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World Food Program calls for donations

By Andrea Stone, USA TODAY

A United Nations food program sent out an emergency appeal for donations Monday as the amount of food sent abroad by the United States is plummeting.

Aid organizations around the world face budget shortfalls because of a rise in global food prices. The Rome-based World Food Program will have to reduce food shipments to disaster-hit places such as Darfur unless it can close a \$500 million deficit.

Food prices have soared 55% since June alone, according to the WFP. The higher costs have resulted from rising oil prices, the use of crops for biofuels and skyrocketing demand for food in developing economies such as China and India.

The amount of food aid delivered abroad by the U.S. government has fallen 43% from 2002-07, according to a report by the Government Accountability Office.

The report blamed the decline in part on soaring transportation costs and inefficient management by U.S. aid agencies. It said nearly two-thirds of the \$2 billion the United States spends every year on food aid — far more than any other country — goes to transportation, storage and handling costs.

The Bush administration has sought to modify a 1954 law requiring all such aid to be donated in food rather than cash and mandating that the food be grown on American soil.

Those rules prevent U.S. agencies from following the example of other organizations in Europe and elsewhere, which have tried to cut costs by buying cheaper crops from countries that are closer to the areas in need.

Harry Edwards, a spokesman for the U.S. Agency for International Development, said buying food from third-party countries could save up to 25% of ocean shipping costs alone.

Proposed changes have made little headway in Congress. The Senate recently passed a farm bill that would allow some third-party food purchases, but the measure was left out of a House version of the bill.

Opponents such as Sen. Saxby Chambliss, R-Ga., say providing cash donations to buy food could lead to fraud and abuse.

Others disagree. Current law "is a very serious impediment" to feeding the world's hungry, says Chris Barrett, a Cornell University development economist. He blames "a few very large agribusinesses that provide huge financial support" to members of Congress for stalling efforts to change the law.

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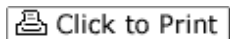
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CARE, an Atlanta-based aid group that plans to meet with USAID officials today about the food crisis, is among groups that support revising the law to allow cash donations.

"We have to really rethink how to provide support to millions of poor and hungry people," says Bob Bell, a CARE official who expects to see cuts in the amount of food donated in the coming year. "We need a range of flexible resources available."

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