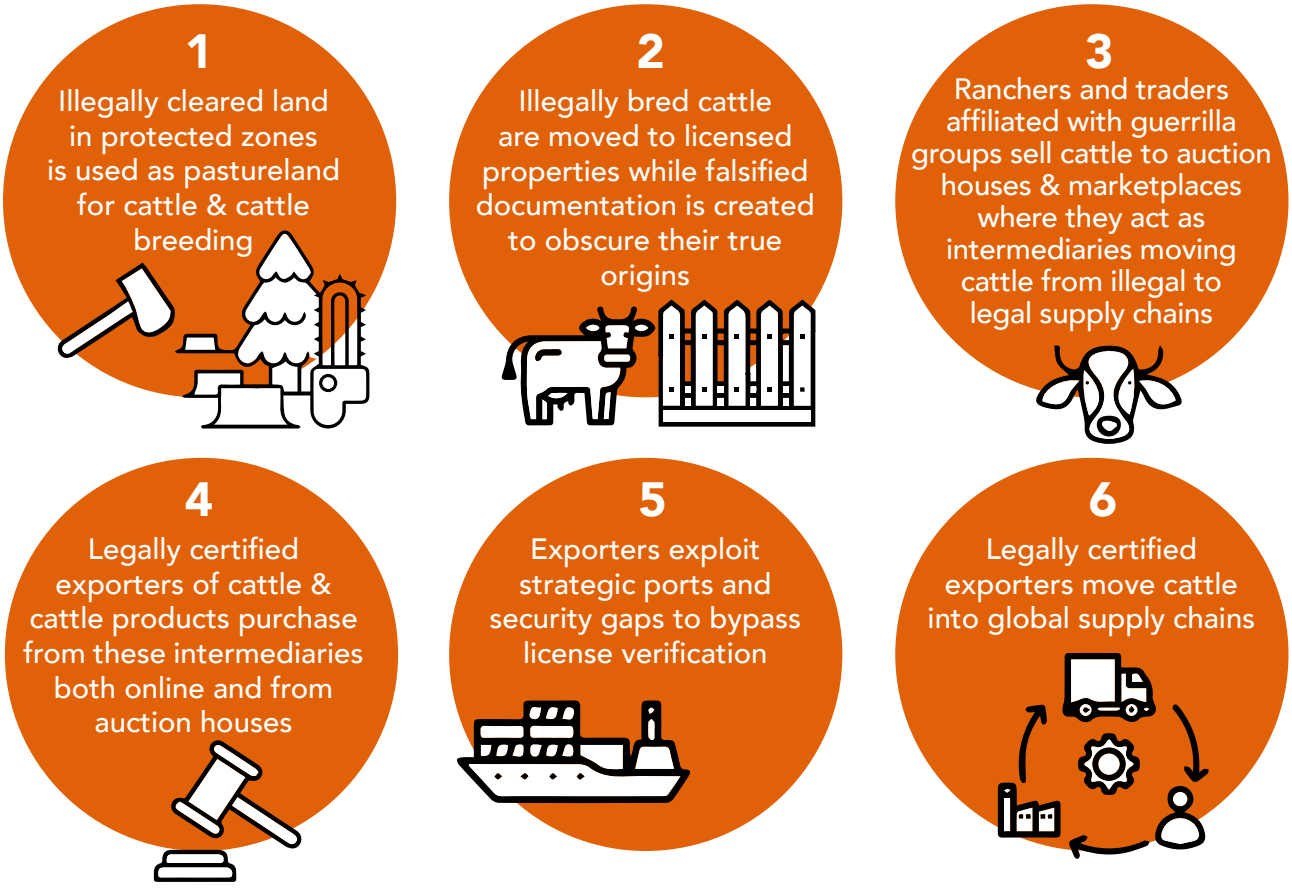
that requires ICA officials to turn a blind eye. However, even this compromise only reaches a small proportion of illegally bred cattle, creating serious vulnerabilities for the sector regarding disease. Rangers in Nukak showed ELI a map of the major smuggling routes, admitting that **in some areas, the practice of vaccinating the cattle just outside the protected areas reaches as few as 1 in 60 cattle**.

As of mid-2026, the cross-border movement of illegally raised cattle in Latin America was a growing threat for the spread of screwworm, a flesh-eating parasite that can also infect humans and other species, including threatened wildlife.[3] [4] The media reported in June 2026 that screwworm had reached the U.S. via Mexico, which often illegally imports contraband cattle reared in the protected areas of northern Central America. InSight Crime described how the corrupt purchase of ear tags and falsified papers facilitates the laundering of illegally reared Central American cattle into Mexico, which has struggled in recent years to combat parasitic outbreaks that have moved steadily north. The parallels provide a clear warning of what the continued proliferation of unvaccinated jungle cattle in Colombia could do to its ranching industry, and people and animals in countries receiving its laundered cattle exports.[5]

3 Shamim, Sarah. (4 June 2026). *First US screwworm case in 60 years: Should America be worried?* Al Jazeera. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2026/6/4/first-us-screwworm-case-in-60-years-should-america-be-worried

4 https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/eid/article/31/9/25-0339_article

5 Asmann, Parker. (5 June 2026) *First US Screwworm Case Spotlights Contraband Cattle in Mexico.* Insight Crime. https://insightcrime.org/news/first-us-screwworm-case-contraband-cattle-mexico/



The lifecycle of illegal cattle rearing, laundering, and exporting

ELI sources also discussed how corruption facilitates the granting of transport licenses, with falsified places of origin on documents. A few of ELI's sources pointed to the same ICA employee for assistance with this falsification. While ICA officials in Guaviare admitted to ELI that there are large numbers of cattle outside their databases, they flatly refused to admit cattle ranching in Nukak and Chiribiquete national parks, despite visual evidence of cattle being moved along the road between them. This means there are large discrepancies between government records and claims and what sources involved in ranching in the Department told ELI. For example, the ICA says that 90% of cows are exported live by foot to Villavicencio, but local farmers say many are from Nukak or Chiribiquete and traded or slaughtered in Guaviare.

Sources in Meta admitted that there is more illegal ranching by criminal groups in the Department than there is legal ranching. As of early 2024, there were an estimated 120,000 cows in protected areas in Meta's southwest that include Macarena and Tinigua national parks. While cattle populations in the parks increased between early 2024 and mid-2025–one source claimed the number in Zone 1 nearly tripled– violent conflicts between FARC-D factions and theft had resulted in a decrease by early 2026.

