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### Peas and lentils become heavy cargo

Shipments through Port Authority spike 425%

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When it comes to exports, New Jersey is consistently infamous.

Huge volumes of waste paper, scrap metal, wood pulp and chemicals -- some of the grimmest remnants of manufacturing and modern-day life -- leave the Port of New York and New Jersey each year for other parts of the world.

Now, you can throw in an eye-popping surge of dried peas and lentils into the mix.

During the first four months of 2008, the volume of dried peas and lentils leaving the port soared a whopping 425 percent over last year, largely as a result of the World Food Program's efforts to provide a basic form of protein to people in the poorest and most unstable areas of Africa.

Food aid shipments through the port are nothing new, but by all accounts, the spike captured in recent data released by the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey was unusual.

John Roberts, who oversees World Food Program operations for Jeodis Wilson, a freight-forwarding company in Woodbridge, said the increase likely was the result of a difficult comparison to last year. Then, pea and lentil cargo destined for Kenya and Sudan could not be cleared by authorities, leading to a temporary drop in shipments.

"The first six months of last year was a period when they were having problems," Roberts said. "Peas and lentils have both picked up considerably for this year."

The gains come as exports continue to surge because of the weak U.S. dollar that makes American-made goods cheaper overseas. Exports of wood pulp, which is used in Asia's paper mills to produce packaging, rose during the first part of 2008 by 32 percent over the first four months of last year. The volume of used cars leaving the port jumped 48 percent and bundles of recycled paper rose 12 percent.

Most dried split peas, chick peas and lentils, meanwhile, are grown in the Northwest, on farms in Washington State, Idaho, Montana and North Dakota.

For the 2008 selling year, farmers harvested a total of 811,300 acres, or 721,286 metric tons, of the tiny, dried vegetables, said Tim McGreevy, executive director of the Idaho-based Dry Pea and Lentil Council. Imports from Canada and a surplus from last year's harvest boosted the supply to 825,061 metric tons.

More than half of those peas and lentils -- 515,445 metric tons to be precise -- were exported, including roughly 120,000 metric tons that were sold to the Department of Agriculture for international food aid programs.

"They've been buying peas for a long, long time to put in to the food aid channels," McGreevy said.

Dried split peas, as it turns out, represent a significant sliver of what the World Food Program describes as a "food basket," which may also include wheat, corn maize, vegetable oil and salt. They are one of the least expensive protein-packed vegetables. They can be prepared easily and they last a long time.

"Their shelf life isn't an issue," McGreevy said. "They're still finding them in the Egyptian tombs."

After the vegetables leave the Northwest, they're loaded into rail cars in Chicago for ports in the East, most often Norfolk or further north to New Jersey or New York. In all, more than 33,000 metric tons of peas and lentils left the Port of New York and New Jersey during the first four months of the year, according to data released by the port authority. The largest deliveries went to Chad, Afghanistan and Somalia, port officials said.

The Port Authority's figures also included separate smaller, commercial shipments of green peas and black beans exported through the region to other areas of the world, including Barbados, Puerto Rico and Sweden.

But the largest exports of the dried version of the vegetables were intended to help people in some of the poorest, most troubled places in Africa. In addition to the World Food Bank, other shipments of dried split peas and lentils were arranged by organizations working with the Department of Agriculture's Foreign Agricultural Service.

During the first week of the year, alone, four ships carrying millions of pounds of dried peas and lentils left for Sudan and Libya and Spain, where the vegetables would have been loaded into smaller ships and transported to other spots, such as Chad, according to data compiled by Newark-based PIERS Global Intelligence Solutions and experts familiar with the routes used by food aid organizations.

Through the end of April, 29 more ships left the port carrying loads of the tiny dried vegetables, said PIERS, transporting them largely to areas of Africa, from Cameroon and Kenya to Tanzania and Mozambique.

"These are big operations," said Brenda Barton, a spokeswoman for the World Food Program in Italy. "These are areas where we're feeding the most numbers of people."

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