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## To counter problems of global hunger, try spuds

By Elisabeth Rosenthal

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**VITORIA-GASTEIZ, Spain:** With governments having trouble feeding the growing number of hungry poor and grain prices fluctuating wildly, food scientists are proposing a novel solution for the global food crisis: Let them eat potatoes.

Grains like wheat and rice have long been staples of diets in most of the world and the main currency of food aid. Now, a number of scientists, nutritionists and aid specialists are increasingly convinced that the humble spud should be playing a much larger role to ensure a steady supply of food in the developing world.

Poor countries could grow more potatoes, they say, to supplement or even replace grains that are most often shipped in from far away and are subject to severe market gyrations.

Even before a sharp price spike earlier this year, governments in countries from China to Peru to Malawi had begun urging both growing and eating potatoes as a way to ensure food security and build rural income.

Production in China rose 50 percent from 2005 to 2007, and the government has called potatoes "a way out of poverty." In Peru, where potatoes are traditionally part of the highland diet, President Alan García has led a campaign to promote potato eating in cities. Schools, prisons and army canteens are serving papapan, bread made with potatoes, helping increase potato consumption 20 percent this year.

A decade ago, the vast majority of potatoes were grown and eaten in the developed world, mostly in Europe and the Americas. Today, China and India - neither big potato-eating countries in the past - rank first and third, respectively, in global potato production. And in 2005, developing countries produced a majority of the world's potatoes for the first time.

"Increasingly, the potato is being seen as a vital food-security crop and a substitute for costly grain imports," said NeBambi Litaladio, a roots and tubers specialist at the UN Food and Agriculture Organization in Rome. "Potato consumption is expanding strongly in developing countries, where the potato is an increasingly important source of food, employment and income."

Though the price of grains has receded in recent months from historic highs, grains are still far more expensive than just two years ago. The UN agency continues to strongly encourage countries to diversify into potato production, Litaladio said, adding: "The world economy has entered a phase of wild swings. New and even more severe high price events could be just around the corner."

And so the potato's image is shifting from that of a food fit for peasants and pigs (and associated mostly with a devastating famine in Ireland) to a serious nutritional aid and an object of scientific study. When the United Nations announced last year that 2008 would be the Year of the Potato, few took it seriously. That was before grain prices doubled between early 2007 and spring 2008, and the UN World Food Program announced that it needed an extra half-billion dollars to buy grain.

Pamela Anderson, director of the International Potato Center, a global scientific research center in Lima, said that as recently last year, the most common question she fielded concerned her favorite potato recipe. "Now the food system is so fragile that people have stopped laughing. People are asking, 'How can potatoes help solve the problem?'" Anderson was one of dozens of international scientists who met this month in the heart of Basque country at Neiker Tecnalia, a 200-year-old agricultural research center. Their goal: to discuss advances in potato farming, like the development of pest- and drought-resistant strains that could be used in poorer countries.

Potatoes are a good source of protein, starch, vitamins and nutrients like zinc and iron. As a crop, they require less energy and water to grow than wheat, taking just three months from planting to harvest.

Since they are heavy and do not transport well, they are not generally traded on world financial markets, making their price less vulnerable to speculation. They are not generally used to produce biofuels, a new use for food crops that has helped drive up grain prices. When grain prices skyrocketed, potato prices remained stable.

Beyond that, potato yields can be easily increased in most of the world, where they are grown inefficiently and in small numbers.

Thanks to the "green revolution" of the 1970s, yields of wheat, rice and corn jumped more than 50 percent in a decade as fertilizers and new planting techniques were used. Potatoes never got that kind of attention.

In poor countries, potato yields are still relatively low, at just one to five tons of potatoes per hectare, or about two and a half acres, less than 15 percent the yield in the developed world.

But potatoes have limitations from the perspective of traditional food aid programs, which buy or receive food from where it can be produced cheaply and efficiently and send it to where it is needed.

Because they spoil easily and are heavy to ship, groups like the World Food Program avoid them. Pound for pound, they contain less protein than wheat, although, looked at another way, an acre of potatoes yields more protein than an acre of wheat.

"They are quite perishable, especially in hotter climates; they sprout and rot quite quickly," said Tina van den Briel, a nutrition specialist at the World Food Program. She added that potatoes were currently a staple food in very few countries, although they were widely used in stews.

"Moving from rice to potatoes is a big leap for people," she said. Nonetheless, the agency has made it a priority to increase production of food for aid in the countries where it is needed, both to lessen transit costs when fuel costs are high and to aid local economies.

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