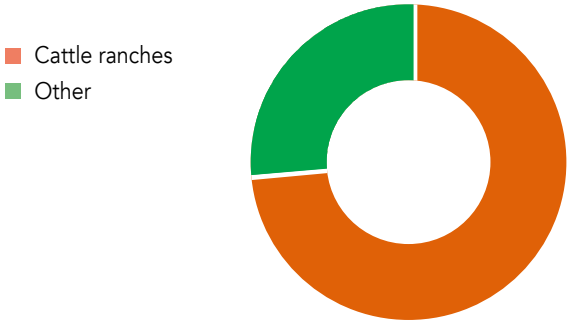
6 Radwin, Maxwell. (9 June 2026). *Colombia passes landmark cattle traceability law to combat illegal deforestation*. MongaBay. https://news.mongabay.com/short-article/2026/06/colombia-passes-landmark-cattle-traceability-law-to-combat-illegal-deforestation/

7 Patrick, Igor. (10 April 2026). *Brazil on track to fill China beef export quota by May as prices hit all-time high*. South China Morning Post. https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3349571/brazil-track-fill-china-beef-export-quota-may-prices-hit-all-time-high

None of this bodes well for the success of the new cattle traceability law that Colombia's legislature passed in June 2026, in part to be able to meet the requirements of the EU's Deforestation Regulation.[6] While the intent is laudable, it's unclear how enhanced monitoring and due diligence such as registries and movement controls will be implemented when existing requirements–some of which are quite similar–are not being enforced. In addition, in early 2026, the press reported that Brazil was set to meet its annual beef export quotas to China by May, suggesting that China may turn to countries such as Colombia to meet unmet demand,[7] adding additional possible drivers to illegal ranching expansion.

FARC DISSIDENTS' ROLE IN ILLEGAL CATTLE RANCHING

As noted, the majority of the FARC-D enterprises that ELI investigated in the protected areas of Zone 1 were cattle ranches.



Cattle ranches accounted for the majority of FARC-D owned businesses: 230 out of 315

FARC-D obtain cattle via both purchasing and stealing, then breed them on the illegally cleared land. The groups run some ranches directly; others are given to locals to run in return for profit-sharing and taxation per head of cattle. In places such as Mapiripán, Meta Department, sources report that around 80% of campesinos are involved in ranching, paying taxes to FARC-D of around 30,000 pesos ($8) per head of cattle per year. In Nukak, the guerrillas collect 20,000 pesos (approximately $5) per head of cattle per year from communities not ranching on FARC-affiliated properties.

The FARC-D groups use their territorial control to control and charge for use of key transit infrastructure, some built, and some natural such as rivers under their domain. This provides another way to profit from the illegal ranching boom, as everyone needs to be able to move their livestock to market.

ELI: *And they have to walk the cattle on foot from the jungle to the river for 8 hours?*
Sa120, a cattle auction coordinator: *The good thing is that it's cheap. What increases the cost is transportation. That is what increases the value per kilo. You have to pay 5 or 6 cowboys for a week etc.*
ELI: *After 8 hours they arrive at the boat. Is the boat in a small town?*
Sa120: *Yes. It is called.... I forgot the name.. Miraflores. The town is a little bit dangerous, don't go around. You probably won't come back.*
ELI: *From Miraflores to Calamar it's 36 hours?*
Sa120: *36 hours on boat. After Calamar, it's 12 hours on the track to here. It is about 3 or 4 days of travelling.*

ELI: *If we purchase these cattle, every month we can have supply from San José del Guaviare?*
POI Sa120: *Yes, I do this every month. But the owners of these boats are the guerrillas. So you have to pay them a tax in order to take out these cows.*
ELI: *Do you pay taxes, or the owners pay?*

POI Sa120: *Everyone. The owners and I. We both have to pay of course, because they control the transit of the rivers. Those are the main ways to get into the jungle.*

ELI: *As a buyer, how much do you have to pay per cattle to the guerrilla?*

POI Sa120: *Let's calculate in USD. Right now we have to pay 4 dollars for the whole route to Calamar. From the jungle to Calamar. There is army and police, everything. So, you don't have to pay anything else.*

ELI: *So we don't have to pay the army or the police? Only the guerrillas, 4 dollars per cattle?*

POI Sa120: *No, only the guerrillas. The cattle are of perfect quality.*

POI Sa120 further clarified payments to boat owners who transport the cattle out of the remote areas must be made in full and through their bank accounts. Because of the number of cattle in the parks relative to the amount that could be transferred at a time, and the rapid expansion of cattle populations in the parks, Sa120 saw the purchase of additional boats as an investment opportunity, telling ELI in 2023 that he was planning to buy additional boats to help build a daily supply chain of cattle from the jungle.

Sa120: *There is way too much. Because the access is very little, so all these cows can't come out at the same time. Imagine having 20,000 animals over there and taking out each week like 60 cows. You will never gonna finish.*

ELI: *Each week you can only take out 60 cows?*

Sa120: *In my case, yes. Let's take the example that there are 10 people like me. 10 times 60, 600 cows. And there are 20,000 cows over there, divided by 600, you can take them all out in 32 weeks.*

Sa120: *We can provide about 500 cattle here from the jungles per month.*

In some areas, ELI sources reported that FARC-D even partners with Brazilian TCOs to smuggle Brazilian cattle into Colombia via rivers to fatten them on high quality Colombian pastures, then moves them back into Brazil to sell at higher profit. FARC-D columns involved in ranching openly advertise for investors, Colombians and foreigners alike, even constructing billboards in the jungle.

Approximately 25 years ago, the FARC constructed an illicit route known as the *trocha ganadera* ("cattle trail"), designed to facilitate the movement of livestock, coca, weapons, and personnel across the region. Today, this route continues to serve as a key conduit for moving cattle from national parks and forest reserves to markets that allow entry into supply chains.

Illegal road building continues to proliferate, causing additional deforestation and fragmenting habitats. The PNN is aware of illegal roads throughout the region, but they remain open and used due to a combination of corruption and poor cooperation between authorities at local, Department, and federal levels. In Guaviare, a local official pointed out to ELI that the road between Calamar and Chiribiquete – a major cattle and narcotrafficking route – was carved in just four months while officials looked the other way. During ELI's departure from La Macarena (Meta), operatives observed trucks collecting cattle directly in town—animals that, according to local sources, had been brought in from protected areas earlier that day.

