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Q2 palay output seen slightly higher

BY EIREENE JAIREE GOMEZ

THE Philippines' *palay* (unhusked rice) production in the second quarter of 2018 may be slightly higher than expected because of better irrigation and increased government subsidies, the Philippines Statistics Authority (PSA) said.

In its April-June 2018 Palay and Corn Forecast, the state-run statistics agency said output in the quarter, based on the standing crop, could hit 4.08 million metric tons (MMT), a 0.74-percent increase from the 4.05 MMT projected in April, but a 1.8-percent decrease from last year's 4.15 MMT.

Harvest area may have dropped by 1.5 percent to 932.64 thousand hectares from 947.19 thousand hectares last year, while yield per hectares may have dipped by 0.2 percent from 4.38 MMT per hectare in 2017.

"Additions in *palay* production are foreseen in [the provinces of] Isabela, Nueva Ecija, Laguna, Quezon, Mindoro Oriental, and Surigao Sur, resulting from [the] control of pests and diseases and sufficient water supply during the cropping period," PSA added.

About 824.66 thousand hectares, or 88.4 percent of the updated standing crop, have been harvested.

On the planting intentions of farmers in July to September, about 487.27 thousand hectares, or 56.1 percent of the total, have been actually planted.

For corn, production may have decreased to 1.27 MMT, 0.7-percent lower than last month's forecast of 1.28 MMT. It may also have been 4.4-percent lesser than 1.33 MMT in the previous year.

Harvest areas may have increased slightly to 391.29 thousand hectares from 391.26 thousand, while yield may decline to 3.25 MT per hectare from 3.27 MT.

"Probable decrements in corn output are largely noted in Kalinga and South Cotabato [provines]," PSA said.

"Insufficient soil moisture during [the] vegetative and reproductive stages of crop in Kalinga may pull down the production. In South Cotabato, yield may decrease due to the effects of intense hot weather," it added.

About 319,000 hectares, or 81.5 of the standing crop, have been harvested. About 530,490 hectares, or 62.3 percent of the planting intentions in July to September have been realized.

Earlier, Agriculture Secretary Emmanuel F. Piñol said the increased palay and corn harvest areas and yield resulted from public-and private-sector financial and technical assistance.

Palay production this year is projected to exceed the record 19.267 million metric tons (MT) in 2017, he added.

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AGRICULTURE

Q2 PALAY PRODUCTION SEEN DOWN 1.8%

By Karl R. Ocampo
@kocampoINQ

The country's palay production in the second quarter was seen to have contracted by 1.8 percent to 4.05 million metric tons (MT) from 4.15 million MT last year, data from the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) showed.

Areas planted to rice also declined to 932,000 hectares (ha) from last year's 947,000 ha.

Nonetheless, the PSA expects additional palay production in Isabela, Nueva Ecija, Laguna, Quezon, Mindoro Oriental and Surigao Sur to be brought about by good pest and disease control and sufficient water supply during the cropping period.

Based on data from the National Food Authority (NFA), total production this year was seen to reach only 12.26 million metric tons while consumption for the year may reach 14.1 million MT. The country may have to resort to increased importation to cover the shortfall of 1.8 million MT.

Last week, the NFA said it was proposing to its council to import an additional 500,000 MT of rice to boost its buffer stock and distribution in the market. This would bring the grains agency's rice imports so far to 1 million MT.

In an earlier interview, Agriculture Secretary Emmanuel Piñol said the Department of Agriculture was expecting palay output to reach a record-high this year as more farmers were seen planting the staple due to higher buying prices for palay.

In 2017, the country's rice production reached 19.26 million MT, which Piñol said "was the highest in the country's history." INQ

BusinessWorld
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SRA seeks imposition of retail price caps for sugar

THE Sugar Regulatory Administration (SRA) is asking the Department of Agriculture (DA) to include sugar in the list of agricultural products that will be subject to the department's suggested retail price (SRP) system.

In a statement over the weekend, SRA Administrator Hermenegildo R. Serafica said that an SRP for sugar will "ensure that the consumers are protected and not taken advantage of."

"The high prices of sugar are brought about by the erroneous perception being circulated by enterprising individuals that there is a shortage in sugar," he added.

"Some are taking advantage of the issue of the lack of sugar for bottlers and using this to raise prices even for standard refined and raw sugar, where there is no shortage."

The SRA monitors sugar prices in supermarkets three times a week, Mr. Serafica said. It found a grocery chain that has set "exorbitant prices well above the prevailing price" on the sugar, though he did not identify it.

As of June 10, the SRA's data indicate a prevailing prices for raw sugar in wet markets and supermarkets at P50 per kilogram (kg) and P55 per kg, respectively.

Both the SRA and DA pointed to speculators as the reason behind rising retail prices amid low farmgate prices.

"The shortage is in the bottlers' grade or premium refined sugar required by beverage companies such as Coke. This type of sugar has very specific quality requirements and standards that can be met by only a handful of sugar refiners in the Philippines," he added.

"Since it is the end of the milling season, our refiners are constrained by the availability of bagasse to fuel their boilers for refining."

Bagasse is a byproduct of sugarcane fiber after cane juice is extracted.

In June, the SRA allowed the importation of 200,000 metric ton of sugar.

Last week, Agriculture Secretary Emmanuel F. Piñol said that the department is considering a review of the sugar importation policy.

He alleged that traders who were supposed to supply sugar to bottlers and processors redirected their stocks to the commercial market instead.

Mr. Piñol also said last week that the DA is set to review other farm commodities "with volatile prices" which can be put under an SRP regime. The DA is looking into poultry and hogs as the next group of agricultural goods for which price ceilings will be set.

Eight commodities — regular-milled rice, some types of fish, onion and garlic — currently are sold under SRP rules. — **Anna Gabriela A. Mogato**

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DA to propose letting commercial boats inside 15-kilometer limit

THE Department of Agriculture (DA) and the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) said they will propose adjustments to improve fishing yields, including permitting commercial boats to operate in municipal fishing waters.

Agriculture Secretary Emmanuel F. Piñol said that the government agencies will be meeting with fisheries stakeholders soon to discuss the industry's preferences while presenting their own suggestions.

Mr. Piñol said the catch has not improved due to the 15-kilometer fishing limit that prevents commercial boats from operating closer to shore, in municipal waters.

"It has been established that the reason behind the decline in the catch of our fishermen [is] the 15-kilometer limit," he said.

While the closed fishing season the DA has imposed has led to a decline in fisheries output in the first quarter, Mr. Piñol said that he expects yields to rise starting with the second quarter.

He said one option is to have local government units (LGU) adjust the definition of municipal waters, as allowed by the law.

Other amendments will be studied by the department's lawyers.

"LGUs are allowed to modify their municipal waters. For example, in Davao, instead of 15 [km.] , they are now allowing commercial boats to fish between 10.1 [km.] to 15 km. from shore to catch fish," he added.

BFAR Director Eduardo B. Gongona noted that Republic Act (RA) no. 10654, which amended the Fisheries Code, affected commercial fishermen by preventing them from entering municipal waters.

According to BFAR, there has been 20% to 22% decrease in the catch since RA No. 10654 was implemented. — **Anna Gabriela A. Mogato**

BusinessMirror
A broader look at today's business

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SRA to DA: Include sugar in SRP scheme

By Jasper Emmanuel Y. Arcalas
@jearcalas

THE Sugar Regulatory Administration (SRA) said it is mulling over a suggested retail price (SRP) for sugar to protect consumers from unscrupulous traders who have taken advantage of a shortage of the sweetener required by beverage makers.

SRA Administrator Hermenigildo R. Serafica told the BusinessMirror that he will propose to Agriculture Secretary Emmanuel F. Piñol the inclusion of sugar in the list of farm products covered by the Department of Agriculture's (DA) SRP scheme.

