

Pulses in Food Aid: Navigating the New Humanitarian Landscape

Updated January 23, 2026

1. **Structural Shift to USDA:** The administration of the Food for Peace (Title II) program has officially transferred from the dissolved USAID to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), aligning international food aid logistics with domestic agricultural priorities.
2. **"Humanitarian Reset" Focuses on Efficiency:** The Administration's new "Humanitarian Reset," formalized via a partnership with the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), prioritizes "more lives saved for fewer taxpayer dollars," placing a premium on cost-efficiency and impact metrics.
3. **Fiscal Stability in FY2026:** Despite proposed cuts, the compromise FY2026 appropriations bill (H.R. 7006) preserves \$1.2 billion for Food for Peace Title II and maintains \$240 million for the McGovern-Dole program, preventing the complete elimination of these key accounts.
4. **"Negative Earmarks" Restrict Key Markets:** New legislative provisions explicitly prohibit U.S. funding in territories controlled by designated adversaries, effectively halting aid shipments to Houthi-controlled Yemen and Taliban-controlled Afghanistan—historically two of the largest markets for U.S. pulses.
5. **USDA as the "Natural Home":** The transfer to USDA safeguards the in-kind commodity donation model against the global trend toward cash-based assistance, as the agency operates under a statutory mandate to support American agricultural producers.
6. **Dietary Guidelines Validate Pulse Nutrition:** The Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2025–2030 explicitly prioritize "real food" and nutrient density, providing a powerful technical argument for increasing pulse inclusion in humanitarian rations over less nutritious staples.
7. **McGovern-Dole Program Continuity:** Funding for the McGovern-Dole International Food for Education and Child Nutrition Program remains level at \$240 million, securing a vital outlet for fortified pulse products and value-added commodities in school feeding initiatives.
8. **Risks from OCHA Pooled Funds:** The U.S. government's \$2 billion contribution to OCHA-managed pooled funds favors flexibility and cash transfers; the pulse industry must actively defend the separate \$1.2 billion USDA in-kind channel to prevent volume erosion.
9. **Operational Mechanisms Remain Active:** Despite the agency transfer, procurement continues through the Web-Based Supply Chain Management (WBSCM) system, with "call forwards" and solicitations proceeding, ensuring immediate logistical continuity for exporters.
10. **Need for Market Diversification:** With major markets like Yemen restricted, the industry must pivot to alternative high-need regions, such as Sub-Saharan Africa and Haiti, leveraging the "America First" framework to justify U.S. commodity use in permissible jurisdictions.

Introduction

The landscape of United States international food assistance has undergone its most significant transformation since 1961. The period from late 2025 into early 2026 has been defined by the dissolution of USAID and the centralization of aid policy at the Department of State, coupled with the transfer of logistical execution to the USDA. For the U.S. pulse industry, this shift presents a new operational reality: a move away from traditional development mandates toward a model of "transactional humanitarianism" that balances efficiency, national security, and agricultural support.

The Transfer of Food for Peace to USDA

The formal transfer of the Food for Peace (P.L. 480) program to the USDA Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS) marks a strategic realignment. Previously, USAID often prioritized Local and Regional Procurement (LRP)—buying food in foreign markets—which frequently displaced U.S. commodities. The USDA, by contrast, views food aid through the lens of domestic market support. This "natural home" for Food for Peace creates a structural firewall for in-kind donations. With the USDA now managing the \$1.2 billion Title II appropriation, the pulse industry is better positioned to integrate its products into procurement tenders that align with domestic harvest cycles and surplus management.

The "Humanitarian Reset" and Efficiency Mandates

In December 2025, the U.S. signed a Memorandum of Understanding with OCHA, launching a "Humanitarian Reset." The core objective is to maximize the impact of every dollar spent. While this initiative channels \$2 billion into efficient, cash-dominant pooled funds, it also creates an opening for pulses. The industry can leverage the efficiency argument by demonstrating that pulses offer the highest nutrient density per shipping container and the lowest cost per gram of protein compared to other commodities. In an era of budget constraints, pulses serve as the "efficiency crop"—shelf-stable, nutrient-dense, and cost-effective.

FY 2026 Appropriations and Funding

Following months of negotiation, Congress reached a compromise on the FY 2026 foreign assistance budget, totaling approximately \$50 billion. While this represents a roughly 16% reduction from previous years, it significantly exceeds the Administration's initial request for deeper cuts. Crucially, the legislation secures \$1.2 billion for Food for Peace Title II and extends the Bill Emerson Humanitarian Trust through September 2026. This funding floor provides the necessary capital to sustain U.S. pulse exports, provided the industry can effectively compete for tenders within the USDA's procurement system.

Geopolitical Redlines: The "Negative Earmarks"

A critical challenge for 2026 is the implementation of "negative earmarks," which prohibit U.S. aid from benefiting adversarial regimes. This policy has suspended operations in Houthi-controlled Yemen and Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. As these nations historically absorbed significant volumes of U.S. split peas and lentils, the industry faces an immediate supply overhang. Diversification is no longer optional; the industry must work with the USDA to identify permissible markets in the Horn of Africa and Latin America where humanitarian needs align with U.S. security interests.

Leveraging the 2025 Dietary Guidelines

The release of the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, 2025–2030 offers a new advocacy tool. By defining pulses as essential "real food" for American health, the guidelines delegitimize the use of inferior calorie sources in foreign aid. If pulses are vital for U.S. nutrition, the argument follows that they should be central to U.S.-funded humanitarian rations. This aligns nutritional science with the Administration's focus on quality and efficiency, supporting the inclusion of pulse-based ingredients in Ready-to-Use Therapeutic Foods (RUTF) and supplementary feeding programs.

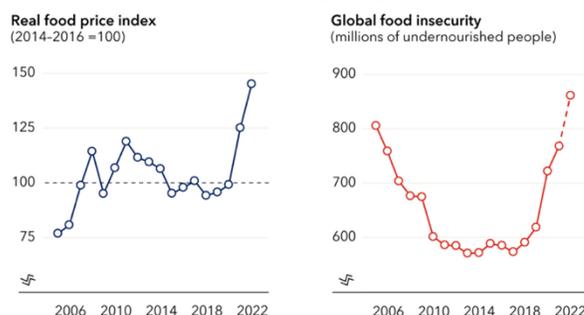
Conclusion

The U.S. pulse industry enters 2026 navigating a complex environment of reduced topline budgets but improved institutional alignment. The shift to USDA management offers a more producer-centric partner for in-kind aid, while the "Humanitarian Reset" demands a rigorous focus on efficiency. Success in this new era requires pivoting from traditional development narratives to hard data on cost-efficiency, nutritional value, and strategic alignment with "America First" priorities.

"Rising Hunger Amid Food Price Spikes: The global food crisis deepens as real food prices surge (left), pushing millions more into food insecurity, with undernourished populations reaching over 800 million by 2022 (right).

Going hungry

Millions more people face hunger globally as food prices spike.



Source: United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization.
Notes: Undernourishment means that a person is not able to acquire enough food to meet the daily minimum dietary energy requirements, over a period of one year.