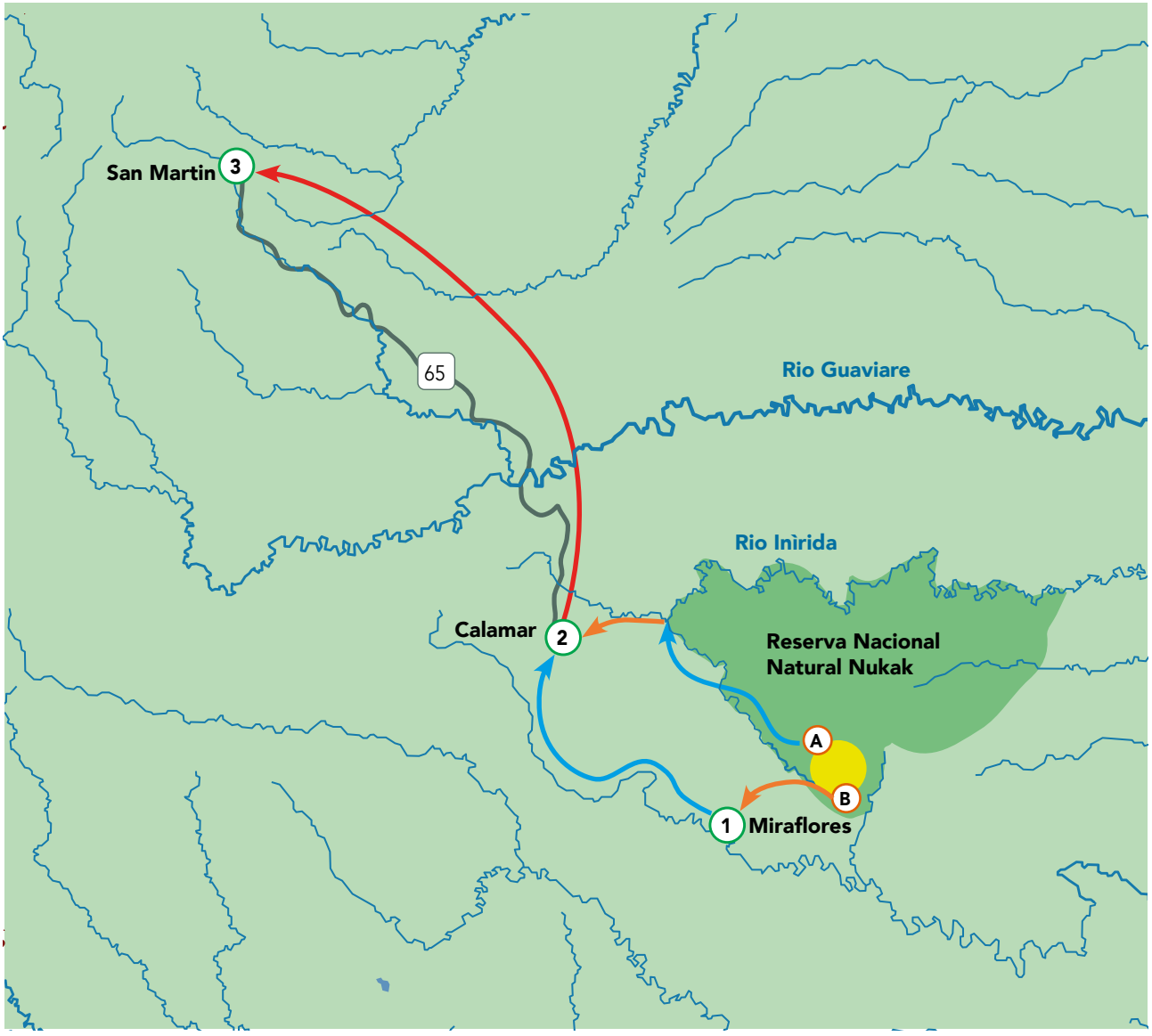
Two routes from the illegal farms inside Nukak National Reserve:

(A) Cattle travel up the Inírida River → to the reserve's northwest boundary. → From the boundary, they travel on foot to Calamar.

(B) Cattle travel 8 hours on foot → to (1) Miraflores. From Miraflores, they travel 36 hours by boat → up the Vaupés River to Calamar.

(2) From Calamar, cattle travel 12 hours along Highway 65 → to the farm of Person of Interest Sa120.

(3) The auction house is a 40-minute drive from San Martín.



Illegal Jungle Farms

Walking Route
River Route
Driving Route

POI Sa185: *"They are constructing highway right now, they are constructing, but, with a lot of problems, because of the deforestation."*

ELI: *"This is legal?"*

POI Sa185: *"No, illegal."*

ELI: *"This project is not of the government?"*

POI Sa185: *"No, the people nearby, they are very rich, because of the stock raising. They, by themselves, construct the roads."*

ELI: *"For cattle breeding?"*

POI Sa185: *"For cattle breeding, for building more farms, and for communicating the farms which are now far away."*

ELI: *"Interesting... Who constructs these roads, the farmers?"*

POI Sa185: *"The farmers."*

During ELI's time in Meta Department, the team received permission from the FARC-D to travel, accompanied by a "guide" at all times while in Macarena National Park. The guide showed the team the roads used within the parks to move cattle to town, and participated in discussions with ELI and *Parques Nacionales Naturales* (PNN) officials.

Similarly, when traveling in the Nukak area, ELI was accompanied by a "guide" while meeting with park rangers, government officials, and representatives of the Nukak Indigenous Community. **Here, too, the FARC-D representative was a candid participant in discussions**, showing ELI the most concentrated ranching areas in the park, the routes used to move cattle in and out, and even explaining how jungle cattle were mixed with cattle from licensed ranches and laundered, then transported to San José del Guaviare. The Inirida River is often used for transportation, and the mixed lots of cattle are aggregated in Calamar and El Retorno for their access to a national highway.



Cattle being transported through a national park in Meta Department

ELI was not allowed into Tinigua Park, receiving a written warning from a representative of the FARC-D 40th Front. Tinigua is the most deforested national park in Meta, having lost approximately a third of its forests since 2018, primarily due to land grabbing and illegal ranching. Locals told the team that the 40th front, which is in control in the area, required that they cut trees on the sides of the road. The FARC dissidents have a great deal of control over deforestation in their areas, and have at some times and places ordered locals at times to cut down the trees and at other times and places have ordered them not to cut any trees, depending on their goals. For example, orders to not cut trees have occurred when they want their operations or movements to be more difficult to detect from the air.

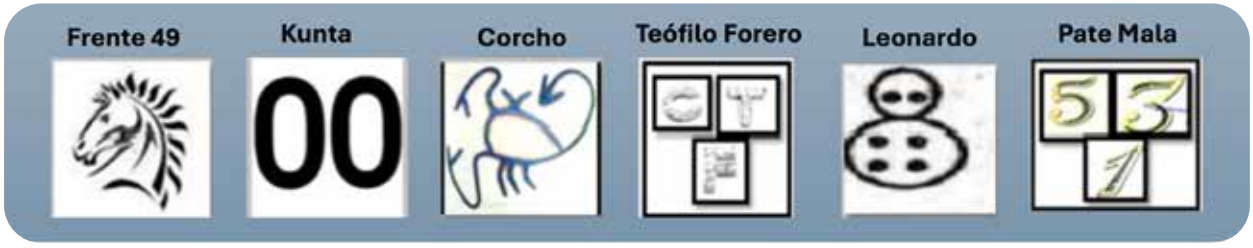
II.