Serafica added that he and Piñol have initially discussed the inclusion of sugar during consultations held by the DA on the implementation of the SRP scheme.

"Sugar will be included in the SRP," he said via SMS. "SRA will make its recommendation."

Serafica said the "high" retail price of sugar today is brought about by "the erroneous perception being circulated by enterprising individuals that there is a shortage in sugar."

"The shortage is in the bottlers' grade or premium refined sugar required by beverage companies, such as Coke. This type of sugar has very specific quality requirements and standards that can be met by only a handful of sugar refiners in the Philippines," he said in a statement issued over the weekend.

"Some are taking advantage of the issue of the lack of sugar for bottlers and using this to propagate high prices even for standard refined and raw sugar, which has no shortage. Even though farmgate prices have started to go down, retail prices remain high," he added.

Serafica said the government-owned and -controlled corporation of the DA has already notified a grocery chain "with exorbitant prices well beyond the prevailing prices." The "grocery chain" has been required to reply within five days upon receipt of the notice.

As of July 10 the prevailing price of raw sugar is P50 per kilogram in Metro Manila wet markets, while it costs P55 per kg in supermarkets. The retail price of refined sugar in Metro Manila-based wet markets is at P65 per kg, while those sold in supermarkets is pegged at P64 per kg.

The prevailing retail price of raw sugar in the market today is P8 higher than the average of P47 per kg recorded at the start of the year, according to SRA data. The prevailing price of refined sugar has gone up by at least P10 per kg since January.

On a yearly basis, the prevailing retail price of raw sugar rose by P10 per kg, while that of refined sugar grew by P12 per kg, SRA data showed.

The SRA has allowed the importation of 200,000 metric tons of sugar to plug the shortfall in local production. Of the volume, 100,000 MT was allocated for bottlers' grade refined sugar; 50,000 MT, standard grade refined sugar; and 50,000 MT, raw sugar for domestic consumption.

Earlier, Piñol said the country's total sugar production in the current crop year ending August 31 may fall below the SRA's estimated output of 2.27 MMT by as much as 200,000 MT. This means that total sugar production may settle at around 2.07 MMT, 17.2 percent lower than the 2.5 MMT produced in the previous crop year.

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THE NATION'S LEADING NEWSPAPER
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Mass resignation at CIIF-OMG to hurt coco farmers

By **MADELAINE B. MIRAFLOR**

Coconut farmers will lose direct clients amid the mass resignation at Coconut Industry Investment Fund-Oil Mills Group (CIIF-OMG) in protest to Malacañang's decision to appoint a new president to the oil mills' group.

Established in the 1970s, CIIF-OMG is a conglomerate of strategically located oil mills and refineries in the Philippines.

Last week, all its board and key officers tendered mass resignation amid the appointment of Rehan Lao — who is currently facing criminal and administrative cases — as the company's new president.

On Friday, Executive Secretary Salvador Medialdea accepted the resignation of the entire board of the company.

Philippine Coconut Authority (PCA) Administrator Romulo J. dela Rosa said in an interview that such event would hurt coconut farmers who have been directly selling their yield to CIIF-OMG.

"CIIF has a good direct buying scheme with coconut farmers. So it is regrettable that this will stop (I hope temporarily) as individual farmer and farmer groups will lose the advantage of direct selling to CIIF oil mills," Dela Rosa said.

To be specific, the mass resignation will result in the closure of three oil mills that CIIF-OMG operates. These oil mills are located in Iligan, Legazpi, and Bauan.

These facilities produce crude coconut oil from copra that is being exported to other countries.

Based on the company's estimate, such closure would result in economic loss of about ₱400,000 daily.

In the meantime, Dela Rosa said the PCA will facilitate farmer-mill direct marketing with any interested oil mill or coconut integrated processing plant.

As a whole, he said this amount will not have a big impact on the copra prices considering that there are many other players in the coconut oil milling sector.

"Other oil millers will take up the slack. Thus, losses to the industry will be mitigated," Dela Rosa said. "Since CIIF does not control a large share of the market, the impact overall might not be huge."

At present, the total crushing capacity of CIIF-OMG's oil mills accounts for about 10 percent of the country's coconut oil milling industry.

Its plants have a combined annual crushing capacity of 370,000 metric tons (MT) of copra with a refining capacity of 240,000 MT of different grades of processed coconut oils.

Copra Buying Stations (CBS) are located near coconut farmers and local dealers, to gather and buy the copra. This assures oil mill plants sufficient stocks to keep the manufacturing operations dynamic.

Through the years, the CIIF-OMG has proven to serve global demands for coconut-based fats and oils and raw materials for animal feeds.

Malaya
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Murky records on NIA's P22.3-B uncollected irrigation fees: COA

BY PETER TABINGO

THE National Irrigation Administration (NIA) may end up having to write off the bulk of its uncollected service fees that has reached P22.304 billion as of yearend 2017 before President Duterte signed the law giving free irrigation to small farmers.

A Commission on Audit (COA) review of the agency's accounts receivable revealed irrigation service fees (ISFs) from national irrigation systems (NIS) stood at P13.87 billion while unpaid fees from communal irrigation systems (CIS) were at P8.286 billion.

The COA said poor record-keeping stretching to decades back has rendered the accounts doubtful due to the lack of supporting documents.

Auditors also said it was difficult to establish what part of the uncollected sums is covered by the policy of condonation under the Free Irrigation Service Act and what should remain in NIA's books as unsettled accounts.

"The reliability and collectability of accounts receivable-irrigation service fees (AR-ISF) aggregating P22.304 billion could not be determined," the COA said.

Among the doubtful accounts cited were P1.53 billion that had no allowance for impairment losses, ISFs without subsidiary ledgers at the NIA central office and NIA regions 3 and 13, dormant or non-moving accounts of 10 to 18 years holding P100.932 million, un-reconciled balance of P999.513 million between NIA Irrigation Management Offices (IMOs) and NAIA region 4-B and region 9 offices, and "other receivables" totaling P894.33 million listed in the central office, Cordillera Administrative region (CAR) and regions 3, 8, and 13.

Dormant accounts amounting to P100.932 million in the records of the NIA central office and regions 5 and 9 offices, on the other hand, were found unchanging for 10 to 18 years.

There were also discrepancies between the records of the IMOs and some regional offices (ROs). Based on the IMOs of Mindoro Oriental-Marinduque-Romblon (MOMARO), Occidental Mindoro, and Palawan, uncollected ISFs amounted to P617.36 million but records of the NIA region 4-B office placed the figure at only P217.16 million.

On the other hand, communal irrigation systems ISFs for IMOs of the same areas showed P35.4 million but the regional offices recorded P499.736 million.

A similar problem was noted in region 9 where the general ledger balance showed P433 million compared to the subsidiary ledger that listed P531.656 million or a variance of P98.623 million.

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High sugar price artificial: SRA

THE Sugar Regulatory Administration (SRA) reiterated that the country is not experiencing a sugar shortage, saying the high retail price is artificially created by the market.

"There is no shortage of sugar for retail consumers. SRA figures on sugar stock shows there is enough raw sugar and standard refined sugar as we speak. The shortage is in the bottlers' grade or premium refined sugar required by beverage companies such as Coke. This type of sugar has very specific quality requirements and standards that can be met by only a handful of sugar refiners in the Philippines," SRA administrator Hermenegildo Serafica said in a statement.

Noting it is already the end of the milling season, SRA said refiners are constrained by the availability of bagasse to fuel their boilers for refining. Bagasse is sourced from the sugarcane fibers left after extraction of cane juice in the production of raw sugar by the sugar mills.

