

Primer on U.S. Food Assistance

Why should the State Department retain oversight of US emergency food assistance?

- **Should food aid survive the budget process**, Representatives in both the House and the Senate have introduced bills that would transfer the functions and duties of administering the Title II program to the US Department of Agriculture. This recommendation would be a reversal of hard fought gains over multiple Administrations (including the first Trump Administration) to create more efficient and effective emergency programming by strategically linking food assistance with water, health, agricultural recovery and other emergency responses that need to be coordinated on the ground. Trump I in fact merged Food for Peace with the Office of US foreign disaster assistance to create a more efficient and effective emergency response. The proposed legislation would undo this integrated response architecture - an approach resulting from years of analysis and lessons learned that resulted in greater value for money by delivering a stronger, more coordinated response on the ground.
- USDA is primarily focused on a domestic agricultural agenda and lacks the necessary in-country presence that both USAID and State have in highly food insecure countries - a presence vital to engage host country officials, other donors and implementing agencies in the response. It also lacks the technical expertise to strategically design emergency response programs, call forward the right foods at the right time and monitor their distribution.
- In the absence of that, there is a danger that shifting food aid to USDA would effectively create a “supply side” response based on what US farmers grow or have a surplus of in any given year, rather than a “demand” side response to address the identified emergency food gaps of affected populations. Such a mismatch can lead to huge inefficiencies, waste, and corruption, including diversions, side selling and other negative practices that limit food aid effectiveness.
- The State Department will soon house the rest of the humanitarian portfolio, including programs that provide vouchers for food in emergency settings. This approach needs to be directly coordinated with USG funding for in-kind food assistance so as not to duplicate effort.
- State also will house the longer term multi-year agricultural investments made by the Feed the Future global hunger portfolio. Moving food aid to USDA not only decouples it from non-food emergency response but also from the development investments necessary to help end the need for food aid.
- While Congress and the US Administration have called for greater efficiency and effectiveness, this legislation would be a serious setback for such an agenda. It returns the program to an earlier time, before the hard won lessons of the 1990s and 2000s in places like South Sudan, Yemen, Syria and Somalia - where it mounted some of the most ambitious lifesaving responses in history. Congress must not set back that agenda by sending food aid to USDA and effectively cutting it from the rest of US relief and development operations.

What is Title II?

- Title II of the Food for Peace Act authorizes the USAID Administrator to establish programs to provide U.S.-grown agricultural commodities around the world on behalf of the American people.
- **This program supports American farmers across the country; and uses the American maritime industry** to ship these commodities abroad to feed people who are in need of emergency food assistance.

- American-produced food has been purchased to support USAID emergency and development programs for more than 70 years, since 1954. **The USAID food bag is one of the most recognized and iconic symbols in American diplomacy: a sign of hope to those in crisis.**
- The longer this disruption continues, the harder it will be to undo. **Congress must act now to restore USAID staff, operations, and partners that oversee this vital program.**

What is U.S. in-kind food aid?

- American farmers in small towns across the country grow food, such as corn, lentils, pinto beans, rice, sorghum, vegetable oil, wheat, and yellow split peas. This is then purchased by the U.S. government on the commercial market and shipped abroad on American ships, preventing famine around the world.

What U.S. states is the food from?

- The food is produced across the United States. Vendors are located in **Wisconsin** (Corn Soy Blend, Corn Meal), **North Carolina** (Corn Soy Blend), **Texas** (Sorghum, Corn, Yellow Split Peas, Vegetable Oil), **Louisiana** (Rice), **Nebraska** (Yellow Split Peas, Corn Meal, Beans), **Iowa** (Vegetable Oil), **Illinois** (Vegetable Oil, Corn Soy Blend, Rice), **Kansas** (Sorghum, Pinto Beans), **North Dakota** (Pinto Beans, Yellow Split Peas, Lentils), **Florida** (Vegetable Oil), **Indiana** (Cornmeal), **Missouri** (Cornmeal), **Oklahoma** (Flour), **Washington** (Wheat, Pinto Beans), **Montana** (Yellow Split Peas, Lentils), **Colorado** (Beans), **Minnesota** (Yellow Split Peas), **Georgia** (ready-to-use therapeutic food), and **Rhode Island** (ready-to-use therapeutic food, lipid-based nutrient supplement).

How does this impact the U.S. shipping industry?

- In fiscal year 2024, USAID procured and transported **a total of 1.1 million metric tons (MTs), of food assistance valued at nearly \$685 million, through ten US ports:** Boston (MA), Chicago (IL), Corpus Christi (TX), Houston (TX), Lake Charles (LA), Miami (FL), Newark (NJ), New York (NY), Norfolk (VA), and Savannah (GA). This is **enough to feed 72 million people** for a month.
- **In addition, the U.S. invested \$230 million in shipping transportation for the food,** including with U.S. flagged vessels, such as American President Lines, Hapag-Lloyd USA, Liberty Glory, National Shipping of America, Maersk Line Limited, and Schuyler Line Navigation Company.

How does U.S. food aid work?