THE CATTLE LAUNDERING MACHINE: RANCHERS, AUCTION HOUSES, INSURGENTS, AND ENABLERS

ELI's team identified 12 entities–POIs or companies–involved in cattle sales and exports that are complicit in cattle laundering, which tripled the number of complicit companies involved in cattle laundering known to the Colombian *Fiscalía*. Crimes included false invoicing and ghost exports, bribery and illicit enrichment, and possible money laundering. While certain details have been reserved for authorities, the information below clearly shows how cattle laundering in the Amazon works and the key actors involved. **ELI witnessed the sale of cattle marked with known guerrilla brands**.

CATTLE AUCTION HOUSES

A POI identified by ELI, Sa120, is affiliated with a cattle auction house, Company Z, systematizing jungle cattle laundering by purchasing them via informal means. Company Z is Colombia's largest live cattle auction company with operations in northern Colombia, a major facility in Montería, Córdoba Department and planned expansions to Puerto Lopez, Costa Rica, Mexico, and the USA. Company Z sells live cattle via in-person auctions and online platforms, including to Colombia's two authorized exporters and another company that is not licensed to export beef but does. Some of Company Z's other clients include major supermarket chains.



Examples of known cattle brands used by guerrilla groups

Company Z is the only company known to ELI that is systematically "officializing" jungle cattle by falsifying documentation, including ICA certificates that point to collusion with local ICA officials. Agreements to buy the cattle are made verbally or through WhatsApp, and Company Z and other companies rely on operators who bring the animals to the buyers' farms in permitted areas. Participants are careful to put nothing in writing and do not sign contracts, relying on trust. However, payments to boat owners and transporters are made via bank transfers, in advance, offering a potential information source for law enforcement.

POI Sa120: *If we agree on $1.50 per kilo we can make sure it sells at this price and that's why I am there. I am the hammer. I will also take care of the paperwork like ICA…*

According to Sa120, his role is to coordinate the extraction of the substantial cattle supply in deeper jungle areas and facilitate their movement toward market entry points, in part by using his own ranch and those of other local ranchers as the midpoint stations for fattening and laundering. Sales volumes at these auctions have increased significantly over the past three years, rising from approximately 50 animals to between 500 and 600 animals per auction. As of 2024, Company Z could sell about 500 cattle per month from the jungle areas.



Fattened cattle at auction

Company Z does not have legal authorization to sell cattle outside the country. This issue is solved by formally selling the animals to export companies like Company B, which acts as an intermediary with the buyers and takes care of shipping the cattle.

ELI: *Did you go to that jungle to see the ranches there?*

POI Sa120: *They sent me the videos to show me the cattle that they were to sell me. The only way to communicate there is through cellphone with WhatsApp. The cattle are all over there. Look at that grass. The cattle are fattened and wild. These cattle are still little ones. They are very calm. Look at their attitude. A piece of meat from these cattle is delicious. It is totally natural.*

POI Sa120: *I have my people living there and I call them to source the cows…we take the risks as the cows there have quality. In the jungles there are a lot of animals, but those owners don't have companies and don't pay any tax and it's totally illegal.*

POI Sa120: *My farm you will visit later today has over 40 percent cattle from the jungle. The other 60 percent are from my genetic breeding here… if these jungle cows are put in my farm for a while, I can then change their origin to my farm here… The jungle cows can be changed to here or anywhere in ICA… The slaughterhouses don't care about the origin. As long as there is a license, they are fine.*



CATTLE EXPORT COMPANIES

There are two certified exporters that ELI's sources shared information about:

- **Company B** is a company authorized to export frozen meat from Colombia with its main markets in East Asia and Russia.

- **Company C** is a company authorized to export live cattle with its main markets in the Middle East.

ELI uncovered connections between these legally certified exporters and the purchasing and laundering of illegally bred cattle from guerrilla controlled protected areas into legal markets. Because it is not certified to export, Company Z goes through Company B and Company C in order to bypass direct licensing. Our sources discovered that Company B purchases 60 to 80 cattle a week from Company Z.

Company D is a major beef processor/slaughter company with plants in cattle-producing regions including the Orinoquía region, operating as a livestock company with slaughterhouses in four locations. It uses generic export codes to export both live cattle and frozen meat, primarily to the Middle East, with emerging markets in Southeast Asia and has been trying to enter the Chinese market.



Cattle ranching facility in a protected area.

According to ELI's sources, they may also be purchasing livestock from Company Z with unverified export licenses. In 2022 alone, Company D exported more than 340,000 calves and tons of processed meat to Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and more recently, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Chile. Company D used the Cartagena and Buenaventura ports, despite the higher costs, due to their strategic value for Asian routes. According to ELI sources, Company D has expansion plans targeting Indonesia, Hong Kong, Macao, and eventually mainland China.

CATTLE SECTOR ORGANIZATIONS

Another POI identified by ELI, Sa129, was a Department-level agricultural official and has connections to a Colombian association for cattle breeders and according to ELI sources, a primary node for trading illegally bred cattle. The association acts as a trader for cattle companies, organizes an annual cattle fair, and runs an online marketplace for members to list and sell cattle and other agricultural products. **The association's role is to act as an intermediary between cattle ranchers, meat processing plants, export companies, and feedlots, facilitating transactions that involve both legally and illegally bred cattle according to ELI's sources**.

According to POI Sa129, it works in conjunction with a private livestock federation. This cooperation not only indicates the presence of illegal cattle trading occurring within officially recognized and legitimate livestock institutions, but Sa129's previous role as a top agriculture official further underscores potential regulatory capture within the cattle industry, suggesting systematic issues, rather than isolated wrongdoings. **By acting as a central enabler of illegal cattle trade, the association appears to facilitate and normalize the circulation of illegally bred cattle through formal supply chains, increasing the difficulty of detection and enabling large scale distribution**. Another POI, Sa128, a former high-level agricultural official, implied to ELI that the federation controls illegal cargo exported with the cattle/cattle products, such as cocaine.

> While news reports have indicated the presence of drugs onboard ships moving livestock to the Middle East–including on ships where all livestock were left to die–ELI cannot independently verify who was responsible for the narcotics in these instances.

According to POI Sa121, who is affiliated with a farmers' committee in Meta, Buenaventura port on the Pacific Coast is optimal for exports to Asia, despite a higher cost due to less ship traffic than on the Atlantic side. Exports from the Atlantic side need to first transit the Panama Canal to head to East Asian markets.