"The high prices of sugar is brought about by the erroneous perception being circulated by enterprising individuals that there is a shortage in sugar. Some are taking advantage of the issue of the lack of sugar for bottlers and using this to propagate high prices even for standard refined and raw sugar which has no shortage," Serafica said.

Earlier, SRA allowed the importation of up to 200,000 metric tons (MT) of sugar for industrial purposes led by the private sector to supply the shortfall.

Given the issue, Serafica said SRA is in favor of the Department of Agriculture's plan to implement a suggested retail price for sugar to ensure that consumers are not abused.

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HIGH

SRA also said it sent a notice to a grocery chain selling sugar beyond the prevailing price, giving it five days to reply upon receipt of the notice.

It added that as of June 10, prevailing price of raw sugar is P50 per kilogram in the wet market and P55 in supermarkets, while refined sugar is P65 in wet markets and P64 in supermarkets.

Prices in wet markets are monitored by the Philippines Statistics Authority three times a week while prices in supermarkets are monitored by SRA three times a week.

The sugar crop year begins September 1 and ends August 31 of the following year.

Sugar production this crop year is expected to go down to 2.3 million MT, from the previous 2.5 million MT, due to heavy rains experienced in Visayas and Mindanao. - ***J. Macapagal***

Manila Standard

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Urban farming project in QC schools—Joy

By Rio N. Araja

QUEZON City Vice Mayor Joy Belmonte on Sunday touted the city's local urban farming project that is already providing food for a local school feeding program.

"We have been implementing urban farming to wherein we get our produce for the feeding program," she said.

Launched in 2010, the "Joy of Urban Farming" project aims to spread green thumbs among city dwellers by creating urban farms that focus on organic produce and innovative gardening methods.

With the help of the Department of Education, the project is now being implemented in schools its "*gulayan sa paaralan*" (school vegetable garden) initiative.

"At present, we now have 166 organic urban farms here in Quezon City," Belmonte said.

The urban farms can also be found in different barangays, churches and areas maintained by various non-government organizations from Districts 1 to 6.

According to the vice mayor, the concept was pioneered in Quezon City in collaboration with the Department of Agriculture.

"The Joy of Urban Farming was started in partnership with now Tourism Secretary and then DA Undersecretary Berna Romulo Puyat. At that time, she wanted to promote urban agriculture in the cities of Metro Manila, and no other city was willing to undertake this project thinking in their minds that agriculture was something that should be constrained to the provinces," Belmonte said.

The city's urban farming also serves to protect the environment by promoting eco-friendly and inexpensive food choices.

"Climate change is happening, and it is real. The Philippines being one of the most vulnerable [countries], it is but natural for us to start responding in a more concrete way because our food choices can and actually do make an impact on the environment," the vice mayor said.

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Why Filipinos go hungry

A look into a failed land reform program

(Second of three parts)

By John Henry Dodson

Former Congressman Jose "Peping" Cojuangco claimed the flawed implementation of land reform not only resulted in agricultural inefficiency and worsen the quality of life of small farmers but also killed the ability to raise capital.

"In [former Agrarian Reform] Secretary [Ernesto] Garilao's survey, they saw the ill-effects of land reform on small farmers, but it did not touch on the other purpose of land reform which was to transfer Filipino capital from agriculture to industries through the provision of incentives," Cojuangco said.

He added the landowner who had 100 or 200 hectares was not compensated enough to allow him to transit to the industry sector.

In the case of the Cojuangcos, he said the family was paid with government bonds whose worth turned out to be only half its nominal value.

"In our case in Luisita, we were paid in government bonds. In the end, when we needed the money, when we were paying with the bonds, we discovered to our dismay that they were worth only 50 percent. So they really killed Filipino capital and that's why we badly need foreign investments now," he said.

Even the distribution of the Luisita property as ordered by the Supreme Court and as implemented by the DAR under President Noynoy Aquino, Cojuangco insisted they were paid "way below market value and does not conform to just compensation as enshrined in the Philippine Constitution and well established by jurisprudence" – a matter that is pending before the DAR Adjudication Board.

Kibbutz-style

Cojuangco said in 2014 it was not too late for the farmer-beneficiaries of land reform to group together like the kibbutz model of Israel and plant crops under the guidance of the government. He envisions a food security group, an umbrella organization composed of agri-related bodies like the DA and the DAR, working cohesively to make the country self-sufficient in meeting its people's food requirements.

"One thing that no one has taken into account is that the DA had been devolved. It is at most a (group of) regional offices because the provincial and municipal agricultural offices are under the local government units (LGU)," he said. "So how can the DA be of any help to the farmers? How can a department supposedly working for the whole nation if they don't have information about the whole country? Many of the agriculturists retained by the LGU are political appointees and hired (without any background) in agriculture.

"At the same time, even if the LGU hire good agriculturists, if the DA doesn't recognize and listen to them, there's a great disconnect that stops the national government from seeing what's really happening at the grassroots level."

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PART 2 OF 2

Why Filipinos go hungry

From page 1

Retired tenants buy land

Cojuangco recalled that before land reform, most tenant farmers in the big estates end up not only owning the agricultural land they themselves bought from their retirement pay (but) also branched out to putting up small enterprises whether agriculture-related or not.

"Many years ago, before land reform, the Filipino's way of saving was not through banks but (the purchase of) land with what money they saved or from retirement money. The tenants at the time would only ask to till the land wherever they may be found)," Cojuangco said.

"With the retired tenants buying land, they also invest by putting up small enterprises like machine shops. That's all gone now, another result of the wrong implementation of land reform."

Cojuangco said with the present beneficiaries of land reform in Hacienda Luisita being given just 6,000 square meters each, the impact was a severe drop in farm productivity and fertile land turning fallow.

"How can a farmer with 6,000 square meters survive? What, then, was the objective of breaking Hacienda Luisita? When you break it up, you break up a farm that was producing way above the average in that area."

Cojuangco said the hacienda averaged 85 tons of sugarcane per hectare on three ratoons. (Ratooning is a method by which the upper part of the sugarcane which is sweet is cut for sugar production while the bottom part, which has buds or nodes, allows the new shoots, or ratoons, to grow).

"We only plant sugarcane once every four years and then we let them grow from the ratoons in the next three years. Ratooning costs only 60 percent compared to the 100 percent if you plant new sugarcane each time. In other words, if you keep on planting every year, it becomes more expensive," Cojuangco explained.

"If you ratoon, there's a drop in your harvest from 85 to 75 percent, but then a 10 or so percent loss in harvest is nothing compared to the 40 percent you save by ratooning."

"Landowner who had 100 or 200 hectares was not compensated enough to allow them to transit to the industry sector."

Same fate

Cojuangco said information about ratooning has been denied to farmer-beneficiaries of land reform. The agricultural news service he espoused was meant to take the place of land owners in providing the technology and marketing skills for the farmers, he said.

"What's happening to rice will also happen to sugar. This is what I've done with the Philippine agricultural news service," he said.

To Cojuangco, removing the landlord from the plant-to-harvest cycle was a bad idea because the farmer often has no knowledge of the crop that would yield the most for the plot of land they own.

"Now you remove the land owner, you remove management, you now leave the farmer with two hectares with no knowledge at all. So, if somebody plants tomato everybody plants tomato. At harvest time there is no market for it. That's really what's happening."

Cojuangco said next year, with the implementation of a World Trade Organization (WTO) agreement opening up agricultural markets, the future appears bleak for Filipino farmers.

Killing production

"What we have done is to kill production, kill the land owners, and kill the small farmers as well. I've heard that many times before from our legislators when I pestered them to do this or do that to save our agriculture. They'd say, 'Cong, let's just import because it's cheaper," he sighed.

