FOREIGN ASSISTANCE

U.S. Agencies Face Challenges to Improving the Efficiency and Effectiveness of Food Aid

What GAO Found

Multiple challenges combine to hinder the efficiency of delivery of U.S. food aid by reducing the amount, quality, and timeliness of food provided. These challenges include (1) funding and planning processes that increase delivery costs and lengthen time frames; (2) transportation contracting practices that create high levels of risk for ocean carriers, resulting in increased rates; (3) legal requirements that can result in the awarding of food aid contracts to more expensive service providers; and (4) inadequate coordination between U.S. agencies and food aid stakeholders in systematically addressing food delivery problems, such as spoilage. U.S. agencies have taken some steps to address timeliness concerns. USAID has been stocking or prepositioning food commodities domestically and abroad and USDA has implemented a new transportation bid process, but the long-term cost effectiveness of these initiatives has not yet been measured.

Selected Trends in U.S. Food Aid, Fiscal Years 2002 to 2006

Given limited food aid resources and increasing emergencies, ensuring that food reaches the most vulnerable populations—such as poor women who are pregnant or children who are malnourished—is critical to enhancing its effectiveness. However, USAID and USDA do not sufficiently monitor the effectiveness of food aid programs, particularly in recipient countries, due to limited staff, competing priorities, and restrictions in the use of food aid resources. For example, although USAID has some non-Title II-funded staff assigned to monitoring, it had only 23 Title II-funded staff assigned to missions and regional offices in just 10 countries to monitor programs costing about $1.7 billion in 55 countries in fiscal year 2006. As a result of such limitations, U.S. agencies may not be sufficiently accomplishing their goals of getting the right food to the right people at the right time.