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**From:** Mills, Cheryl D <MillsCD@state.gov>  
**Sent:** Tuesday, October 4, 2011 12:47 PM  
**To:** H  
**Subject:** FW: CQ piece

See highlights.

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**From:** Shrier, Jonathan  
**Sent:** Tuesday, October 04, 2011 12:15 PM  
**To:** Mills, Cheryl D  
**Cc:** Toiv, Nora F; Laszczych, Joanne; Roth, Richard A  
**Subject:** FW: CQ piece

Cheryl: Good, balanced piece below from CQ on U.S. food aid and ag development assistance. It quotes Secretary Clinton's August 11 IFPRI speech. The reporter also spoke with both Richard Roth and me, and he quotes Richard on HoA and me on food price volatility, Feed the Future, and L'Aquila.

The overall storyline is that the Administration is thinking smart about food security while facing a tough budget environment.

Jonathan

P.S. Will write separately on productive meetings here in Addis. We go into a press briefing and more meetings momentarily.

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## Food and Consequences

By Jonathan Broder, CQ Staff

It's not easy to find good news these days from the Horn of Africa. The worst drought in 60 years has spawned full-blown famine across the parched savannah of southern Somalia, driving ragged clusters of people toward neighboring Kenya and Ethiopia. The lucky ones survive robbery, rape and murderous attacks by local armed gangs to reach overcrowded refugee camps just over the border. The less fortunate — the weak, elderly and those prevented from leaving Somalia by soldiers of the Islamic al-Shabaab militia — simply starve to death.

But far better news emerges from Ethiopia, where officials appear to have learned lessons from a 2002 drought that affected as many as 13 million people. In the aftermath of that devastating dry spell, Ethiopian officials, working together with U.S. agronomists, invested in drought-resistant crops and water-saving irrigation systems for long-term food security. American officials also helped them stockpile food for future emergencies. By the time the current drought struck the Horn, less than 5 million Ethiopians were affected.



REFUGE: Displaced Somalis gather inside a courtyard in the capital, Mogadishu, to receive food aid. War-torn Somalia has been hardest hit by the drought affecting the Horn of Africa, but large portions of the country are off limits to aid groups. (ROBERTO SCHMIDT / AFP / GETTY IMAGES)

“Now, that is still an unacceptably large number,” Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said last month. “But it is also an astonishing improvement in a relatively short period of time. And it is evidence that investments in food security can pay off powerfully.”

Still, the Horn of Africa drought coincides with global food prices sitting at near-record levels. The price of corn jumped 84 percent between July 2010 and July 2011, according to the World Bank, while the price of wheat shot up 55 percent. The impact on poor people has been immense — and often destabilizing.

The growing crisis has Clinton and other Obama administration officials urging Congress to provide continued funds for both emergency aid and long-term food-security aid — a critical request because the United States provides nearly half the food aid to the United Nation’s World Food Program, the principal distributor of such assistance worldwide. But with the brutal budget climate on Capitol Hill — and a nation turning increasingly inward — foreign food aid is likely to suffer significant cuts.

The effect is that America’s budgetary politics could have global consequences by diminishing the signature role the United States has played for decades in feeding the world’s hungry. “What does the United States stand for?” says Democrat Patrick J. Leahy of Vermont, chairman of the Senate Appropriations subcommittee that determines foreign aid. “If we’re going to be blessed the way that we are in this country, we have a certain moral obligation to help others.”

While trims of a few billion dollars may sound paltry at a time when lawmakers are mulling more than a trillion in spending reductions, these cuts could not be happening at a worse time globally. Already, the shock waves of food price increases have rocked Tunisia, Egypt and Syria, where the large demonstrations that became known as the Arab Spring began as angry protests over a rise in bread prices, brought on by a drought and poor harvest in Russia last year. Down the line, experts say, the consequences could be much more disruptive. Pentagon planners say a food-related crisis could even prompt the United States to intervene militarily for either strategic or humanitarian reasons.

