Migratory agriculture is frequently cited as a primary driver of deforestation in the Peruvian Amazon. This broad generalization provides little basis for understanding patterns of land use change, or for formulating policy responses to slow deforestation or encourage sustainable forest management. Current deforestation patterns in Peru result from multifaceted processes involving diverse stakeholders with varied motivations and having differentiated impacts on landscapes. A finer grained understanding of socio-economic and governance factors driving change on these forest frontiers would provide a better foundation for decision making and planning by policy makers.

This paper analyzes migration patterns, livelihoods strategies and forest use in four multi-village landscape sites in the Peruvian Amazon. We used focus group interviews and systematic household survey to assess household migration histories, production systems, property rights and local perceptions of migration drivers and impacts. We also used remote sensing to gauge historic land use change at the village and landscape scales.

Although sampled households had diverse motivations for migration decisions, we observed that the search for arable land and economic opportunity were prominent drivers of migration across sites. State owned forestland was often susceptible to spontaneous settlement due to the lack of control and oversight by state agencies. Once occupied, settlers cleared forests to demonstrate and justify land claims. The paper concludes by discussing how governance factors allow spontaneous settlement patterns and associated deforestation to persist and how reform could encourage forest management and conservation.