In addition to the abundant evidence of financial convergence between cattle and cocaine, there is evidence of logistical convergence as well. For example, in January 2023, Spanish police intercepted and seized a shipment of cocaine concealed within cattle feed silos aboard a livestock export vessel bound for Lebanon.[1] POI Sa129, previously identified as having connections to both the association and the federation, acknowledged this link during our discussion, stating:

POI Sa129: *So in this case, [the federation] stepped out to announce that they knew nothing about the cargo, etc. So, there is good business, but one cannot be too cautious. And [they] can help you, you need to contact them.*

1 General Directorate of the Police. (2023, January 28). *A cargo ship carrying 4,500 kilos of cocaine from Colombia was intercepted west of the Canary Islands*. https://www.policia.es/_es/comunicacion_prensa_detalle.php?ID=15246#

III.

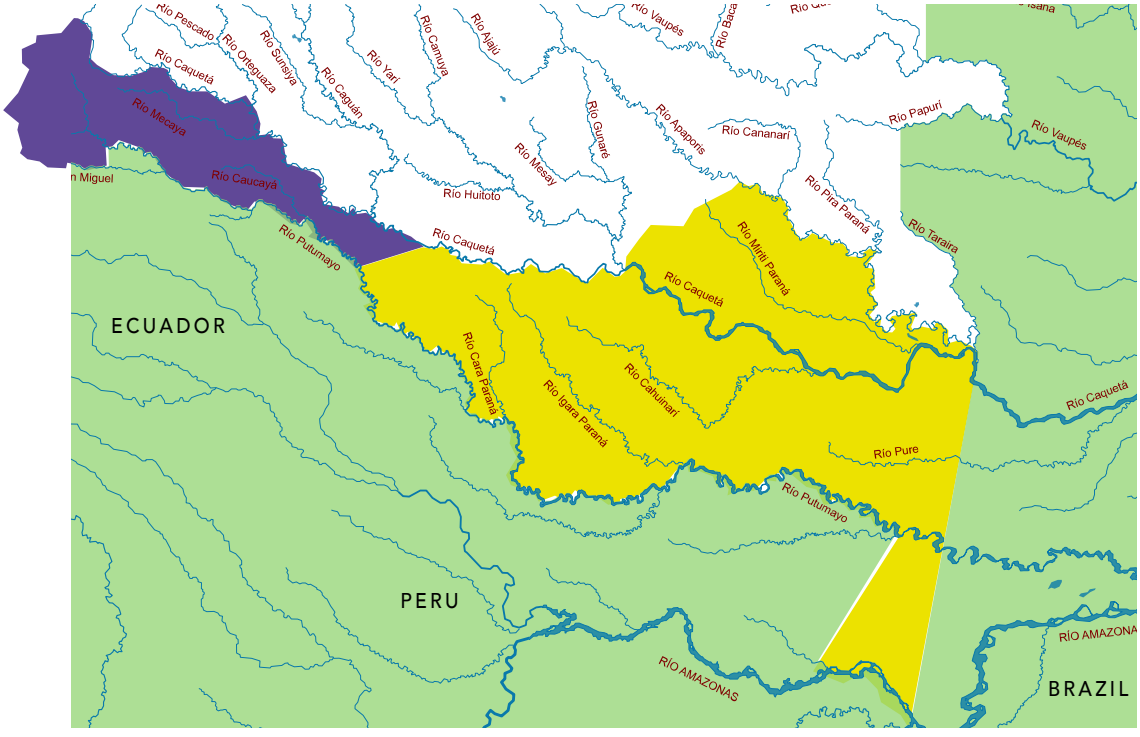
ZONE 2: COCA AND COCAINE IN PUTUMAYO AND AMAZONAS

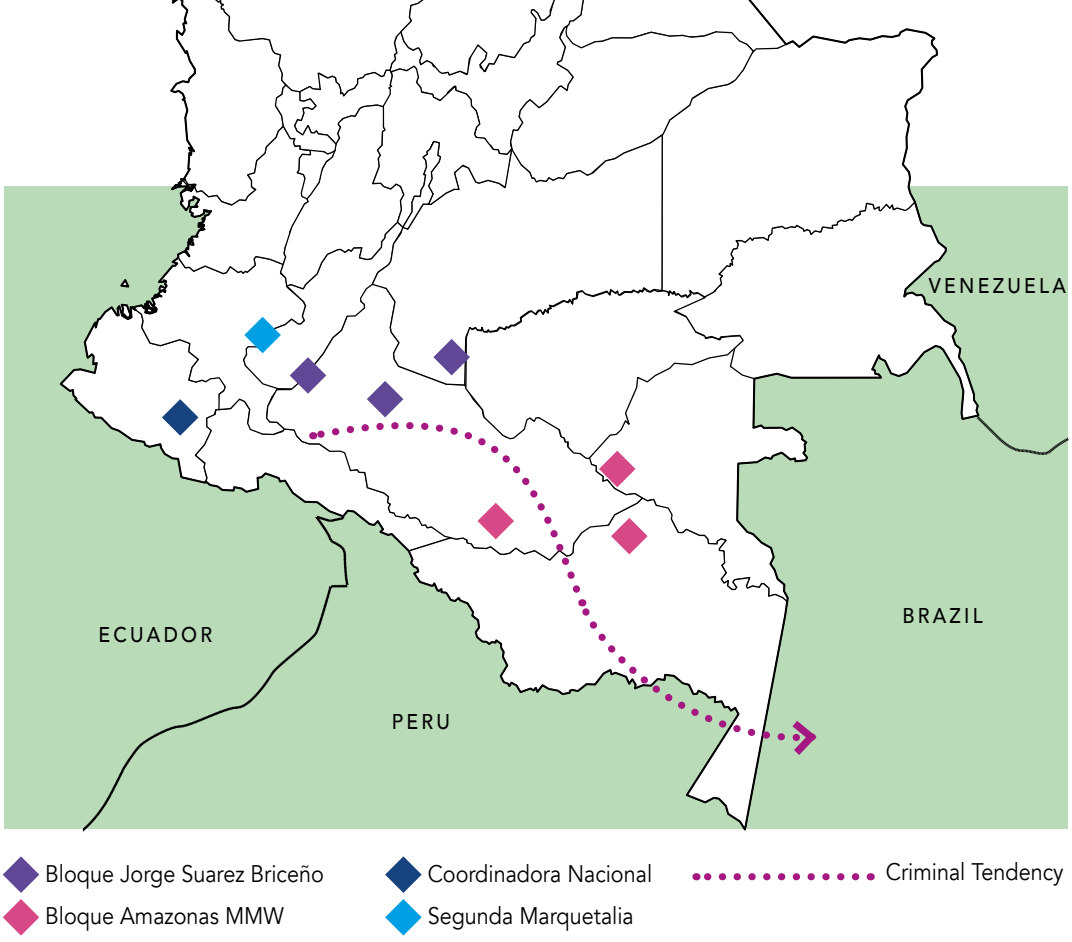
CRIMINAL DYNAMICS AND LOGISTICS SHIFTS IN COLOMBIAN COCAINE TRAFFICKING

Zone 2 is Colombia's focal point for the cultivation of coca and its processing into cocaine base or cocaine HCl (powder cocaine) for export. Putumayo Department in particular has one of Colombia's highest concentrations of coca production, given its strategic location along two major rivers (the Putumayo and Caquetá rivers) and bordering Ecuador, Peru, and Brazil. However, this and 40 years of control by the FARC and now FARC-D groups mean that there is also heavy Colombian military presence, which has displaced some activity, pushing it outward.



