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Let's Keep the Food in Food Aid

By *Bob Stallman*

Recently, a member of the American Farm Bureau Federation staff was interviewed on the subject of proposed changes to U.S. international food aid. The question was whether the United States should shift food aid donations to cash instead of American-grown food.

Like most interviews, this one went on for 15 to 20 minutes. The result was one pieced-together quote: "Exports via food aid are a small drop in the market. Our concern is less about decreasing an important revenue stream for U.S. agriculture. It's more about the loss of a sense of pride."

Once the article ran, some organizations pounced, effectively charging: How could American agriculture, solely out of pride, take food out of the mouths of 2-4 million people?

Facts do suffer when skewed through the prism of agenda-driven politics. Not that long ago, a fact sheet posted by USAID (the United States Agency for International Development) reported that cash or voucher humanitarian relief systems and programs are more expensive than those using U.S.-procured commodities. Interestingly, now that President Barack Obama has proposed using cash in lieu of commodities, USAID's website, updated in late April, now says just the opposite.

There have been times when those programs accounted for a significant percentage of our exports. But that is simply not the case today.

In one breath, critics claim the Food for Peace program currently accounts for "less than two-tenths of 1 percent of U.S. agricultural production and about one-half of 1 percent of U.S. agricultural exports." Then, in the very next breath, they claim this program dealing with "less than one-half of 1 percent" of our exports is driving "Big Ag" to come out with "guns blazing." Their emotional response ignores a logical analysis of their own statements, and frankly gives Farm Bureau more credit than is due.

We will claim some credit for our nation's long-standing success in helping those in need around the world. The very origin of the Food for Peace program can be traced to a September 1953 meeting of the Cheyenne County (Kansas) Farm Bureau. A young farmer named Peter O'Brien put into motion a grassroots idea that made its way through our policy development process, from Kansas to AFBF and then as legislation introduced by Sen. Andy Schoeppel (R-Kan.) that was signed into law by President Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1954.

If critics of Farm Bureau's policy on food aid ask whether we are proud of our role in this program, the answer is an unequivocal, "You bet we are." Are America's farmers and ranchers proud of our contribution to feeding multi-millions of people around the world, thanks to a Farm Bureau idea? Again, "You bet." Would we rather see crops produced here in the United States being used in these kinds of aid programs? Yes!

The problem with switching to cash donations is that cash too easily can be used for purposes other than feeding people. Food can only be useful going into someone's stomach. Shipping a cargo load of food, rather than the money to buy food (if it is available), is the best and most secure way to ensure that taxpayer-funded international food assistance actually makes it to hungry people overseas. Without that certainty, the full impact of our nation's donations could be easily slashed by administrative costs assessed by cooperating entities, or worse, siphoned off by inept or corrupt governments in recipient nations. That is why several international food aid organizations also oppose switching to cash donations.

Giving people sacks of food with "USA" on them is good international relations. Seeing those "USA"-labeled food donations in news photos does make a difference!

Our food aid program has excelled for nearly 60 years because it is built on the ability of America's farm and ranch families to produce an abundant supply of food.

At a time when even hunger assistance comes into question due to our nation's fiscal condition, it is vital to support efforts that clearly give our tax dollars more bang for the buck, and more certainty that our food aid will reach those in need.

To date, we have not taken a strong position on this issue, known in Washington as "cash in lieu of commodities." We have listened to both sides. The recent misrepresentation of Farm Bureau's motives now gives us the opportunity to go on record and stand boldly with many other farm groups and enlightened humanitarian non-governmental organizations in working to keep U.S.-produced food a part of the food aid program.

Our current approach to helping feed the world successfully ensures that we share our nation's bounty. Those who would rather just have American taxpayers write another check to pay for uncertain results should focus on how to feed more hungry people, rather than criticize the organization that helped start Food for Peace or malign the farmers and ranchers whose work makes our food donations possible.

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