

# Logistics and Relief Commodities Sector Update

OCTOBER 2013

## SECTOR OVERVIEW

As part of its efforts to ensure a rapid response to humanitarian emergencies around the world, USAID's Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance (USAID/OFDA)—the lead U.S. Government (USG) office for international disaster response—stockpiles relief supplies at regional warehouses in Miami, Florida; Pisa, Italy; and Dubai, United Arab Emirates. Stockpiled commodities include blankets, plastic sheeting for emergency shelter, hygiene kits, kitchen sets, water purification tablets, 10-liter collapsible water containers, and 10,000-liter water storage bladders.

In addition to warehoused items, USAID/OFDA maintains a full-time team that handles logistics-related requests in the aftermath of disaster. The USAID/OFDA logistics team based in Washington, D.C., coordinates the delivery of relief supplies from regional warehouse hubs to affected areas via air, sea, or land. USAID/OFDA logisticians can also quickly procure relief items that are not stockpiled in regional warehouses from numerous suppliers worldwide. When working in the field, USAID/OFDA logistics personnel help receive the relief commodities and ensure that supplies reach implementing partners for distribution to affected populations.

In Fiscal Year (FY) 2013, through grants and in-kind contributions to humanitarian partners, USAID/OFDA provided nearly \$170 million for relief commodities and associated transport, as well as for other logistical support. This funding represents approximately 20 percent of the total humanitarian assistance USAID/OFDA provided globally during the fiscal year.



USAID/OFDA-provided emergency health kits arrive at a warehouse. Each kit has sufficient supplies to meet the basic health needs of 10,000 people for three months. (Photo by USAID)

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## STANDARDIZING COMMODITIES TO BETTER MEET POST-DISASTER NEEDS

Relief commodities come in many shapes and sizes. The items included in a kitchen set, for example, may change depending on the humanitarian organization or donor agency from which it originates; even the quality and size of a bar of soap may vary. By standardizing the specifications of relief items, the international humanitarian community gains many benefits.

Commodity standardization helps streamline procurement, shipping, and storage processes; guarantees that the provided assistance meets minimum international standards; and improves equity in humanitarian assistance by ensuring that all beneficiaries affected by a disaster receive the same quantity and quality of relief supplies.



USAID/OFDA stockpiles emergency relief items in a warehouse in Dubai, United Arab Emirates (above), and other warehouses around the world in preparation for future responses. (Photo by Robert Demerenville/USAID)

Following significant review and research in FY 2012, including consultation with both internal and external technical specialists, USAID/OFDA—with the help of its logistics officers—began updating its warehouse stockpiles, bringing many commodity specifications in-line with those used by humanitarian partners, U.N. agencies, and other international organizations. This process continued throughout FY 2013. New and altered commodities include both medium and high thermal fleece blankets, plastic sheeting in metric measurements, residual chlorine test kits to determine water source purification levels, and improved hygiene kits—better equipped with products for women—sufficient to meet the

needs of a five-person family for one month. Such standardization assures that USAID/OFDA can provide the relief items best suited to meet the most common and broadest range of needs after disasters, thereby improving the speed and efficiency of its assistance. In addition, through the standardization, USAID/OFDA demonstrated its support for the promotion of worldwide standards and for the further professionalization of the logistics sector.

Going forward, the USAID/OFDA logistics team will continue to monitor all aspects of the relief commodities supply chain, inspecting the production, distribution, and impact of supplies to help ensure suitable, rapid assistance to disaster-affected populations around the world.

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## OVERCOMING LOGISTICAL CHALLENGES TO AID DROUGHT-AFFECTED POPULATIONS IN RMI

Between January and July 2013, unusually low levels of rainfall triggered severe drought conditions in northern areas of the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), a nation located in the middle of the Pacific Ocean that comprises more than 1,000 individual atolls, islands, and islets spread over hundreds of miles. The drought led to depleted freshwater reserves and damaged crops, leaving thousands of people in need of humanitarian assistance, particularly food and safe drinking water.

In early 2013, as dry conditions set in, USAID/OFDA began donating reverse osmosis units—machines that can render seawater safe for consumption—to the Government of the RMI (GoRMI) in preparation for drought effects. In May, U.S. Ambassador to RMI Thomas H. Armbruster issued a disaster declaration due to humanitarian needs resulting from the drought, and in response, USAID/OFDA provided \$100,000 to its partner working in RMI, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), to distribute emergency relief items, including water containers, water purification tablets, hygiene kits, and water bladders, from a USAID-funded warehouse in the RMI capital of Majuro.

Through its unique status as a freely associated state of the United States, RMI also had access to disaster relief assistance from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and other USG agencies. Thus, as drought conditions in RMI worsened, USAID/OFDA staff collaborated closely with colleagues from FEMA and USAID/Philippines to conduct assessments of drought-affected areas and advise on possible USG response options.

In support of the humanitarian response, USAID/OFDA logistics officers—both in RMI and in D.C.—coordinated with USG interagency partners, including FEMA and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Service, and other stakeholders, such as IOM and the GoRMI, to facilitate the delivery of USG assistance in RMI. Working with shipping contractors and warehouse facilities, USAID/OFDA logistics officers planned and oversaw the distribution of emergency relief items, safe drinking water, and food commodities from Majuro to RMI's drought-affected atolls and islands over a months-long response.



On Mejit Atoll, RMI, local residents and humanitarian staff, including a USAID/OFDA logistics officer, carry relief commodities off-loaded from a cargo ship over a coral reef for loading into a second boat. The boat must transfer the goods across the atoll's lagoon to shore, where beneficiaries can collect the commodities. (Courtesy of IOM)

Beyond organizing a complex response with many participants, the USAID/OFDA logistics team also had to overcome a series of significant logistical challenges posed by the RMI landscape. For example, planes carrying commodities could not land on most of the affected RMI atolls and islands. Hence, nearly all relief items, including food items and containers full of safe drinking water, traveled by sea, sailing for days to reach some of the more remote locations. In addition, the presence of coral reefs and the lack of piers complicated ship access to most atolls and islands, and several sites had only one boat large enough to transport commodities from the cargo ship to shore. As a result, offloading relief items required an entire day in most locales. Nonetheless, due in large part to the work of its logistics officers, USAID/OFDA was able to successfully convey much-needed USG humanitarian assistance to affected residents throughout RMI.

In FY 2013, USAID/OFDA logistics and relief commodities assistance to RMI—funded by FEMA—amounted to more than \$1.4 million.

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