ELI sources report that there are now high levels of coca cultivation in the Colombia-Peru-Brazil tri-border area that have been established over just the past few years, partly as a result of displacement from joint Colombian-Ecuadorian military operations in traditional cultivation zones along the Ecuadorian border. Because of enforcement pressure, cultivation and processing have primarily been moving to the southeast toward the Brazilian border. In some cases, this causes clashes between different criminal networks, primarily different FARC-D groups.





Criminal Tendency toward Brazil

As of mid-2026, law enforcement and environmental pressures (flooding) on the Putumayo had also largely displaced drug logistics from the Putumayo to the Caquetá River further north and increased its tactical importance. Because of this, as of spring 2026, 3 different FARC-D groups were fighting each other for control of the Caquetá. These same pressures have pushed some coca cultivation north toward the Caquetá as well, but to a lesser degree than cultivation spread to the southeast.

A number of TCOs from the region have interests in the cocaine produced here, including several FARC-D groups, the Brazilian TCOs Comando Vermelho (CV) and Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC), Clan del Golfo, and Mexican cartels.

Previously, Mexican cartels purchased most of the cocaine, then sent it north to U.S. markets from South America's Pacific coast. However, over the past decade, growing involvement by the CV and PCC in shipping cocaine to European and Asian markets–where street value is much higher than in North America–began to shift more of these flows, and as of mid-2026 sizable amounts of cocaine were being shipped to Brazil via the Putumayo and Caquetá rivers. In addition to selling cocaine in Brazil's own sizable domestic market, Brazilian TCOs maintain relationships with groups from the Balkans, China, and Italy to move this cocaine into markets in Europe and Asia, usually via the ports in Manaus and Santos. **According to ELI's sources, a number of factors make sales and shipments to Brazil a more attractive proposition**:

1. Pressure from the U.S. regarding cocaine that moves north to U.S. markets
2. Increased counternarcotics cooperation between Ecuador and Colombia
3. Significantly higher prices for cocaine in European and especially Asian markets: as of spring 2026, cocaine prices in Asia were 3-4 times higher than in the U.S.

ELI sources mentioned that some Mexican drug cartels are also involved in coca cultivation and cocaine production in Zone 2, and illegal cattle ranching that is used to launder drug money in Zone 1, but they were notably less forthcoming about these than about the FARC-D groups. Nonetheless, **ELI learned that Nukak is a major area for cattle owned by the Sinaloa Cartel and Cártel Jalisco Nueva Generación (CJNG). Both CJNG and Sinaloa are known for their efforts to control their entire supply chains, including logistics within Colombia**. Traditionally, Sinaloa has worked with the Clan de Golfo, whose roots are as a right-wing paramilitary group, and CJNG has worked with the FARC. Where Clan del Golfo does not have a presence in the south of Colombia, the FARC-D are the main sellers to all parties.

As of mid-2026, Sinaloa and CJNG's fighting within Mexico had extended to Colombia, given pressures from law enforcement, shifting territories, and increasing competition from the Brazilian TCOs. However, sources were skeptical of imminent clashes between Mexican and Brazilian TCOs, noting that they preferred to compete on prices, especially given that the PCC and CV are very close to their home base while the representatives of the Mexican TCOs do not have a sufficiently large presence in Colombia to challenge them. **ELI sources reported that a number of TCOs were holding negotiations in Tabatinga/Leticia as of May 2026 (Note: these twin cities form a borderless area between Colombia and Brazil)**.

POI Sa120: *Those jungle guys know the art of breeding as it's an old culture. I don't know the name of the cartel, but FARC is guerrilla. I don't ask them any of these questions as I don't care. The less you know about their world, the better. The less information we know about these guys, the better and safer for us. Also, for you… and for everyone. They are very dangerous people.*

Just north of Zone 2, high volumes of coca are brought into Colombia from northern Peru for processing by Colombian cocaine labs. Peruvian and Colombian TCOs take advantage of Indigenous communities' legal rights under Peruvian law to cultivate coca, pushing them for large-scale production. These communities bring the coca over the border on foot due to the density of the jungle along the border. A FARC-D group known as the Border Commandos (48th Front) has longstanding ties to narcofamilies in Peru, though the pressure pushing activities southeast toward Brazil is creating challenges to this from other FARC-D groups. **According to ELI sources, all**

Plastic drug bags bearing the initials of local criminal groups







cocaine processing from coca to cocaine base (aka pasta) is done within Colombia. While much refining from the base into powder (HCl) cocaine is also done in Colombia, the Brazilian TCOs also buy base and have the capability to process it into powder cocaine at high purity rates in Brazil. Cocaine or base that is processed from coca brought from Peru is done as close to Brazil as possible for easier transport, further augmenting the shift to the southeast from further up the Putumayo region.

COCAINE, CATTLE, AND CASH TIES BETWEEN ZONE 1 AND ZONE 2

Coca is also cultivated in Zone 1 and processed into cocaine, though not at the same volume as in Zone 2. The coca-rich areas of Zone 2 are the origin of much of the money laundered via cattle in Zone 1. **The drug trade converges with the illegal cattle both logistically and financially throughout both areas**. Zone 2 contains many of the factories that process products from the cattle in Zone 1 that are not auctioned there, such as dairy products and leather, offering additional money laundering venues and revenue.

Competing FARC-D groups fight over territory and routes. As of mid-2026, the Estado Mayor Central (EMC), a federation of nine dissident FARC groups, was engaged in violent clashes with the Estado Mayor de Bloques y Frentes (EMBF), with both groups seeking to control the movement of coca to the Venezuelan border. On 28 May 2026, a skirmish between rival FARC-D groups left at least 48 guerrillas dead, according to press reports.[1]

GASOLINE TRAFFICKING: AN ESSENTIAL INPUT FOR COCAINE PROCESSING AND MINING

Gasoline trafficking

The role of gasoline trafficking in powering the illicit economies with which it converges cannot be overstated. ELI mapped the fuel smuggling system:

1. Gasoline legally arrives at stations located on the Colombian side of the Amazon river.

2. Gasoline is then bought by local people who are part of criminal groups in the area, complying with the maximum limit of 20 gallons per person.