On Capitol Hill, lawmakers are worried about these scenarios, but there is little agreement on a course of action for funding. With additional legislative steps to be taken, the House and Senate are still a long way from reconciling their differences.

“In the long run, investing in humanitarian aid to defuse civil wars and reduce the number of countries that breed terrorism is a lot cheaper and more effective than going to war everywhere around the world,” says Leahy.

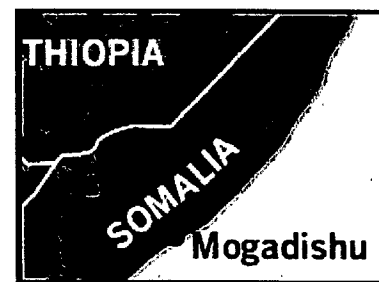
Among Republicans, however, the most immediate concern is to reduce spending and bring the budget deficit under control. And Georgia Republican Jack Kingston, chairman of the House Appropriations Agriculture Subcommittee that funds emergency overseas food aid from an account popularly known as PL 480, says the least politically sensitive place to find such cuts is in the foreign aid budget.

“Unless a member of Congress can go back home and explain to a Rotary Club why we’re providing a billion dollars worth of PL 480, you’re not going to be able to protect that funding,” he says. “And it’s not easy because the aid is so unpopular.”

## Back to the Future

The Obama administration’s difficulties in prying more food-aid funding from Congress represent a sharp departure from previous times that the United States confronted regions facing widespread famine and destabilization.

Back in the 1960s, when such threats played into Cold War politics and spending priorities, U.S.-led advances in



Hunger Hot Spots: [Click here to view chart](#)

breeding high-yield seed varieties — dubbed the “Green Revolution” — led to spectacular successes in food production in Asia and Latin America, averting mass starvation. Developing countries like India, whose starving children were often evoked to make truculent American children eat their spinach, became self-sufficient in food production. By the 1990s, the amount of U.S. development aid that went to long-term agricultural assistance had declined significantly.

“It was mostly felt that the food challenge had been resolved because of the Green Revolution,” says Simon Nicholson, an expert on global food security who is on the faculty of American University’s School of International Service. “Numbers of hungry people were falling, and incomes around the world were starting to rise. In influential circles, food came to be considered as just a technical challenge. The feeling was that if we can just get the right technologies into the right hands, then it’s just a short period of time before this whole challenge goes away.”

As a result, U.S. food-aid efforts were narrowed to shorter-term relief. Most of these programs had been developed during the Cold War, when the federal government already was buying up the surpluses of U.S. farmers to keep commodity prices high. As storage fees mounted, officials decided to give the food away to poor countries and earn some pro-American good will at the same time. Congress got involved, passing laws that required half, then three-quarters, of foreign food aid be delivered by U.S.-flagged ships. As surpluses disappeared, the government began buying the food from big agricultural conglomerates. (*Delivery model*, p. 2042)

But in 2008, the international aid community was jolted when global food commodity prices suddenly shot up as several factors — the world’s growing population, rising demand for meat by wealthier populations in India and China, and the relentless extremes of flooding and drought caused by global climate change — converged to create worldwide shortages. Food riots erupted across Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America, shaking the political order in India, Pakistan and Mexico, and toppling governments in Haiti and Madagascar.

“For you and me, if the price of a bag of Doritos goes up by 50 cents, we’d probably just pay it and keep on eating,” says Jonathan Shrier, head of the State Department’s Office of Global Food Security. “But if you’re talking about a corn-based commodity that is a major part of your weekly food basket, and

you're in a poor household where most of your income goes to food, then those kinds of price differences really hurt."

The following year, in 2009, President Obama gathered in L'Aquila, Italy, with leaders of the eight major industrialized economies to re-examine their food-aid priorities and to focus on longer-term approaches that would help countries enjoy greater food security. Of the \$22 billion pledged to the effort at the L'Aquila summit, Obama pledged \$3.5 billion — the largest commitment of any single country.