"They don't seem to realize why it's cheaper abroad, like (in) Thailand. It's because the price of fertilizer in Thailand is P300 per bag while in the Philippines that same bag of fertilizer costs P3,000. How can our farmers, including land reform beneficiaries, survive when in Thailand it is free while in the Philippines irrigation is not only lacking, but our farmers have to pay for it.

"Then we have a President now who says let's go with land distribution without a single mention of improving the program. Land reform is not land distribution; it is a combination of land distribution and all the things that we have not done.

"They in government say the economy is doing great. If so, why are the Filipinos going hungry?

(To be continued)

*Hunger incidence among Filipinos dropped by 2 points to 9.9 percent in the March 23-27, 2018 survey of Social Weather Station (SWS). It was the first time it breached the double-digit mark since 2004. President Rodrigo Duterte also signed a landmark law this year providing free irrigation to farmers all over the country. – **Editor***

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COA questions amount of NIA receivables

By Vince F. Nonato
@VinceNonatoINQ

The National Irrigation Administration (NIA) has yet to adjust its books to reflect the losses it incurred after President Duterte exempted small farmers from paying irrigation service fees (ISFs).

The Commission on Audit, in its 2017 audit report, doubted the accuracy of the P22.304-billion receivables recorded by the NIA, because it did not provide for the "impairment loss" on the unpaid ISFs.

The unpaid fees of farmers with landholdings of less than eight hectares should have been written off from NIA's books, because Republic Act No. 10969—signed into law last February—condoned these liabilities.

Receivables are amounts expected to be collected in terms of debt payments and other unpaid obligations. Impairment loss pertains to items that suddenly decrease in recoverable value due to supervening events such as new legislation.

No loss provision

Auditors said the NIA's failure to provide for the impairment loss in its 2017 books meant "the reliability and collectability" of the reported receivables "could not be determined."

The total amount of forgone debts was not known yet, because the regional offices and even the central office "have not yet prepared the schedules" for the unpaid fees and overdue communal irrigation systems accounts of the small farmers.

Such data should have served as basis for computing the impairment losses. INQ

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Fighting inflation for the poor

Liberalization of rice imports seen bringing down high prices

By Dennis M. Arroyo
@InquirerBiz

Inflation has surged to its highest rate in five years, reaching 5.2 percent in June 2018. Compare that with the 2.9 percent in May 2017. Driving it were the higher prices seen in rice, corn, fish and personal transport. This is beyond the 2-4 percent target of the government.

The knee-jerk public reaction is to blame the new tax reform or TRAIN law, but there are other factors.

Global oil prices are on the rise after long being subdued. The peso is getting weaker, so the rising exchange rate makes imports more expensive. And there were episodes of tight supplies of food.

The people are feeling the pain of inflation.

Social Weather Stations (SWS) tracks government performance on many fields every quarter. In the March 2018 survey, the administration scored weakest in fighting inflation. While 45 percent of the people were satisfied with it, 39 percent were dissatisfied, for a net rating of +6 percentage points. This is the lowest in almost two years.

The Pulse Asia March 2018 survey finds that 98 percent of the people report inflation. Of this number, 86 percent say they are strongly affected by the price increases, 92 percent say that food prices have risen, along with 81 percent noting price hikes in rice, and ratios of 56 percent for soft drinks, 30 percent for electricity, 16 percent for gasoline or diesel, 12 percent for LPG and 7 percent for transport fares.

The Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) declared that inflation for the poorest 30 percent of the people rose by 5.3 percent in the first quarter of 2018. This is the highest level in four years, and the rate is pushed up by the price hikes in rice and food in general. Hence, food inflation, particularly rice inflation, needs special attention as it hits the poor the most.

Rice prices on the upswing

Average prices for regular milled began to increase by 2.6 percent in the first week of January, compared to a year before. Rice price inflation rose further to 7.8 percent in the second week of April. So why did rice prices surge?

The National Food Authority (NFA) keeps a buffer stock of cheap rice good for 15 days during the harvest season and 30 days during July to September, or the lean months. This is meant as "insurance" for emergencies. Now, the country suffered two big calamities in 2017: the eruption of Mayon volcano and the Marawi siege. The government deployed NFA rice for these disasters. However, the NFA did not restock the rice immediately.

The government admitted in February 2018 that its NFA rice stock was lacking. Then by April the rice stock was down to less than a day's worth. So the poor shifted from buying cheap NFA rice to commercial rice. The increase in demand thus raised the price of commercial rice. Government thus approved in May a big import order of rice for the NFA.

This was somewhat similar to the rice crisis in 1995. The NFA recommended importing 700,000 metric tons (MT) of rice, but the Department of Agriculture agreed only to 263,000 MT. The resulting shortage doubled the price of rice.

Rice from Vietnam and Thailand

Rice is usually imported from Vietnam and Thailand, as it is much cheaper, at only around half the price of Philippine rice. This is because those two nations produce rice more abundantly: They are blessed with huge river systems, the Chao Phraya in Thailand, and the Mekong in Vietnam.

Importing huge amounts of rice is a tricky business because of all the uncertainty. In years like 2018, the government underimported, but in 2010, it overimported. For decades, the NFA has held the monopoly over rice imports. That is where the problem lies —any economics student knows that monopolies are harmful.

The government is now correcting this.

In late April, Malacañang removed import quota restrictions, allowing the private sector to buy more rice from abroad. But the country's economic managers want to push this further. They call on Congress to pass the Rice Tarrification Act immediately.

This act will liberalize rice imports, and it works like this. Private traders can import rice but must pay a 35 percent tariff or tax on imports. This will result in rice that is P7 cheaper per kilo than current levels.

Many will benefit from this. The poor and consumers in general will buy cheaper rice. Government will get revenue from the tariffs. Traders will have a new source of profit. The NFA will save much money it uses for its imports. The country will have food security, as imports will not go through the slow process of public bidding and the layers of approval along the bureaucracy.

To fight the present wave of inflation and to relieve price pressures on the poor, Congress must target the core food item. Liberalize rice imports. —CONTRIBUTED INQ

The NFA has started the distribution of NFA rice to outlets in Quezon City, enabling consumers to buy more affordable milled rice. — JAM STA. ROSA

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COA to NIA: Return P250-M cash incentives

By MICHAEL PUNONGBAYAN

The Commission on Audit (COA) is demanding the refund of more than P250.1 million in cash incentives granted to officials and employees of the National Irrigation Administration (NIA) last year.

The state auditors, in a 2017 audit report released recently, said the payment of Viability Incentive Grant (VIG) to regional office executives and personnel was without legal basis.

COA stressed the general provisions of the General Appropriations Act (GAA) prohibit the grant of honoraria and other allowances, except those specifically authorized by law.

State auditors noted the rules also "prohibit the grant of food, rice, gift checks, or any form of incentive/allowances except those authorized via AO (Administrative Order) by the Office of the President."

Despite such law and regulations, NIA regional offices allegedly granted cash incentives in 2017 in the total amount of P250.161 million.

"The payment of VIG was without approval from the President of the Philippines, thus contrary to Section 12 of RA 6758 dated Aug. 21, 1989," COA said.

"It is worth mentioning that previous VIGs granted by NIA to its officers and employees in various (regional offices) had already been disallowed in audit and the Notices of Disallowance (NDs) were affirmed by the Office of the Cluster Director, Cluster 5, Corporate Government Sector, due to lack of legal basis," the audit team added.

The COA report said the payment of cash incentives last year should be stopped and refunded for lack of legal basis.

During discussions with the audit team, NIA's administrative department manager said they requested for approval of the VIG from the Office of the President in 2016 but the request had not been approved as it was submitted during election time.

The NIA administrator emphasized that if such request is pending, no payments should have been made which is why a memorandum will be issued to the regional offices to stop such payments.

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No retail shortage in sugar — SRA

By LOUISE MAUREEN SIMEON

The Sugar Regulatory Administration (SRA) maintained there is no shortage of sugar for retail consumers despite continued spike in prices but it is now mulling to implement suggested retail price for the commodity.

