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Bush Administration Gains Support for New Approach on Food Aid

By Celia W. Dugger
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KANSAS CITY, Mo., April 19 — Waiters in white aprons maneuvered through a noisy cocktail party here Tuesday evening, offering heaping platters of jumbo shrimp, lamb chops and crab-stuffed mushrooms to a crowd of people in town for an annual food aid conference dedicated to ending world hunger.

As shipping and agribusiness executives, charitable workers, lobbyists and federal employees mingled at Morton's steakhouse, Charles Worledge, who works for the Long Island-based Sealift Inc., a major shipper of American food to the hungry, offered an insight essential to understanding the politics of food aid.

"I thought this was a charity," he explained during the party, for which another shipping company played host. "It's not. It's a business."

It was here in Kansas City, at the 2005 food aid conference, that the Bush administration pushed for a fundamental change in food aid that would have diminished profits to domestic agribusiness and shipping companies. It proposed allowing a quarter of the Food for Peace budget to be used to buy food in poor countries near hunger crises, rather than buying only American-grown food that had to be shipped across oceans.

And Secretary of Agriculture Mike Johanns spoke at the conference on Wednesday to again make the administration's case for the same idea, contending that such a policy would speed delivery, improve efficiency and save many lives.

Congress in each of the past two years killed the proposal, which was opposed by agribusiness and shipping interests who stood to lose business, even as it won support from liberal Democrats like Representatives Barney Frank of Massachusetts and Earl Blumenauer of Oregon — generally not a subset of lawmakers found in the president's corner.

But there are signs that the frozen politics of the issue are beginning to thaw, especially as evidence of flaws in the current aid system mounts.

A Government Accountability Office report released on the eve of this conference described in

stark detail a system rife with inefficiencies: the amount of food shipped over the past five years has fallen by half as shipping and other logistical costs have soared. Only a little more than a third of federal food aid spending actually buys food. The United States feeds about 70 million people a year now instead of the more than 100 million it fed five years ago.

And experts worry that the food aid budget will feed even fewer of the world's 850 million hungry people as soaring demand for corn to make ethanol drives up the cost of that staple, a mainstay of food aid programs.

This year, some farm state lawmakers are for the first time considering backing a pilot program to test buying food overseas. Representative Jo Ann Emerson, a Missouri Republican on the Agricultural Subcommittee of the House Appropriations Committee, opposes major changes in food aid, but, she said, "doing a small demonstration is fine with me."

"If it turns out to work better in some places than others," she said, "I don't have a big problem with that."

And some influential supporters of the administration's more ambitious proposal, contained in the farm bill, are speaking out. Former President Bill Clinton recently said at a fund-raiser for Bread for the World, a Christian group that lobbies on hunger issues, that it was to Mr. Bush's "everlasting credit" that he had proposed buying food aid in poor countries. Such a policy had never crossed his mind when he was president, Mr. Clinton said, but he thought it was a great way to help farmers in Africa and buy food more efficiently.

And while an alliance of 15 nonprofit groups involved in food aid has endorsed only a pilot program for local purchase, Catholic Relief Services, which has a million donors and links with 13,000 parishes, has embraced the administration's proposal. Addressing hundreds of people assembled at the conference, Ken Hackett, president of the agency, which is a major player in food aid,

declared, "C.R.S. supports the administration's request for greater flexibility through local purchase."

At perhaps no time since the government's food aid program was created during the Eisenhower administration over a half century ago has there been more ferment about its future among scholars, politicians and advocates for the poor.

The curious mix of altruistic and self-interested motivations that animate American food aid spring from its origins. Early in the 1950s, the government was the farmer's buyer of last resort when commodity prices fell, and as a result it sat on mountains of grain. Public Law 480 and the Food for Peace program, adopted in 1954, provided a way to dispose of the surplus grain, which was costly to store, and at the same time feed the world's hungry people. The law mandated that food for the program be grown domestically.

Over the years, the farm programs evolved, and the government shifted to buying virtually all food on the open market, but the requirement that it be grown in the United States never changed. In recent years, the United States has bought more than half the food for its aid programs from just four agribusinesses and their subsidiaries: Archer Daniels Midland, Cargill, Bunge and Cal Western Packaging, according to the Agriculture Department.

Some researchers and advocates say it is time to rethink the American approach to fighting world hunger.

"Are we committed to eradicating hunger because it's feasible, not terribly expensive and our moral obligation as the richest society in human history?" asked Christopher B. Barrett, a Cornell University economist and the co-author of "Food Aid After Fifty Years." "Or are we just trying to placate a few agribusiness, shipping and NGO constituencies with a handout?" referring to nongovernmental organizations.

But some in Congress, as well as lobbyists for interest groups that benefit from food aid, warn that untying aid from requirements that the food be grown in America and mostly shipped on American-flagged vessels would shatter the political coalition that has sustained the program for decades and made the United States the world's largest food aid donor. They also warn that cash sent to poor countries can be misused or stolen, and that a mismanaged program to buy food in poor countries could drive up food prices.

Still, even here at the food aid conference organized by the Department of Agriculture and the Agency for International Development, some participants were talking up approaches that would sound heretical to old-line champions of food aid.

Marv Baldwin, president of the Foods Resource Bank, a Christian nonprofit group dedicated to fighting hunger, described how more than a thousand farmers have turned American-style food aid on its head.

They are raising farm animals and growing crops on some 7,000 acres across America. They donate their land, labor and the use of their equipment, and church groups help raise cash for fuel and fertilizer. But instead of shipping the crops and animals to poor lands to feed the hungry, the farmers sell them in the United States. The Foods Resource Bank then spends the money from those sales in developing countries to buy seeds, fertilizer, tools and other goods poor farmers say they need to grow food for their families.

Vernon Sloan, 81, used to donate and ship corn he grew on his 200-acre farm in Ohio to Haiti, Liberia and Angola to feed the hungry. But after years of working with the Foods Resource Bank, he said in an interview, he concluded that it was more practical to sell the crops here, avoid the huge shipping expense and use the proceeds to help farmers in Africa support themselves. "It's what's needed there," he said, "rather than what we think they need."