In late 2010, however, global food prices again began to rise, provoking yet another round of food riots in the Middle East and South Asia. The most consequential disturbances flared in Tunisia last December. Those riots — and the Tunisian

government's harsh response — set the stage for the self-immolation of a peddler named Mohammed Bouazizi, an act of despair that ignited the broader political

protests that soon toppled Tunisia's pro-American President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali after 23 years in power. The Arab Spring protests then spread to Egypt, where President Hosni Mubarak, one of Washington's closest allies in the Arab world for nearly three decades, also was forced from power. The rise in food prices also sparked the anti-government protests that are still challenging the autocratic government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.



Kingston (BILL CLARK / CQ ROLL CALL )

While the Obama administration has generally embraced the democratic impulses behind the Arab revolutions, economists and development experts caution that unless issues of long-term food security are addressed, more political instability and long-term problems around the globe are looming.

Nayan Chanda, a scholar at Yale University's Center for the Study of Globalization, notes that the political unrest in the Arab world has prompted food-importing countries such as Egypt and Libya to build up their stocks of grain, rice and oil seeds as a buffer against further unrest. But as oil prices also rise, he says the costs of food inputs — from fertilizer and irrigation to transportation — are also rising, making food that much more expensive for ordinary consumers.

Christopher Barrett, an economist and food-aid expert at Cornell University, identifies a cycle of destabilization in poor countries that sets in with high global food prices. First, he says, tens of millions of people around the world are plunged deeper into poverty. With whole families now needed to earn enough money to pay for food, parents pull their children out of school, truncating their educations. Another problem of today's high food prices, especially for impoverished young children, pregnant women and breast-feeding mothers, is under-nutrition, which he fears will produce a generation with permanent, irreversible physical and cognitive difficulties.

"That, too, should concern us because we're going to be relying increasingly on workers overseas to produce goods and services for us," Barrett says. "If those workers are not cognitively and physically at their optimum, we're going to getting less reliable products. They'll be more expensive because workers will be less productive."

To counter both potential instability and the concerns about human development, Obama unveiled last year his Feed the Future initiative, identifying some 20 countries that faced major challenges in food security but also demonstrated the economic conditions and political will to justify U.S. investments to improve food security there. Ethiopia and Kenya were among the recipients.

To qualify for Feed the Future aid, Shrier explains, countries must have their own existing programs for agricultural development, raising rural incomes and increasing the agricultural share of gross domestic product. U.S. aid helps them achieve these goals by providing improved seeds and fertilizers; teaching new climate-adapted farming techniques; and investing in storage, transportation and local banks to provide short-term loans. Officials at the U.S. Agency for International Development closely monitor the program for results and make adjustments when needed.



FIRE: The protests that toppled the regime of Tunisia's Ben Ali began as riots against high food prices. (AFP / GETTY IMAGES FILE PHOTO)

Shrier notes the administration also convinced the World Bank to establish a fund called the Global Agricultural and Food Security Program, which acts much like the Feed the Future initiative. With donations from the United

States, Canada, Ireland, South Korea and Spain, as well as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the fund has awarded nearly half a billion dollars to a dozen countries so far.

But progress on other fronts is lagging. Of the \$22 billion pledged in L'Aquila for long-term food-security assistance — also to be administered by the World Bank — only around \$4 billion has been delivered so far.

“Real results take time and investment,” Shrier says. “So you have to do the right things and do them long enough to make a difference. Well-run development assistance requires a reliable stream of resources that allows us to start programs and see them through until they can reach an effective point where we can turn them over to a partner government.”

Meanwhile, the famine in the Horn of Africa presents a different sort of challenge for U.S. food-aid efforts. There, the response has been emergency U.S. food aid — American-grown crops, sent on U.S.-flagged ships to the Kenyan port of Mombasa, and then trucked hundreds of miles inland to the refugee camps along Somalia's western border with Kenya and Ethiopia. Working through World Food Program officials and other aid groups on the ground, the United States has become the largest donor of humanitarian assistance to the region, providing nearly \$650 million worth of food to nearly 4.5 million people.