SRA administrator Hermenegildo Serafica said there is enough raw sugar and standard refined sugar for the retail market.

"The high prices of sugar is brought about by the erroneous perception being circulated by enterprising individuals that there is a shortage in sugar," Serafica said.

"The shortage is in the bottlers' grade or premium refined sugar required by beverage companies such as Coke. This type of sugar has very specific quality requirements and standards that can be met by only a handful of sugar refiners in the Philippines," he said.

As milling season is about to end, refiners are constrained by the availability of bagasse, which is sourced from sugar cane fibers, to fuel their boilers for refining.

"Some are taking advantage of the issue of the lack of sugar for bottlers and using this to propagate high prices even for standard refined and raw sugar which has no shortage," Serafica said.

The sugar shortage of bottlers and processors, on the other hand, is being addressed after the government allowed sugar importation.

Furthermore, SRA and the Department of Agriculture are already studying the possible implementation of suggested retail price for sugar to ensure consumer protection.

The DA has already implemented an SRP to eight commodities last month and it earlier said it may add more depending on price movements in the market.

"The SRA has already sent a notice to a grocery chain with exorbitant prices well beyond the prevailing price and they have been required to give their reply within five days upon receipt of the notice," Serafica said.

Currently, prevailing price of raw sugar is P50 per kilogram in the wet market and P55 in supermarkets while prevailing price of refined sugar is P65 in wet markets and P64 in supermarkets.

Prices in wet markets are monitored by the Philippines Statistics Authority three times a week while prices in supermarkets are monitored by SRA thrice a week also.

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FARMERS: WE NEED FUEL VOUCHERS, TOO

By Jasper Emmanuel Y. Arcalas
@jearcalas

FILIPINO rice farmers are now seeking government intervention to cushion the impact of rising global oil prices and the Tax Reform for Acceleration and Inclusion (TRAIN) law, which have sent their production costs soaring.

For one, they are urging the government anew to issue fuel vouchers to aid them in coping with the increasing oil prices.

"We have been asking the government to give us fuel vouchers for years now. We asked this before from the National Food Authority [NFA] but to no avail," Edwin Y. Paraluman, chairman of the Philippine Farmers Advisory Board, told the BusinessMirror.

"So we are renewing our call to give us fuel vouchers, especially when fuel prices are increasing. If they can give fuel cards to jeepney drivers, then why can't they give farmers as well?" Paraluman added.

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Rice farmers are affected by the increase in oil prices as farm machineries and equipment utilize fuel, Paraluman explained. "That will cause a domino effect. Increase in oil prices would lead to increase in fertilizer prices, and that would mean higher cost of production."

The TRAIN law imposed an excise tax of P2.50 per liter on diesel products and P7 per liter on gasoline. A study recently conducted by the Philippine Rice Research Institute (PhilRice) concluded that "the TRAIN's imposition of increased excise tax, unstable global fuel prices, and the peso-dollar exchange rate conspired" to raise rice farmers' production cost.

And one of the recommendations of the study, authored by Alleen C. Litonjua and Jesusa C. Beltran, to help farmers cope with rising production costs, is to give "discounted fuel."

"[The government could] explore ways to provide farmers with discounted fuel," the authors said. "This will directly unburden them of the ill effects of TRAIN on rice farming."

Under the TRAIN law, jeepney franchise holders are entitled to fuel vouchers to mitigate the increase in oil prices. For this, the government has allocated some P977 million, which is expected to be distributed to about 179,000 jeepney franchise holders.

Fuel costs increase

THE study found an increase in the fuel costs of farmers across three different sources of irrigation.

Farmers exclusively using national irrigation systems (NIS) saw their fuel costs rise by P249 per hectare after the implementation of TRAIN; those using pumps to supplement irrigation incurred a P949 per-hectare increment in their fuel costs.

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Farmers who solely depend on water pumps posted the highest increase in fuel costs, incurring an additional P2,014 per-hectare expenditure after the TRAIN law.

"Farmers who depend on pumps for irrigation water suffer from the increased fuel prices. Their fuel consumption accounts for some 30% of their total production cost," the study explained.

"TRAIN increases the production cost of pump-dependent farmers by 50 centavos for every kilogram of palay produced, which diminishes their income by 10 percent," it added.

The study said pump-dependent rice farmers consume about 397 liters to 413 liters of fuel per hectare, more then double the fuel requirement of those not solely dependent on pumps.

"The fuel price increases, therefore, disadvantage farmers who highly depend on pumps for water supply," the study said.

The increase in the fuel costs of pump-dependent rice farmers translated into a 10-percent cut in their net income, according to the study. The study noted that farmers in 2016 earned P5.12 per kilogram but since the implementation of the TRAIN law, their net income went down to P4.62 per kilogram.

In 2016 farmers spent P12.31 to produce a kilogram of rice while they earn about P17.43 per kilogram, according to the study.

Recommendation

PUMP-DEPENDENT rice farmers could recoup the increase in their production costs if farm-gate price of palay continues to increase, according to the study. But if it doesn't, then they would be "even less competitive due to increased production cost," and this would "deprive them of a higher income," the study said.

So what should pump-dependent rice farmers do to cope with the increased in fuel prices? Produce an additional yield 105 kilograms per hectare "to maintain the same level of income," according to the study.

And for them to do this, the study recommended, they should invest in farm machinery and slowly mechanize their operations.

"The DA-PHilMech [n.d.] asserts that farmers incur 4.29-percent harvest losses, which steal 214 kg/ha from the would-be gross yield of 5,000 kg/ha. Adopting the combine harvester can reduce this to only 2.11% [Regalado and Ramos, 2016], thereby saving more farmers' produce without having to significantly increase fuel cost," it said.

"The mechanized farmer only uses an additional 16-26 liters per ha, equivalent to PhP600-1,000/ha more cost under TRAIN-lifted prices. The estimated PhP6,000/ha additional net income [Litonjua et al., 2016] from using the combine harvester more than offsets the additional cost," it added.

"Therefore, the increase in fuel prices has less impact on farmers who choose to mechanize," the study concluded.

Furthermore, to cushion the ill effects of TRAIN on rice farming, pump-dependent farmers have to continue "using yield enhancing technologies, reduce harvest losses through mechanization, and adopt water-saving technologies like Alternate Wetting and Drying [AWD]," the study said.

AWD, according to the study, reduces farmers' water use by 16 percent to 35 percent without decreasing grain yield.

The study also recommended that the government fast-track the completion of existing irrigation projects to increase the number of farmers benefiting from "free and reliable irrigation supply." This, the study pointed out, would help pump-dependent farmers save on irrigation cost.

Support price

PARALUMAN said fuel voucher is just one of many subsidies the government could give the rice sector to cope with rising production costs.

"I hope the government could give us subsidies for us to be able to cut our production costs. They could give us high-yielding seeds and fertilizers," he said. Furthermore, Paraluman, who represents the farmers' sector at the NFA Council, sought an increase in the agency's support price for palay to ensure the rice farmers' profititability.

Paraluman said increasing the NFA's palay buying price ensures farmers earn more instead of being at the mercy of loan sharks every harvest season.

Earlier this year, the NFA proposed to increase its buying price from the current P17 per kilogram to P22 per kilogram, but this was thumbed down by the NFA Council. Last month the NFA proposed to increase its support price to P25 per kilogram to become competitive against the buying price posed by traders in the market—ranging from P22 to P25 per kilogram.

"All farmers live on debts. The harvest is mortgaged to the lenders even while the palay is still standing," he said, mostly in Filipino. "The service of the government should be for the people. What they get from the people's income should also return to them."

