

Brazilian presidential candidate Marina Silva reaches out to agribusiness, renounces anti-GMO stance

Brazilian presidential candidate Marina Silva, an icon of the green movement, is cozying up to old adversaries in the sugar and ethanol industry as she seeks to win over the powerful farm lobby ahead of next month's election.

Since entering the race in mid-August, Silva has picked a pro-agriculture congressman as her running mate, met repeatedly with agribusiness leaders and campaigned in the farm belt, eager to make allies in an industry that accounts for a quarter of Brazil's economy.

Her message: conservation and big agriculture would thrive side-by-side in a Silva government and she would roll back the gasoline subsidies that President Dilma Rousseff has used to contain inflation. The fuel price controls have gutted Brazil's once-booming sugar cane ethanol industry.

Silva, who polls show is slightly ahead of Rousseff in an expected runoff, has also pleased crowds in the farm belt by reminding voters that she has dropped her opposition to genetically modified crops, which have been crucial to Brazil's rise in recent years as an agricultural power.

"There's this legend out there that I'm against genetically modified crops. That's not true. I support a model in which GMO and GMO-free crops co-exist," she said in a recent TV interview.

A few days later, on a campaign stop in the grains-rich state of Rio Grande do Sul, she said: "I will support agriculture on all levels" – a relief for producers who worry she would favor smaller family farms over the large-scale plantations that have come to dominate Brazil's countryside.

Silva's apparent embrace of big agriculture marks an about-face for a lifelong environmentalist who ran for president in 2010 on the Green Party ticket, and she runs the risk of alienating some voters and allies in the green movement.

A former rubber-tapper and maid who grew up poor in the Amazon state of Acre, Silva became a symbol of the global green movement by devoting her life to environmental issues after the murder of her mentor, union leader Chico Mendes, in 1988.

As environment minister between 2003 and 2008, she fought to contain the expansion of Brazil's grain belt and cattle ranching, helping to reduce the pace of Amazon deforestation by more than half but also angering farmers, ranchers and loggers in the region.

But to win the October election and form the political alliances needed to steer Brazil out of its economic rut, the center-left Silva needs agribusiness leaders and their influential friends in Congress on her side.

Read the full, original article: Brazil's Silva, a lifelong environmentalist, courts big agriculture