

## Devex Dish - More on the Aid Story, by Tania Karas, Devex, 29 Jan 2025

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**“Terrifying.” “Extremely concerned.” “Shock and disbelief.”**

These are just some of the words I’ve heard in the past few days to describe the effects of U.S. President Donald Trump’s 90-day freeze on foreign aid, along with the stop-work order halting most of that work. In my 14 years as a journalist, I have rarely heard the level of **fear and alarm that is gripping the food systems community** right now.

As Dish readers know, the U.S. is the world’s biggest food aid donor. The [U.S. Agency for International Development](#) spends almost \$5 billion on food aid annually. In addition to emergency aid, USAID’s flagship food security program is Feed the Future, which works to address root causes of hunger by boosting agriculture-led economic growth in 20 countries across Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia.

This freeze is all part of a Trump administration [effort to ensure U.S. foreign aid is aligned](#) with his “America First” agenda. And although the **stop-work order exempts “emergency food assistance,”** crucial work on food safety, nutrition, building resilience to climate shocks, and research to improve agricultural productivity has all been stopped. **Feed the Future**, given its longer-term focus, **has ground to a halt.**

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Here’s what you need to know:

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**Define “emergency”:** I went on a long journey — one might call it a rabbit hole — to learn [what falls under the “emergency food assistance” exemption](#) to the stop-work order. Do school meals count? Cash aid? Malnutrition treatment? It’s all ambiguous, but the answer may come down to where within the U.S. government’s budget a specific program’s funding comes from. (Shoutout to Stephanie Mercier, senior policy adviser at the Farm Journal Foundation, for helping me parse this). Two caveats: USAID did not get back to me by Dish’s send time to confirm, and four INGOs that deliver food aid that I spoke to are all interpreting this slightly differently.

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**Tick-tock:** 90 days is a long time to stop food, nutrition, and agriculture programs. In a place like Sudan, where nearly 25 million people face acute hunger, food rations alone will do little to stop the spread of famine. “There are other life-saving core humanitarian assistance that are both complementary to food aid and just as important, like basic shelter,” nutrition, and WASH, a U.S.-based senior humanitarian official tells me. The freeze also coincides with the planting season for many crops in areas where the U.S. provides support, meaning a year’s worth of seeds and scientific research paid for by the American taxpayer may be lost — the irony is not lost on me. At least two INGOs that get more than one-third of their funding from the U.S. tell me they’ll have to drastically scale down operations amid

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immediate cash-flow issues triggered by their inability to access funds USAID has committed to them.

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**Slash-and-burn:** USAID's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance, or BHA, has [furloughed at least 500 contractors](#), or nearly 40% of its team, according to a scoop from my colleague Elissa Miolene. BHA works on crises such as in Sudan, Gaza, northern Syria, and Haiti, and a huge part of their work is delivering emergency food aid. "They've effectively just taken away the U.S.' ability to respond to a humanitarian emergency," one of those former officials tells Elissa. And you're hearing this in Dish first: I've been told by one current and one former USAID official that **furloughs have also hit the Bureau for Resilience, Environment, and Food Security**, which runs Feed the Future. This follows a move Monday by USAID to put [dozens of agency leaders on administrative leave](#).

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**Partner problems:** USAID's partners that deliver food and nutrition aid — whether they're big INGOs, local organizations, or for-profit development contractors — are all trying to figure out which aspects of their work they can salvage. A [World Food Programme](#) spokesperson tells me **the agency is "not aware" of any WFP operations being stopped**, and that "[Washington,] DC colleagues are seeking clarity on the details of the [executive order] and the waiver to understand what is impacted." Meanwhile, UNICEF, which delivers nutrition aid, said it remains "determined to deliver our support to children even as we work through the implications of the decision." The U.S. contributes [45% of WFP's \\$9.7 billion budget](#), and [15% of UNICEF's \\$8.9 billion budget](#). For humanitarian funding, the proportion of U.S. funding to those agencies is even higher.

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**Pause and effect:** Everyone I spoke to questioned why work needs to stop as the [U.S. State Department](#) reviews foreign aid programs. "No one is disputing the value of a review or looking at the value proposition of foreign assistance," the humanitarian official tells me. "But the pause ... is causing real-world impacts now that will not be able to be undone, even if and when the pause is lifted."

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**Uncertain future:** Since Monday morning, the website for USAID's [Feed the Future](#) has been "[temporarily unavailable](#)." Links for some of the agency's other food, nutrition, water, and climate programs are broken. Feed the Future innovation labs, which develop tech to feed a growing population amid climate change and are based at universities around the U.S., have been halted, two people tell me.

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**Bright spot?** Late yesterday, Secretary of State Marco Rubio [approved a new waiver](#) for "life-saving humanitarian assistance" that would exempt some work from the 90-day pause, according to a memo which my colleague Adva Saldinger

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obtained. Rubio defines it as “core life-saving medicine, medical services, food, shelter and subsistence assistance, as well as supplies and reasonable administrative costs as necessary to deliver such assistance.” It’s up to humanitarian groups to determine whether they qualify. To this we say ... good luck to all.

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**Further reading:** [How Trump’s US aid stop-work order affects global food aid](#)

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