

Republicans defend USAID in hearing meant to criticize waste. *Roll Call*, 14 Feb 2025

Even critics of USAID acknowledge the critical soft power of targeted and efficient programming,' one subcommittee chair says

House Foreign Affairs Chair Brian Mast's effort Thursday to spotlight waste at the U.S. Agency for International Development resulted in Republicans, including some former aid officials, criticizing the manner in which the Trump administration is shuttering the government's biggest foreign aid agency and grinding assistance programs to a halt.

"[Chinese President] Xi Jinping is watching and he is waiting for the chance to fill any U.S. vacuum," said Rep. Young Kim, R-Calif., who chairs the House Foreign Affairs East Asia and Pacific Subcommittee. "Already, there have been many reports of Chinese Communist Party officials signaling their willingness to replace USAID in Nepal and [taking over] de-mining activities in Cambodia and these are just the instances that we know about. Even critics of USAID acknowledge the critical soft power of targeted and efficient programming."

Mast, R-Fla., titled his hearing "The USAID Betrayal," but two of the three witnesses — all of them former Republican lawmakers or senior appointees in Republican administrations — defended the bulk of the agency's work and said Elon Musk's cost-cutting task force should reverse course and allow the agency's thousands of staff to resume work. Musk leads the so-called Department of Government Efficiency.

"If you're upset about getting off course, so am I, but let's course correct, not course destroy," said Andrew Natsios, who led USAID for five years during the George W. Bush administration.

Mast read off USAID programs through the course of the hearing that he said had received waivers from Secretary of State Marco Rubio to resume their work. He chastised Democrats for criticism of how Musk has gone about dismantling USAID, accused them of exaggerating the negative impacts of the cutoff of foreign aid funding, and urged them to apologize for their criticism.

"The programs that USAID and the State Department have spent money on are indefensible," said Mast, highlighting spending on, among other things, \$22 million to support the tourism industry in Tunisia and Egypt and \$5.5 million to support LGBT communities in Uganda. "I think the fact is clear that America would have been better off if your money had been simply thrown into a fireplace."

Natsios said aid for tourism is economic development in a country like Egypt.

"Don't we want people working instead of being unemployed? It is 12 percent of the GDP of Egypt: tourism," he said. "We call it development tourism. We do it in Lebanon. We do it in Tunisia. We've done it in Kosovo and in Bosnia. We've done it in Morocco. We do it all over the world. It brings in revenue and employs people."

Unimplemented waivers

Both Republicans and Democrats said Rubio's waivers for humanitarian assistance and other aid aren't effective because USAID employees and contractors have been laid off, 93 overseas missions have been closed, and USAID's Phoenix payment system for disbursing financial assistance to recipients has been frozen. Health organizations say waivers have not brought the programs they work on back online.

“I’m also hearing many concerns regarding the lack of clarity on the scope of the waivers and challenges with getting paused programs restarted,” Kim said. “It’s hard to restart them if we’ve completely turned the lights off.”

Former Rep. Ted Yoho, a Florida Republican and ex-House Foreign Affairs member, told Kim the administration can ensure foreign aid waivers are being properly executed by bringing back USAID staff, including foreign nationals working in their home countries to implement aid programs.

“I think the important thing they can do is get it back online as quick as they can and put people, authorize them to get back into the field, the implementers,” said Yoho. “The people that were there on the ground with USAID . . . these are the people who have institutional knowledge, and they know how to do that. They’re not Rs or Ds. They’re mission driven.”

Yoho, who served four terms before retiring at the end of the first Trump administration, is now co-chair of the Consensus for Development Reform, a conservative foreign aid organization.

Democrats oppose the administration’s broad attacks on USAID and the funding freeze on most foreign aid.

“If there’s a problem or you don’t like a certain kind of program, you can fix that, you can address it, you can discuss it and talk about how to make it better,” said Rep. Dina Titus, D-Nev., noting that she wouldn’t seek to dissolve the Agriculture Department even though she doesn’t support some programs. “You don’t destroy it. You don’t just throw the baby out with the bath.”

USAID’s model in question

Republicans appeared to fall into two camps: those, like Mast, who have cheered on DOGE’s efforts to shut off international assistance and lay off or place on administrative the bulk of USAID’s workforce, and those who want to see most of USAID’s work resumed despite their criticism for some progressive programs approved during the Biden administration.

This latter camp also appears divided on whether USAID should be fully merged within the State Department or remain a semi-autonomous agency.

“I don’t know if they have the bandwidth or the expertise and the capability,” Yoho said about the State Department’s potentially taking over the agency’s work.

Rep. Michael McCaul, R-Texas, the former committee chairman, advocated closer State Department supervision of the agency.

“Why was USAID created in the first place in 1961? It was to counter the Soviet Union during the Cold War. I believe it still has a legitimate purpose to counter the rising threat of China and . . . our other foreign adversaries. It also has the ability to counter terrorism,” said McCaul. He also praised the agency’s Food for Peace program and the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, better known as PEPFAR.

Lawmakers on both sides of the aisle agreed USAID should resume screening for infectious diseases that have the potential to spread to the U.S. like Ebola and new strands of avian flu.

“The outbreak of diseases, infectious diseases is one of the big things that USAID helps to prevent,” said Rep. Sara Jacobs, D-Calif. “This is why I think we all should be so horrified that because of Elon Musk’s illegal takeover of USAID, USAID is no longer able to screen travelers

at airports leaving Uganda, where there is currently an Ebola outbreak that Americans have already been infected by.”

Natsios estimated that some 55 percent of USAID’s fiscal 2023 \$38 billion budget was spent on “life-saving” programs such as humanitarian assistance, public health and disease prevention.