

A step in the wrong direction for food aid

Christopher B. Barrett / Guest Column

With demand for emergency assistance at an all-time high and increasing, and supplies at historic lows, this is not the time to further reduce scarce emergency food aid. How can the Congress threaten the very survival of the world's most vulnerable peoples?

But reducing USAID's ability to respond immediately to emergencies will instead hurt the poor when they most need help: when disaster might otherwise force them to leave their homes in search of food, to pull their children from school, to sell their land or livestock, or worse. The Congressional conference committee now meeting to reconcile the two versions of the Farm Bill can and should remove this well-intentioned but misguided "hard earmark."

At best, the hard earmark would delay emergency food aid deliveries. USAID would have to seek supplemental appropriations from Congress to cover unanticipated emergency needs. It has done so successfully in five of the last six years but embedded within broader requests for additional funding for Iraq while access to non-emergency funds has provided insurance that enabled US-

AID to jumpstart emergency response. How much longer can the world's natural disaster victims rely on Iraq funding to hold off famine?

Sadly, it currently takes nearly five months, on average, to deliver U.S. emergency food aid. Without the authority to tap non-emergency sources when needed, USAID's response to humanitarian disasters would slow further while it awaits supplemental Congressional funding, putting lives at risk unnecessarily and increasing the costs of helping those reached in time.

More likely, emergency food aid would get cut. Relative to recent outlays, the hard earmark would redirect up to \$250 million to non-emergency food aid, equivalent to all the food aid shipped annually to Darfur. At average response costs per person in less complex emergencies, this could cut off assistance to as many as

25 million people suffering from natural disasters and war. According to the International Red Cross' World Disasters Report, disasters have increased threefold in the poorest countries and the number of people affected by disasters has more than doubled in the past decade.

With food prices spiking to record highs, the poor are more vulnerable than ever, so ever smaller shocks can cause greater calamity. And because food aid budgets have been flat while food prices and shipping costs skyrocketed, global food aid flows have fallen to their lowest level since the 1973-74 world food crisis. With demand for emergency assistance at an all-time high and increasing, and supplies at historic lows, this is not the time to further reduce scarce emergency food aid. How can the Congress threaten the very survival of the world's most vulnerable peoples?

President Bush is right. Food aid reform is necessary. But the Congress appears poised to make the wrong changes.

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In his State of the Union address last month, President Bush called on Congress to change the Farm Bill so as to improve how United States food aid responds to humanitarian disasters in poor countries by authorizing the purchase of food locally when that could speed response, cut costs or both.

Unfortunately, the change Congress seems to have in mind goes in the opposite — and wrong — direction.

The law governing U.S. food aid programs currently grants the U.S. Agency for International Development authority to use as much of its food aid budget as needed to respond to humanitarian disasters, even if it means drawing money from non-emergency accounts. USAID has had to use this authority in each of the past 20 years.

However, the Farm Bill versions passed by the House and Senate would curtail that authority to use scarce food aid resources where they are needed most.

The "hard earmark" guarantee of \$600 million — half the food aid budget — for non-emergency U.S. food aid sounds noble: why not guarantee that half of U.S. food aid goes to help people help themselves through projects that build rural roads, provide school lunches or enhance small farmers' productivity?