"The economic managers have been saying that increasing the NFA support price to P22 would be inflationary. But at the present P17, why did the prices of rice in the market continue to increase? The NFA has been obsolete in buying from farmers," Paraluman added.

Paraluman said the NFA has been given P7 billion for its local palay procurement program but has only been able to withdraw some P1.8 billion due to its incapability to buy from local farmers.

While these ideas remain as proposals to the government, rice farmers are left with no choice: tighten their belts and borrow money.

"Farmers cannot do anything with the increasing production costs and rising prices of goods but to budget what they have," Paraluman said. "They are only tightening their belts. And [they] will borrow money as their farm income is not sufficient to meet their daily needs."

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Palay, corn outputs drop in Q2

By LOUISE MAUREEN SIMEON

Palay (unhusked rice) and corn are still expected to register minimal production growth in the first half despite the projected decrease in the second quarter due to contraction in harvest areas in some major producing regions.

Based on the latest crops outlook of the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) released over the weekend, palay production for the first semester may rise to 8.7 million metric tons, 1.5 percent higher than the 8.57 million MT output in 2017.

However, the expansion in palay production for the period was tempered by the projected drop in the second quarter.

The PSA said palay production from April to June may reach 4.08 million MT, down 1.8 percent from the 4.15 million MT output in the same period last year.

Harvest area may shrink 1.5 percent to 932,000 hectares and yield may contract to 4.37 MT per hectare from the previous year's level of 4.38 MT.

This is compared to the 4.62 million MT palay output in the first quarter, which is a 4.61 percent increase from 4.42 million MT last year.

This was attributed to the growth in harvest area, which stretched to 1.19 million hectares and yield increased to 3.87 MT.

Most region posted increments especially in the areas of Cagayan Valley, Mimaropa, Calabarzon and Davao.

The PSA outlook also showed corn production may increase to 3.75 million MT in the first half, up 1.4 percent from the 3.7 million MT output last year.

However, the report also said corn production for the April to June period is expected to post a 4.4 percent drop to 1.27 million MT from 1.33 million MT in 2017 as harvest area will also decrease.

Probable decline is attributed to insufficient soil moisture during vegetative and reproductive stages of crop and the effect on the intense hot weather. Decrements are expected specifically in Kalinga and South Cotabato.

The second quarter projection will reduce the overall corn output for the period.

Corn output in January to March was five percent higher at 2.48 million MT as substantial increments were noted in major corn-producing areas.

For the third quarter, the PSA said about 487,000 hectares or 56 percent of the palay planting intentions have been planted.

For corn, about 530,000 hectares or 62 percent of the planting intentions of the farmers for July to September 2018 have been realized.

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CAC/BW FILE PHOTO

THE DAVAO CITY Agriculturist Office maintains a model urban container garden at the city hall annex rooftop.

Urban farmer pushes for regular training to help reduce waste

DAVAO CITY — An urban farming advocate is pushing for regular training sessions in the city not just to promote home gardening but to help reduce trash by turning biodegradable wastes into fertilizers.

Perfecto B. Rom, author of UCG A Home Farming Manual-With an Introduction to Household-based Waste Management and Food Security System, said he hopes to have a permanent learning garden with satellite sites in the communities, especially those that will be affected by the coastal road project.

"With gardening, you are not only solving the problem of waste but the food security and health and nutrition as well," said Mr. Rom, who organized an Urban Container Gardening (UCG) Hands-On Seminar Workshop on July 14-15.

The concept involves teaching households to grow vegetables for their consumption and produce organic fertilizer, with the surplus to be collected and sold to commercial farmers.

By reducing garbage collected at the household level, the city might be able to delay the plan to build a waste-to-energy (WTE) plant to replace the existing sanitary landfill that is expected to be at full capacity in two years.

It is not yet time for a WTE, Mr. Rom said. "This is my opinion, food is a form of energy, biodegradable waste is a form of energy. If we keep burning that, we keep burning the energy to produce energy?... Why don't we compost that and use micro-organisms to degrade that and bring that back to the mountains where those came from."

Mr. Rom is referring to the proposed WTE project, which can accommodate about 600 metric tons of waste daily. The project is eyed as a joint venture between Nippon Steel, the city government, and Japan's Kitakyusho City, which already uses the system.

"The reduction of waste is equivalent to the reduction of budget because with every one liter of waste collected, 50 centavos is thrown away," said Mr. Rom, an agriculture degree graduate from Xavier University in Cagayan de Oro, with a major in crop science.

His UCG training covers container preparation and designing, a basic guide to sustainable home farming, organic bio-solid/liquid fertilizer and pesticide preparation, physical and chemical soil composition, planting/transplanting techniques, home farm planning exercises, and crop care and maintenance.

"We are excited to share to others the benefits of urban gardening... We will simplify sciences that are related to this urban container gardening." — **Maya M. Padillo**

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Rice output likely rose by 1.56% in H1–PSA

THE country's unmilled rice production in the first half likely expanded by 1.56 percent to 8.703 million metric tons, from 8.569 MMT recorded a year ago, according to data from the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA).

In its latest output forecast, the PSA also revised upward its projection for palay production for the April-to-June period to 4.08 MMT, from its earlier estimate of 4.05 MMT.

"Additions in palay production are foreseen in Isabela, Nueva Ecija, Laguna, Quezon, Mindoro Oriental and Surigao Sur resulting from control of pests and diseases and sufficient water supply during the cropping period," the PSA said in its report published recently.

However, despite the increase in projection, the PSA's latest output forecast for second quarter is still 1.69 percent lower than the 4.15 MMT recorded volume during the April-to-June period of 2017.

"Similarly, harvest area may contract to 932,640 hectares, from last year's level of 947,190 hectares," it said. "Yield may probably decline by 0.2 percent, from 4.38 metric tons per hectare in 2017."

However, the 4.62-percent year-on-year expansion in the first quarter palay output would allow the country to surpass its total first half production last year.

The country produced 4.623 MMT of palay in the January-to-March period, higher than the 4.419 MMT recorded in the first quarter of 2017.

The PSA said one of the reasons behind the 4.62-percent increase in the first quarter was the early planting and harvesting by farmers "due to construction of newly irrigation facilities from previous rainfed areas which encouraged the farmers to plant earlier than usual."

Also, the higher prevailing farmgate prices of palay enticed farmers to plant and harvest rice earlier.

As of June 1 the PSA said about 824,660 hectares, or 88.4 percent, of the standing crop for the April-to-June period have been harvested.

"Of the updated 595,240 hectares standing palay crop, 58.7 percent were at vegetative stage, 20 percent at reproductive stage and 21.3 percent at maturing stage," it added.

Furthermore, the PSA said about 487,270 hectares, or 56.1 percent, of the farmers' planting intentions for the July-to-September period have materialized.

In the same report, the PSA said corn output in the second quarter likely reached 1.28 MMT, slightly lower than its earlier projection of 1.27 MMT. ***Jasper Emmanuel Y. Arcalas***

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Meralco RE Unit Spectrum, IRRI Ally in Green Energy, Inaugurates Solar PV System at Los Baños Campus

Executives from Spectrum, Meralco, and the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) prepare to cut the ribbon to officially inaugurate IRRI's Los Baños, Laguna solar panel system. From left are: Spectrum President Rain Reyes, Spectrum Chairman and Meralco President & CEO Oscar S. Reyes, Meralco Chairman Manuel V. Pangilinan, IRRI Chairman of the Board of Trustees Jim Godfrey, OBE, DSc, and IRRI Director General and CEO Matthew Morell.

The International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) and Spectrum, a Meralco subsidiary specializing in renewable energy (RE), have collaborated on a project with twin objectives of responsible environmental sustainability and economic management.