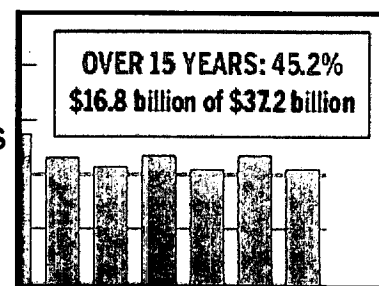
Even so, the United Nations estimates that three quarters of a million people face starvation within the next three months. The main culprit is al-Shabaab's continued refusal to allow aid groups to carry food aid into the hardest drought-stricken areas of Somalia. “It's very hard to get around the Shabaab,” says Richard Roth, a senior State Department official in charge of the relief effort. “They kill people.”

In Clinton's speech last month, she sought to connect Washington's emergency aid efforts to the Horn of Africa with the Obama administration's longer-term food-security initiative. “Our goal is not only to help the region come through this crisis, but . . . to do all we can to prevent it from ever happening again,” she said. “Food security is the key.”

## **‘Every Dollar Counts’**

But that approach has proved to be a hard sell on Capitol Hill this year, especially among House Republicans.

“In the past, we have been able to fund important projects and take the long view, knowing that someday what we plant would bear fruit,” Texas Republican Kay Granger, chairwoman of the House Appropriations subcommittee that doles out foreign aid, said in July, when her panel approved a \$39.6 billion discretionary spending bill for fiscal 2012, effectively returning funding to fiscal 2008 levels.



Paying for U.N. Food Aid: [Click here to view chart](#)

“But today is a different time,” she said. “We are facing a global recession unlike anything in recent memory. Our debt is well over \$14 trillion. Today, every dollar counts. This bill reflects those new realities.”

Her measure zeroes out last year’s \$100 million for the World Bank’s long-term food-aid account and provides \$2 billion for overall development aid — nearly half a billion dollars less than fiscal 2011 and \$850 million less than Obama’s request. The language does not specify how much of that aid goes to Feed the Future, leaving that for the Obama administration to decide.

The Senate Appropriations State-Foreign Operations measure, which was approved last month, would provide \$44.6 billion in discretionary spending, including \$2.6 billion for development aid. Of that, \$1.1 billion would go for the Feed the Future initiative, and \$200 million for the World Bank’s long-term fund. The development aid funding level is \$30 million above the fiscal 2011 level and \$368 million below Obama’s request.

A Democratic Senate aide says that the House subcommittee’s approved level of development assistance is “so low that there’s no way the administration is going to be able to fund many of the initiatives that are normally funded within that account at anything like the levels currently or [those] being requested.”

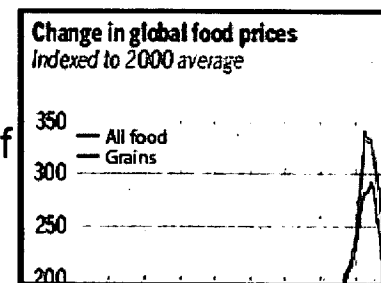
As for the PL 480 emergency food aid that is funded in the Agriculture appropriations bill, the House-passed measure slashes funding by 31 percent from fiscal 2011 levels to \$1.04 billion.

Kingston, while stressing how “enormously unpopular” food aid, and foreign aid in general, are back home, also suggests an element of payback in the bill, noting that few countries in the world appreciate the fact that the United States has provided such a large percentage of aid to the World Food Program. “I



don't think we get credit for that internationally, or at the U.N., or from some of these blame-the-U.S.-for-all-the-world's-problems groups," he says.

Kingston also says that the spending cuts help prevent further waste, charging that a significant portion of U.S. foreign aid is "siphoned off by dictators or oppressive government leaders who are re-elected with 90 percent of the vote and stay in office for life." In a swipe at Democrats who controlled the House before 2010, he notes that despite such corruption, past appropriators did not trim the PL 480 emergency food-aid account.



