

Omaha World-Herald: USAID reform should be strategic, protect Nebraska farmers

By Rep. Don Bacon



Rep. Don Bacon speaks at the Nebraska Walk for Life in Lincoln on Feb. 1.
CHRIS MACHIAN, THE WORLD-HERALD

https://omaha.com/opinion/column/article_27fd79cb-277e-42ae-b678-6bb6da67a3ef.html

Nebraska’s farmers don’t just put food on our tables — they help feed the world and advance our national security interests. They wake up before dawn, work long hours and keep our agricultural economy strong. But they don’t do it alone.

Since its inception in 1961, the United States Agency for International Development has played an important role in getting American agricultural products to those in need while also strengthening U.S. influence abroad.

When determining USAID’s future, Congress should work with the White House and focus on smart reforms to eliminate wasteful and nonsensical spending rather than dismantling all the programs entirely. Get rid of the bad, but don’t throw out the good with the bad. A wholesale shutdown would

take buyers away from our farmers, weaken the economy, and create security risks that adversaries like China and Russia are eager to exploit.

In Nebraska and across the country, USAID plays a crucial role in supporting American agriculture — purchasing more than \$2 billion in agricultural products annually, with over 40% of the food aid we send abroad coming directly from American farms. That means USAID isn't just a foreign assistance program — it's a critical buyer for corn and other crops Nebraska's farmers grow and it keeps people from starving overseas. When these programs shut down, markets for our farmers disappear — leading to tougher times for the men and women who keep our economy strong. For family farms already navigating tight margins, losing a major market like this could mean the difference between staying afloat and selling a generational farm.

Beyond the immediate impact on agriculture, halting USAID programs also poses a significant risk to our national security. For decades, USAID has been instrumental in stabilizing regions that might otherwise become breeding grounds for terrorism.

Cutting off these programs creates a void that will be filled by someone — whether it's China increasing its economic influence in Africa, Russia expanding its grip in Eastern Europe or ISIS gaining ground in war-torn countries. If we aim to protect our interests abroad and prevent threats from reaching our shores, we must utilize every tool at our disposal, including well-executed foreign aid.

That's not to say we shouldn't also demand accountability from USAID. It is undeniable that some programs have been mismanaged, misused taxpayer dollars, and could have been better spent on domestic investments. I'll be the first to agree that we shouldn't be spending taxpayer money on atheism programming in Nepal nor on transgender programs in Guatemala. But stopping millions of AIDS deaths in Africa is an honorable program that we want to continue. That necessitates change and a targeted approach — not a sledgehammer.

Change also requires partners in Congress to step up. A federal judge recently held that the Trump administration cannot unilaterally withhold \$2 billion in USAID. Working with the Trump administration, Congress should conduct an audit, cut wasteful spending, increase transparency and ensure that our international assistance directly benefits America's interests. Doing so will allow us to prioritize

programs that lead to economic growth, strengthen our national security and help our farmers compete in the global marketplace.

Together we should work toward reforms that protect our farmers, ensure responsible spending, and maintain American leadership in the world. Smart reforms will ensure we continue to put Americans first — without ceding ground to our adversaries or hurting growers and producers in the U.S. Let us not throw out the baby with the bathwater.

Don Bacon has served as the U.S. representative for Nebraska's 2nd Congressional District since 2017. He previously served nearly thirty years in the U.S. Air Force and retired as a brigadier general.