With 115 years of Meralco energy expertise and experience as a foundation, Spectrum installed an 810 kW solar photovoltaic (PV) system on five buildings of the Los Baños, Laguna research facility. One building is the new state-of-the-art Lloyd T. Evans Plant Growth Facility, which hosts studies for rice breeding and growth under a variety of controlled environments.

Commissioned to Spectrum under a Project Supply Agreement, this is the first time Spectrum has worked with an international non-profit organization with specialized needs.

IRRI's solar PV system was officially inaugurated as part of the agenda of its annual Global Board of Trustees meeting, one of the rare occasions when all 12 IRRI board members were present.

"Our partnership allows IRRI to enjoy electricity savings from the grid on zero capital outlay," said Spectrum President Jose Rainier A. Reyes. "The solar system we installed provides about 10 percent of the energy requirements of this facility, and so far, it has already given about P800,000 of energy savings since going online on October 2017. That's at least a P170,000 of savings every month."

Shared goals

Spectrum's engagement with the research center advances initiatives for systemic adaptation of clean energy throughout the country. The partnership also aligns with IRRI's Sustainable Rice Platform of forging multi-stakeholder alliances to promote resource efficiency.

There is a lot at stake.

As a staple, rice is a water-thirsty crop and is vulnerable to extended dry spells, making it critical for agri-bodies to take a lead role in combating issues of climate change.

"Rice production is a major contributor to climate change. As a global leader in rice science, IRRI must take serious steps in rice innovations and take advantage of climate-smart technologies to minimize rice farming's environmental footprint," states Dr. Bruce Tolentino, IRRI Deputy Director General for Partnerships and Representative for the Philippines. "The installation of the solar panels is important to our efforts to fight greenhouse gases and reduce our operating costs."

For its part, Meralco has strongly advocated for clean energy use, as shown by subsidiary spin-offs like Spectrum and an aggressive push for projects in RE, electric vehicles, and charging stations.

"Meralco strongly supports renewables as a responsible member of the global community geared towards energy sustainability," said Meralco Senior Vice President and Head, Customer Retail Services and Corporate Communications Alfredo S. Panlilio. "We have a corporate responsibility, not just to the environment, but clearly in food-production, as well. And RE is a disruption that we fully embrace."

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Small farmers get P10B fund

Above poverty line. The program aims to raise the income of each farmer family way above the P10,000 poverty line threshold per month.

BY JED MACAPAGAL

THE Land Bank of the Philippines is making available P10 billion additional funds for small farmers under a new loan program called Accessible and Sustainable Lending Program for Small Farmers (ASL Farmers Program).

Aimed at increasing the income of small farmers especially the Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries (ARBs), ASL Farmers Program has three modules: module 1 for lending to individual small farmers and through agri-based cooperatives; module 2 for lending through Land Bank-assisted agri-based cooperatives; and module 3 for lending farmers cooperatives through Farmers Corporative Inclusive Financing Program.

Under module 1 of the program, small farmers and ARBs can avail a crop production loan of up to 90 percent of the project cost, with interest rate fixed at 6 percent per annum aside from a one-time loan take-out which can cover the debt of farmers from various credit conduits.

Module 2 enables borrowers to avail loan for the acquisition of

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farm machineries and equipment, post-harvest and processing facilities with an amount up to 90 percent of the total project cost, with 6 percent interest rate per annum with annual re-pricing.

Module 3 is open to farmers co-operatives which enter into a farm management and marketing agreement (FMMA) with a big Agri Corporative Corp. (ACC).

Land Bank will take charge of land consolidation and coop organizing for the small farmers while for the big ACC, the bank will handle fully integrated corporate loan for production, post-harvest and processing with lower debt to equity ratio of 90:10 at competitive interest rate.

ACC's roles for the scheme is to increase farm production to global standards; to buy 100 percent production of farmers cooperative at agreed price per kilo as specified in the FMMA as well as to hire farm workers from nominees of farmers cooperative members.

"We have high hopes for this program which will make credit very accessible to most Filipino farmers at a low interest rate of 6 percent per annum. This complements Land Bank's existing agricultural lending programs, as we strive harder to help small farmers increase their productivity and income," said Alex Buenaventura, bank president and chief executive officer.

"The main objective (of the ASL Farmers Program) is to raise the income of each farmer family way above the P10,000 poverty line threshold per month," Buenaventura said.

To ensure that more farmers can gain access to financing, Land Bank lending centers nationwide will provide loans to target borrowers through direct marketing as a master list of small farmers will be generated in consultation with local representatives of Departments of Agrarian Reform and Agriculture which helped craft the program.

The bank noted that apart from the initial P10 billion fund allocation, it can source additional funding for the program by issuing small farmers corporative bonds which will be auctioned to other banks as alternative compliance to the Agri-Agra Law.

"With our issuance of Land Bank small farmers corporative bonds, we will not only raise funds for our lending to farmers but it will also provide an added instrument for banks to comply with the requirement of the Agri-Agra Law especially on the 10 percent of loan portfolio requirement for agrarian reform farmers," Buenaventura said.

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Zambo event features ZamPen native chicken

By Butch Gunio

ZAMBOANGA CITY—The Western Mindanao Agriculture and Aquatic Resources Research and Development Consortium is hosting a two-day Farmers Encounters through the Science and Technology Agenda featuring Zamboanga Peninsula native chicken production.

Science and Technology Undersecretary for Regional Operations Brenda Nazareth-Manzano and Philippine Council for Agriculture, Aquatic, and Natural Resources Research and Development acting executive director Dr. Reynaldo V. Ebora on Tuesday led the opening of the event.

The program includes science and technology business forums, technology matching, ZamPen native chicken cooking contest, photography and poster-making contests, and presentations being held at Western Mindanao State University here.

In his message, Nazareth-Manzano, reiterated the importance of the transfer of the result of the research and development technologies to end users. She was the Department of Science and Technology Region 9 director.

For his part, Ebora pointed out that science and technology researches are meaningless unless adopted by farmers. He urged FIESTA participants to take advantage of ZamPen native chicken technology.

The respective research consortiums in each of the regions is the face of PCAARRD, he said, and assured the council is committed to promote science and technology in the country.

WMSU vice president for Resource Generation and Wesmaardec Director Dr. Teresita Narvaez said PCAARRD has provided funding for chicken strain purification in 3 regions including Region 9 and sustainability of ZamPen native chicken technology.

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EDITORIAL

Surging rice prices

The Duterte administration has found itself receiving sustained flak for its seemingly shortsighted policies that have led to the higher prices of goods and services every Filipino household must contend with today. Indeed, while a substantial portion of the cost increases is caused by a factor beyond their control—international crude oil prices—the administration's policymakers have basically amplified its effects with a broad tax hike package and the failure to temper inflationary effects with an early tightening of monetary policy.

But there are other systemic issues that are contributing as much, if not more, to the problematic situation.

A cursory glance at the inflation data will show that what's making it more difficult for Filipinos to make ends meet, especially those at the poorer end of society, is the sharp spike in food prices. Rice, in particular, is a major driver of the country's inflation rate, which stands at a five-year high of 5.2 percent as of June.

Official data show that prices of various rice varieties have risen anywhere between 5.5 and 7.1 percent on an annual basis. Measured from week to week, rice prices have been on an uptrend for at least 23 weeks now. That's almost six months of uninterrupted price increases for an item that constitutes the staple food of Filipinos.

Yet this phenomenon is not unknown to policymakers. Sudden rice shortages in the marketplace happen every few years. And, almost like clockwork, every presidential administration has had to deal with at least one rice "crisis" during its watch.

It is difficult to prove, but there is a lingering suspicion among some reform-minded people in government that these periodic rice shortages are artificial in nature, created by big rice traders who tighten supply lines during critical periods to push prices higher and make hundreds of millions of pesos in extra profit in the process.