3. Gasoline is then taken to storage ships—three of which were identified by ELI—where it is packed into large blue containers to then be sent to drug traffickers and illegal miners. Armed FARC-D members tax gasoline entering the cocaine lab and illegal mining areas.



1 https://www.dw.com/es/enfrentamiento-entre-guerrillas-deja-48-muertos-en-colombia/a-77338396

ILLEGAL LOGGING

Alongside the clearing of land is of course timber trafficking, given the value of many Amazonian species and their corresponding scarcity except in protected areas. In Departments such as Putumayo, Amazonas, and Caquetá, many rural and Indigenous communities often have sustainable development plans that they manage with authorities, but these groups and areas are vulnerable to threats and incursions by criminal groups. Loggers target species such as palo vaca (*Couma macrocarpa)* and saith (*Licania* spp.), which are low-quality softwood, to high-value hardwoods like cedar (*Cedrela odorata)* and achapo blanco (*Cedrelinga cateniformis)*.



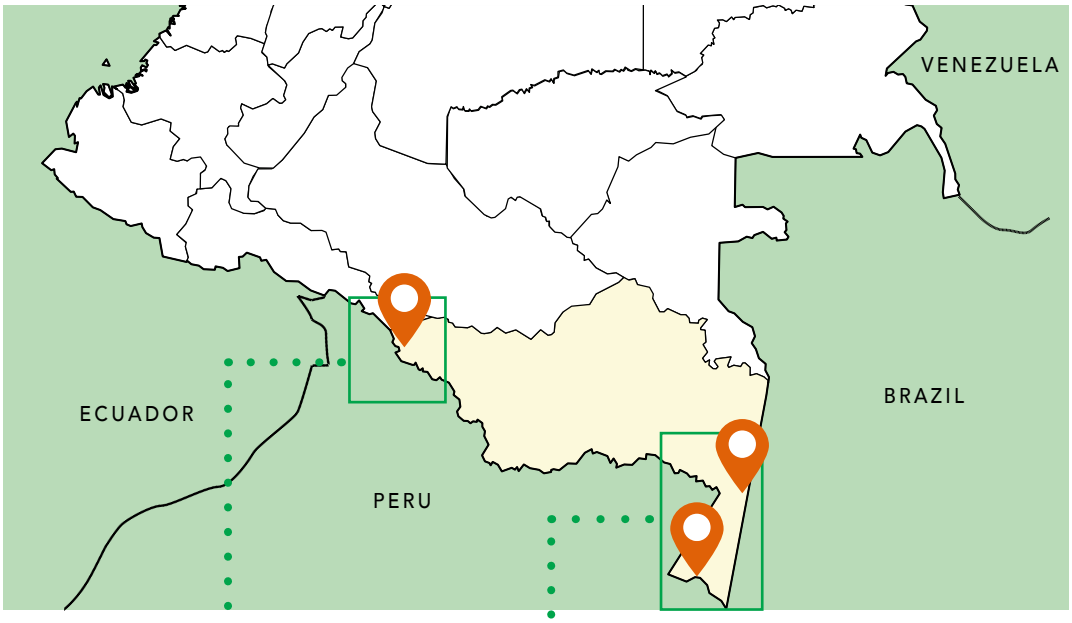
In Zone 2, **ELI documented the multi-crime use of logging boats and trucks, with timber routes overlapping with transnational smuggling corridors into Peru and Brazil** (Type 3 convergence). Illegal logging in Colombia also happens concurrently with illegal mining, particularly gold mining, which is equally destructive and, in many cases, more profitable than cocaine for Colombian criminal groups (Type 2 convergence).

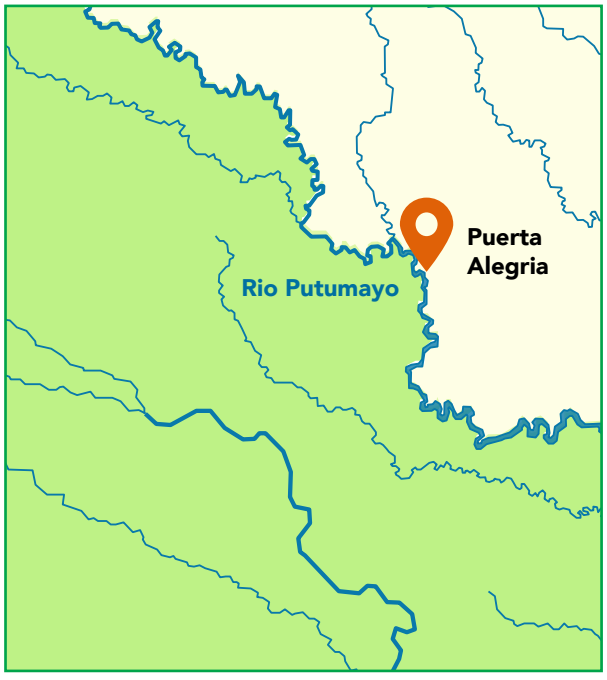
The timber trade is where ELI teams noted the presence and participation of Chinese TCOs in Zones 1 and 2, and ELI identified a Chinese network sourcing timber from Colombia and specific POIs who act as the points of contact between Colombian and Chinese criminal networks.

Photos of illegal logging in Zone 1 from a site funded by a Chinese investor



This map shows illegal logging hotspots within the Putumayo, Amazonas, and Caquetá Department





Puerta Alegria in western Amazonas



The confluence of the Putumayo and Cotuhé Rivers in the Amazonas Department & the Municipality of Puerto Nariño on the north bank of the Amazon River

CONCLUSION

ELI's findings underscore that Amazonian deforestation is not only an environmental crisis but a governance one. Criminal networks hold a clear upper hand in territorial control, resources, and the compromise — in some cases the effective capture — of the institutions built to protect Amazonian ecosystems and the people who live in them.

A central finding of this investigation is that even the wealthiest and most heavily armed criminal groups could not sustain these illicit economies, let alone expand them, without extensive support from the licit sector.

Illegal cattle ranching in Colombia's national parks does not only function because armed groups are powerful. It functions because ranchers accept jungle cattle onto licensed properties, because auction houses systematize their sale, because veterinary and agricultural officials sell certifications, because notaries formalize stolen land, because trade associations broker the transactions, and because export companies carry the product to international markets. Each of these actors is identifiable and operating within the formal economy.