Peak Prices: [Click here to view chart](#)

"Our bill is a reflection of our financial situation," he says. "And remember, for every dollar we spend, 40 cents is borrowed. So not only am I paying for lunch, but I'm borrowing the money to pay for lunch."

Senate Democrats acknowledge the need to reduce spending, but they argue such cuts must be done thoughtfully, keeping in mind U.S. national security interests. "U.S. food aid can be a stabilizing force in the world's poorest countries," says Herb Kohl of Wisconsin, chairman of the Senate Appropriations Agriculture subcommittee, which passed a funding measure that provides \$1.56 billion for emergency food aid, roughly the same as last year's level, but \$124 million less than the president requested.

Nita M. Lowey of New York, the ranking Democrat on the House Appropriations State-Foreign Operations Subcommittee, slams Republicans on the panel for slashing development aid so deeply. "That money goes to programs that help anticipate future famines and develop agricultural practices to prevent them," she says.

And Dan Glickman, a former Democratic House member from Kansas and Agriculture secretary during the Clinton administration, says it's in the nation's economic interest to help ameliorate the global food crisis. "What happens in Kenya or Tanzania or Indonesia affects us very directly," Glickman, now a senior fellow with the Bipartisan Policy Center, told a food-policy conference in Washington last month. "You see in the Arab Spring, the problems in North Africa were in part due to lack of subsidized food in some of those countries. It is in our interest to be engaged."

Such opposing views are destined to become just one more discordant note in the partisan bickering over spending that now dominates Capitol Hill. But food-

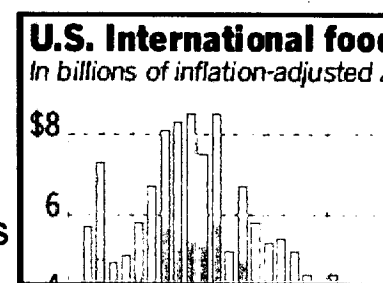
aid experts warn that the proposed cuts — even the smaller trims proposed in the Senate bills — will have real consequences on the ground.

Allan Jury, director of the U.S. relations office of the World Food Program, says it costs his organization roughly \$40 to feed one person for about a year. So he estimates that for every \$100 million cut in funding, 2.5 million people won't get fed. And as food prices continue to rise, he added, the number of those affected by funding cuts only gets bigger. "The effects," Jury says, "would be significant."

## Food and Water Wars

Food prices today remain steadily high, and several recent studies indicate that price could continue to grow in the future, suggesting the global food crisis is only likely to intensify.

The U.N.'s Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) says food prices last December topped the 2008 prices that sparked so many food riots. The combination of high food prices and the global economic slump has left some 925 million people in poverty and hunger, according to the FAO.



Putting Bread on the Table:  
[Click here to view chart](#)

The organization says food prices will continue to rise over the next 10 years, threatening the food security of millions of people around the world. The World Bank estimates that demand for food will rise by 50 percent by 2030, driven by population growth, rising wealth and shifting diets. Layer on top the projected effects of climate change, which could disrupt agricultural patterns and water supplies around the globe, and food security emerges as an important national security issue.

"Along with tackling the linked problem of climate change, delivering global food and nutrition security is the challenge of our time," former U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan, told an FAO conference in Rome in June.

Among those studying the effects of drought, mass migration and the global food crisis are U.S. military and intelligence analysts, who now warn such conditions could prompt a U.S. military response or humanitarian-relief effort.

Indeed, three years ago, the Pentagon and the CIA began studying the strategic challenges posed by climate change. The Defense Department's 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review concluded that in the decades ahead,

vulnerable regions such as the Horn of Africa, sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, and South and Southeast Asia will face the likelihood of catastrophic drought, flooding and food shortages that could demand U.S. intervention.