- USAID and USDA administer international food assistance. (1) American producers grow food; (2) at USAID's request, USDA purchases American-produced commodities on the commercial market. (3) USDA enters into a contract with ocean carriers — half of which must be U.S.-flagged. (4) The food is branded with the USAID logo "From the American People" — demonstrating the values and generosity of the American people, (5) Carriers ship and transport the food to its destination, (6) USAID partners—many of whom are U.S.-based organizations employing Americans—distribute food to hungry people.

Is U.S. food aid tied to U.S. legislation?

- Yes, Congress funds food assistance programs through annual appropriations laws. U.S. in-kind food aid is directly tied to legislation that benefits American farmers and the American maritime industry.
- **Title II of the Food for Peace Act** authorizes the USAID Administrator to establish programs to provide U.S. agricultural commodities to foreign countries on behalf of the people of the United States.
- **The Cargo Preference Act** of 1954 requires that at least 50% of government-generated cargo be transported on U.S.-flag ships. U.S.-flag ships must be privately owned and have a crew that is at least 75% U.S. citizens. This supports a strong American maritime industry and creates jobs. It also supports **national security** by ensuring a readily available U.S.-flag merchant marine that can be utilized during times of war or national emergency.

Secretary Rubio issued a waiver for emergency food assistance, so isn't U.S. in-kind food moving?

- The waiver was only effective in allowing U.S. food that had already been bought to be moved, although the USAID officers who managed that transportation were also placed on leave. This food includes corn and cornmeal, lentils, pinto beans, rice, sorghum, vegetable oil, wheat, and yellow split peas.
- But moving food means paying shippers, warehouse and dock workers, truck drivers, food distribution monitors, and more. Given continued slow processing times instituted by DOGE's tampering with USAID's payment system, the payment backlogs are threatening the solvency of some organizations and preventing some of them from getting the food to the people who need it. Without also paying for all these expenses, the waiver achieves very little.

How many people around the world need food assistance right now?

- Before the freeze in USAID assistance, approximately 343 million people across 74 countries were estimated to need emergency food assistance. This is a 10 percent increase from last year, according to the UN.
- Prior to the destruction of USAID, the Famine Early Warning Systems Network expected the number of people in need of urgent humanitarian food assistance to be highest in Sudan, Yemen, Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Nigeria.

Why shouldn't USDA take over U.S. food aid?

- Providing U.S. food assistance is a complicated process - much tougher than ordering takeout.
- USAID staff working on food assistance - both in the U.S. and around the world - possess a variety of specialized skills. They are experts in logistics and supply chains, price forecasting, market analysis, nutrition and food safety, monitoring, and grant and contract management. Many teams at USAID support the provision of food assistance, from grant and contract managers in Washington, to the program officers overseas who monitor food distributions. Technical advisors ensure the food is of good quality and provides adequate nutrition. Partnership and risk management teams minimize risks of waste, fraud and abuse and ensure accountability. Information officers ensure that Congress, the White House, and the American people get timely and accurate reporting on the work USAID does.

- Other U.S. agencies do not have the specific expertise and global footprint required to responsibly manage this assistance.
- Relying on others who lack this expertise would risk inefficient use of U.S. taxpayer resources and the potential fraud, waste, and diversion of U.S.-grown food aid.
- In addition, USDA is dismantling its own development food programs abroad (McGovern Dole and Food for Progress) and cutting staff.

There are hungry people here in America. Why can't farmers sell the food here?

- There is enough food to do both! U.S. farmers produce more food than Americans can consume by themselves. In fact, that's how the U.S. food assistance program got started—ensuring American farmers could sell all their food at a stable price while assisting hungry people overseas—and building foreign goodwill toward the U.S. for this generosity.
- Hunger in the U.S. is a very real problem. Congress could choose to pass laws to provide more assistance to food-insecure Americans. Given the enormous amount of food grown in the U.S., and how little money is spent on foreign assistance (only about 1% of the budget), there is no competition between helping hungry people here at home and those overseas.
- The provision of U.S. food assistance overseas demonstrates American generosity and values, a core component of U.S. foreign policy and American diplomacy that makes America safer and stronger.

What if we just did food aid? Is that enough?

- No. Food aid is a critical part of responding to emergencies, but it isn't enough on its own.
- People displaced from their homes also need a safe place to sleep and cook the food they get, clean water to cook and drink, dishes, pots and pans, and soap.
- When communities don't get enough to eat, babies and young children are at higher risk for malnutrition and death, and often need specialized nutrition support. People whose bodies are weakened by lack of food are more susceptible to disease. That means that access to healthcare, and to clean water to reduce the spread of disease, are also critical.
- Additionally, the assistance that USAID provides abroad can serve as the first line of defense for the American people. USAID's help can prevent international crises from becoming domestic ones. For example, during the West African Ebola crisis from 2014-2016, USAID's interventions contained the spread worldwide. Only eleven people were treated for Ebola in the United States during this period. Had there been an outbreak here, it would have had devastating consequences for the American economy and public health.
- In recent years, there have been other outbreaks of Ebola and other diseases. Most people in America have never heard about them. Why not? Because, with USAID's assistance, they were quickly contained before they could spread.

Information in this document reflects the status as of June 2, 2025, and will be updated as new developments occur. For questions and meeting requests, contact congressaidletters@gmail.com