This is what makes the problem tractable. Satellite monitoring can show where forest is being lost, but it cannot show who profits, through which company, along which route, and with whose signature on the paperwork. **That requires human intelligence gathered on the ground, over time, from the people running the system. The evidence in this report demonstrates that such intelligence can be collected, even in areas under armed-group control, and that when it is collected it produces leads that law enforcement can act on**.

Several implications follow.

1) Enforcement must move up the chain. The arrests documented in this report fell almost exclusively on those paid to clear land — the least culpable and most replaceable participants. Prosecutions targeting beneficial owners, auction operators, certifying officials, and exporters would disrupt the system in ways that arresting chainsaw operators cannot.

2) Traceability requires enforcement capacity, not only legislation. Colombia's 2026 cattle traceability law addresses a real gap, but ELI's evidence shows that existing origin and movement controls are already being defeated through bribery and falsified documentation. Without independent verification, sanction of certifying officials, and inter-agency information sharing, a new registry risks becoming another document to falsify.

3) Importing markets carry responsibility and exposure. Colombian cattle and cattle products reach China, Russia, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia, and the EU Deforestation Regulation places due-diligence obligations on European buyers. The laundering documented here is designed specifically to make illegal origin invisible at the point of purchase. Buyers relying on Colombian paperwork alone are relying on the weakest link in the chain.

4) The biosecurity risk is shared. The overwhelming majority of jungle cattle are never vaccinated. The arrival of screwworm in the United States in 2026, via an analogous laundering pipeline through Central America and Mexico, is a preview of what unmonitored herds moving through falsified supply chains can produce. This is a direct commercial and public-health interest for every country importing Colombian livestock.

5) Environmental crime is national security. The same fronts that own the ranches tax the rivers, sell the cocaine reaching Europe and Asia, and negotiate with Brazilian and Mexican organizations at the border. Treating deforestation as a conservation matter separate from narcotrafficking, corruption, and money laundering has allowed these convergences to grow unexamined. They are one economy and require a response designed accordingly.

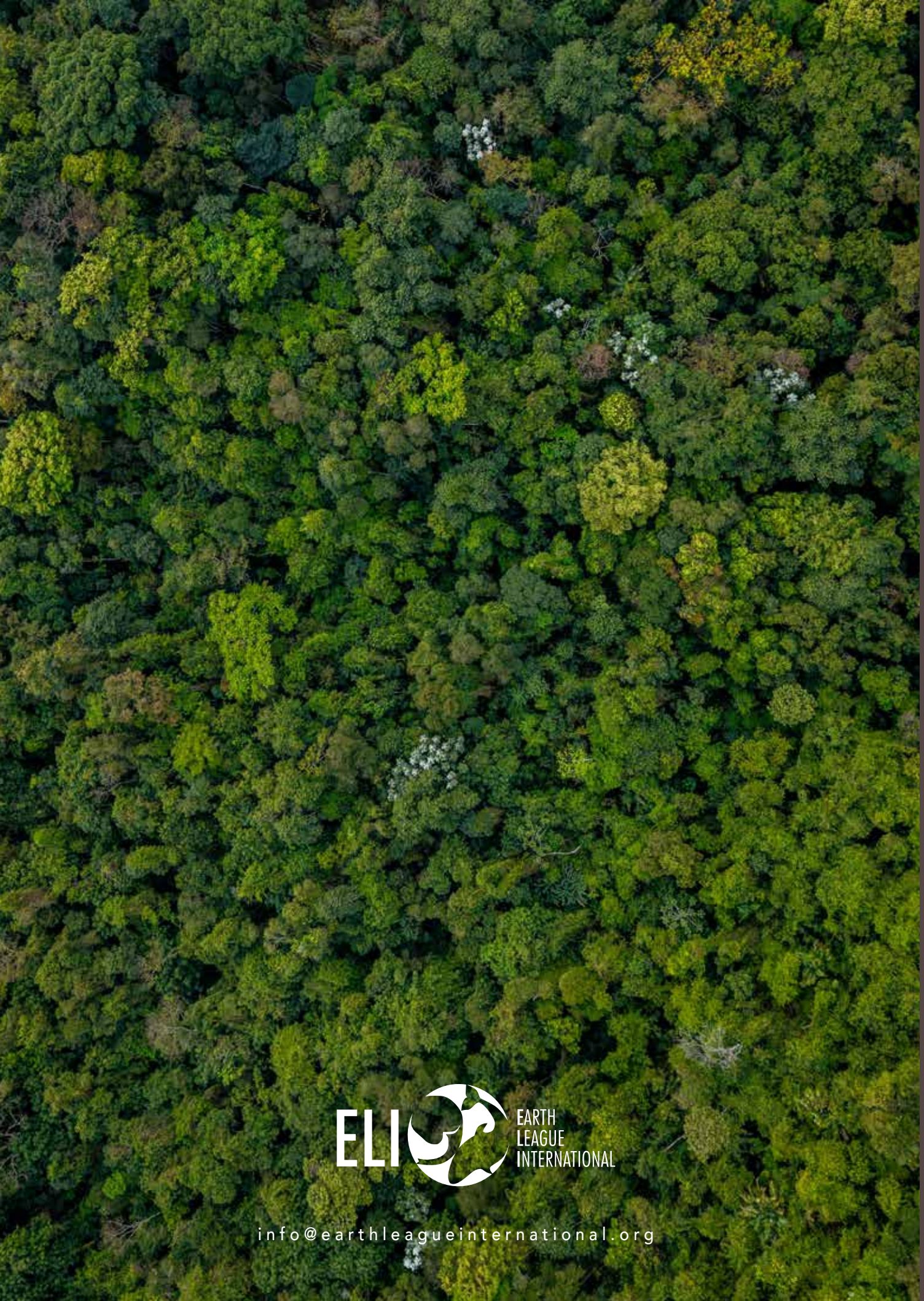
ELI has shared the intelligence underlying this report with authorities in Colombia, the United States, and Europe. The named entities, routes, and mechanisms described here are actionable. What is most needed is the political will to act on them.



About **EARTH LEAGUE INTERNATIONAL (ELI)**

Earth League International (ELI) is the only NGO in the world dedicated exclusively to investigating and addressing Environmental Crime Convergence—the intersection of environmental and wildlife crime with other serious transnational crimes, including money laundering, corruption, human trafficking, and drug trafficking. A pioneer in applying professional intelligence methodologies to environmental crime, ELI identifies and investigates high-level environmental criminals and transnational wildlife trafficking networks worldwide, including how they move their money and their links to transnational organized crime and other serious offenses. ELI works in close collaboration with key government agencies in the United States and internationally.


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