“Assessments conducted by the intelligence community indicate that climate change could have significant geopolitical impacts around the world, contributing to poverty, environmental degradation and the further weakening of fragile governments,” the review said. “Climate change will contribute to food and water scarcity, will increase the spread of disease and spur or exacerbate mass migration.”

The climate analysis in the review was based on state-of-the-art Navy and Air Force weather programs, as well as climate research by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration.

It was Congress, in its 2008 defense authorization bill, that prodded the Pentagon to include climate and food-security issues in its strategic forecasting.

Until now, Democratic lawmakers had focused on passing energy legislation to address climate-change issues. But with climate-change skeptics and coal-state senators successfully blocking any comprehensive energy bill since 2007, some lawmakers regard food-aid funding as the next best way to address the issue. Food-aid levels are expected to be a major point of partisan contention when lawmakers consider a new farm bill next year.

“I get the feeling from so many in the Pentagon that if we could accomplish something with humanitarian aid as compared to going to war, we’re all winners,” says Leahy. “If there are massive displacements of people caused by global warming or environmental reasons, as well as by war, our international situation is such that we’re going to get dragged in one way or another. Humanitarian and development aid just makes it much easier to avoid that.”

*Ellyn Ferguson and Lauren Gardner contributed to this story.*

**FOR FURTHER READING:** *Senate State-Foreign Operations appropriations bill (S 1601), CQ Weekly, p. 1992; Senate Agriculture appropriations bill (HR 2112), p. 1870; House Agriculture appropriations bill (HR 2112), p. 1323; draft House State-Foreign Operations appropriations bill, p. 1132; 2008 defense*

*authorization bill (PL 110-181), 2007 Almanac, p. 6-3; 2007 energy bill (PL 110-140), 2007 Almanac, p. 10-3; Agricultural Trade Development and Assistance Act of 1954 (PL 83-480), 1954 Almanac, p. 120.*

Source: **CQ Weekly**

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## **Food-Aid Model: No Easy Overhaul**

By Finlay Lewis and Jonathan Broder, CQ Staff

When Congress began sending food aid abroad in 1954, it made sure that starving populations overseas wouldn't be the only beneficiaries. Lawmakers required most of the food to be grown by American farmers and a significant portion of it to be shipped in U.S.-flagged vessels.

This structure helped ensure strong political backing from an odd coalition of farmers, shipping interests and aid groups. But over the years, studies by the Government Accountability Office, academics and others have faulted the design of U.S. food aid — particularly the workhorse PL 480, or Food for Peace, program — for diverting scarce resources from needy populations abroad to benefit those powerful domestic constituencies. Past streamlining attempts have foundered, in part due to the lobbying clout of the maritime industry and others.



**RELIEF:** The United States was a major supplier of food aid to Haiti after the 2010 earthquake. By law, the food has to come from U.S. farmers. (THONY BELIZAIRE / AFP / GETTY IMAGES FILE PHOTO)

But with lawmakers struggling to shave the deficit, they could end up looking beyond mere spending levels on foreign aid. At issue could be the very structure of the American food-aid model itself.

Over the last decade or so, the United States has provided about \$2.2 billion a year in international food-aid financing, mainly for emergency famine relief and for development projects aimed at teaching foreign farmers how to become self-sufficient.

In 2009, for example, government food-aid shipments included about 824,000 metric tons of wheat, about 790,000 tons of sorghum and 286,000 tons of corn — accounting for 79 percent of all food-aid cargoes.

But what started as a subsidy to struggling farmers has become a significant boon for U.S. agriculture companies such as Cargill Inc. and Archer-Daniels-Midland Co. John Gillcrist, chairman of the Bartlett Milling Co. in Kansas City, Mo., and a prominent food-aid supporter, estimates that every \$1 million dollars worth of food shipped abroad under PL 480 sparks about \$3 million worth of economic activity at home.

The House voted last summer to appropriate slightly more than \$1 billion for emergency aid and development purposes for fiscal 2012 under the PL 480 program — significantly less than the \$1.7 billion being sought by the Obama administration and the \$1.56 billion allocated by the Senate Appropriations Committee's spending bill. Whatever the final number, it will represent a steep cut.

That reality, in turn, has sparked new conversations about restructuring U.S. food assistance, which is largely administered by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the U.S. Agency for International Development, to be able to provide more food aid for fewer dollars.

"If going forward, U.S. food aid is, in fact, a scarce resource and not a means of commodity surplus disposal, which it was in the past, then it really is incumbent on Congress to make sure the program is given the opportunity to operate as flexibly as possible," says John Hoddinott, a senior researcher at the International Food Policy Research Institute.

Hoddinott's concerns appear to resonate with some in Congress. "U.S. food aid should be used to save lives and not as a source of wasteful corporate welfare," says Ed Royce, a senior Republican member of the House Foreign Affairs Committee. "I think we have an opportunity for reform. The stars may be aligned."

The agenda of those who want to overhaul food aid, such as Royce and Democratic Rep. Jim McGovern of Massachusetts, includes targeting the decades-old cargo preference law requiring that 75 percent of all U.S. food-aid shipments be transported on U.S.-flagged vessels. The heart of the case against the cargo rule comes from a year-old study headed by Cornell University researchers that concluded that cargo preferences drained about

\$140 million from the program in 2006, in part because it discriminates against cheaper foreign-flagged vessels.

The maritime industry says the study's methodology is badly flawed and that the cargo rule has the additional benefit of ensuring a reserve of U.S. commercial ships and sailors for the Pentagon in the event of a national security crisis.

"It's been a lot of work to explain to tea party Republicans how important these programs are, not only for people overseas, but for providing jobs here at home," says Bryant Gardner, a lobbyist at Winston and Strawn, whose clients include the U.S. merchant marine carriers.

Critics of the current structure also want to remove the restrictions on buying food from farmers in or near famine areas. Such food is often cheaper to purchase — and significantly cheaper to ship. Indeed, the United States is the only country to use domestically produced food for its aid efforts.

Congress has authorized the use of cash in a few food-aid pilot projects, and the GAO has concluded that the approach can speed deliveries at a significant savings to the taxpayer, although it can also backfire by disrupting local markets.

Another overhaul target could be a complex process known as monetization. This entails the use of government grants by nongovernmental organizations to buy U.S. commodities, which they then sell abroad in order to raise cash for international development projects.

In a June report, the GAO concluded that monetization "is an inherently inefficient way to fund development projects and can cause adverse market impacts in recipient countries."

Christopher Barrett, an economist who conducted the food-aid study, says the current structure makes no economic sense. "It's taking a dollar of taxpayer money and turning it into 50 cents for the program," he says. "Why not just give them 50 cents directly, rather than losing half of it along the way." Other experts contend the return on the dollar is closer to 80 cents.

Either way, some aid groups have come to rely heavily on monetization. One such group, Save the Children, derives about 35 percent of its revenue by monetizing U.S. food aid, according to the group's head of government

relations, Michael Klosson. Those funds are then put back into other food-related programs.

Of course, none of these changes would be easy. Most food-aid programs come within the jurisdiction of the House and Senate agriculture committees, where coalitions of farm interests usually trump partisan politics.

McGovern said he hopes the markup of a 2012 farm bill will provoke "an honest and intelligent discussion on . . . how we can make our food-aid programs more efficient and effective."

But significant changes could have the unintended effect of fracturing the unlikely coalition that has sustained food aid for decades. For example, many nonprofit groups support the greater use of cash in emergency situations. Gillcrist, however, warns that support for food aid would wither among many farm-related organizations if cash transfers were to become a major substitute for commodities.

"Quite frankly if the [food-aid coalition] breaks apart, we'll see the further erosion of our funds going into some of these programs," McGovern said. "In a perfect world, do you want to spend the money on shipping or on feeding hungry people? In a perfect world, you'd say you want to feed the hungry people, but the issues aren't black and white."

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