MEASURED FROM WEEK TO WEEK, RICE PRICES HAVE BEEN ON AN UPTREND FOR AT LEAST 23 WEEKS NOW

The story is the same every time: Prices go up, Malacañang approves a large batch of rice imports to address the supposed shortage, and one can imagine rice traders (and possibly their cohorts in the government bureaucracy) laughing all the way to the bank.

There is a solution on the table that may not only remedy the current rice shortage, but also prevent whatever artificial schemes may be behind it. The so-called rice tariffication proposal calls for decisions about the importation of rice to be taken away from the hands of government and left to the market forces of supply and demand.

While the Duterte administration regulates how much rice can be imported, ostensibly to help protect local rice farmers and promote self-sufficiency, this system, unfortunately, can be gamed by unscrupulous traders to their advantage. To say that this, in fact, appears to be happening, given the anomalous market movements, is not a farfetched supposition.

But by eliminating government's control over the volume of rice imports and shifting it to a tariff that will be levied on all rice bought from abroad, the power will shift to Filipino consumers who will, as a group, be able to control its market price basically on the strength of how much they consume the staple.

Rice tariffication has been on the table for several years now, but no administration has been able to summon enough political will to go up against entrenched, powerful and wealthy interests in the local rice industry. No administration as well has been able to look at Filipino farmers in the eye and tell them straight up that it's time to emerge from decades of being sheltered by the government's protectionist policies.

The Duterte administration prides itself on a chief executive with a penchant for doing things long thought to be impossible, especially vis-à-vis influential businessmen. Perhaps the time is ripe to implement the one solution that will finally end shortages of rice stock, and thereby bring a measure of relief to Filipino homes made hungry by the continuing surge in rice prices.

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TUNA FARMS INALMAHAN

Ng maliliit na mangingisda

NAGPAHAYAG ng pagkabahala ang national organization ng maliliit na mangingisda sa plano ng gobyerno na magtayo ng tuna farms.

Ayon sa Pambansang Lakas ng Kilusang Mamamalakaya ng Pilipinas, ang planong tuna fish farms ay magkakait sa mga mangingisda ng access sa tradisyonal na fishing ground dahil magreresulta lamang umano ang panukala sa privatization at kumbersiyon ng communal fishing grounds para sa lumalaking tuna.

"Private aquacultures will further the monopoly-control of few fishing firms and corporations to the traditional fishing grounds of municipal fisherfolk. Small fishers will be eventually transformed from subsistence fisherfolk into mere workers or caretakers in aquafarms earning paltry wages and suffering from slave-like conditions," wika ni Pamalakaya chairman Fernando Hicap.

"We strongly oppose privatization in a form of aquaculture because it promotes import-dependent inputs and export-oriented production especially that a foreign country will be providing technologies and capital," sabi pa ni Hicap.

Dagdag pa niya, ang aquaculture ay nagdudulot ng water pollution dahil sa feeding practices na nakadepende sa chemical at feed additives.

Tinukoy niya ang nangyari sa Laguna de Bay kung saan nakontamina ng malalaking fish pens ang lawa ng chemical-based feeds na ginagamit sa paglinang sa isda.

Gayunman ay paulit-ulit itong pinabulaanan ng LLDA, sa pamamagitan ng general manager nito na si Joey Medina, at sinabing ang mga fish cage at fish pen operator sa Laguna de Bay ay hindi pinapayagang gumamit ng feed sa lugar.

Mismong si Pangulong Rodrigo Duterte ang nagutos sa Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) at sa LLDA na gibain ang illegal fish pens at fish cages sa lawa.

JONATHAN L. MAYUGA

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PALAY OUTPUT TATAAS SA 1ST HALF

POSIBLENG sumipa ang produksiyon ng palay sa bansa sa first half ng 1.56 percent sa 8.703 million metric tons (MMT) mula sa 8.569 MMT na naitala noong nakaraang taon sa likod ng mas mataas na first quarter output, ayon sa Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA).

Sa pinakabago nitong output forecast, itinaas ng PSA ang pagtataya nito para sa palay production para sa April-to-June period sa 4.08 MMT, mula sa naunang projection na 4.05 MMT.

"Additions in palay production are foreseen in Isabela, Nueva Ecija, Laguna, Quezon, Mindoro Oriental and Surigao Sur resulting from control of pests and diseases and sufficient water supply during the cropping period," nakasaad sa report ng PSA.

Gayunman, sa kabila ng pagtaas ng projection, ang pinakabagong output forecast ng PSA para sa second quarter ay mas mababa pa rin ng 1.69 percent sa 4.15 MMT na naitala sa kahalintulad na panahon noong 2017.

"Similarly, harvest area may contract to 932,640 hectares from the last year's level of 947,190 hectares," sabi ng PSA.

"Yield may probably decline by 0.2 percent from 4.38 mt per hectare in 2017," dagdag pa nito.

"However, the 4.62 percent year-on-year expansion in the first quarter palay output would allow the country to surpass its total first half recorded production last year."

Ang bansa ay nagprodyus ng 4.623 MMT ng palay mula Enero hanggang Marso, mas mataas sa 4.419 MMT na naitala sa first quarter ng 2017.

"The reasons behind the 4.62-percent increase in first quarter was the early planting and harvesting by farmers 'due to construction of newly irrigation facilities from previous rainfed areas which encouraged the farmers to plant earlier than usual," paliwanag ng PSA.

Bukod dito, ang mas mataas na umiiral na farm-gate prices ng palay ay humikayat sa mga magsasaka na isagawa ang pagtatanim at pag-ani sa first quarter mula sa second quarter.

Hanggang noong Hunyo 1, may 824,660 ektarya o 88.4 percent ng standing crop para sa April-to-June period ang naani na.

"Of the updated 595,240 hectares standing palay crop, 58.7 percent were at vegetative stage, 20 percent at reproductive stage and 21.3 percent at maturing stage," dagdag pa nito.

JASPER ARCALAS

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JAPANESE FIRM IPINAKILALA ANG PRE-COOKED RICE SA PINAS

IPINAKILALA ng isang lokal na sangay na Japanese company sa merkado ng Pinas ang pre-cooked, ready-to-eat rice products gamit ang kakaibang teknolohiya ng kanilang mother company.

Inilunsad noong nakaraang taon ng BiotechJP Corp., na nakabase sa probinsiya ng Batangas, ang Echigo, isang pre-cooked, protein-reduced rice na layon ay para sa mga taong may karamdaman sa kidney.

Nagsasagawa sila ng commercial distribution ngayong taon para sa tatlo pang produkto–Insta Rice (regular, precooked rice na kailangan lamang i-microwave), Gohan Lite (calorie-reduced precooked rice, na iinitin lamang), at Rice-to-Go (ready-to-eat rice na puwede nang kainin kahit hindi initin).

Ang apat na produkto, na ibinebenta sa 200-gram packs, ay gamit ang locally grown Rc-160 rice, na malapit sa katangian at kalidad ng Japanese rice, sabi ni Trisha Ann Garcia, ang general manager ng kompanya.

Ang mga produkto ay lisensiyado ng gobyerno, ng Food and Drug Administration at tatagal ng anim na buwan hanggang isang taon, dagdag pa niya.

"Our product is rice, and for Filipinos, 'rice is life.' So, our chairman, Kiyosada Egawa, sees a big market here," pahayag ni Garcia, na isang professional nutritionist, sa isang panayam.

Ang main company ng Egawa, ang Biotech Japan Corp., ay binuksan noong 1994 at nakabase sa Niigata Prefecture, bandang timog ng Tokyo, na nakaharap sa dagat ng Japan.

Ang sangay sa Filipinas ay nag-iisa sa labas ng Japan at ito ay itinayo noong Abril 2015, at nagsimula ang commercial operations noong Enero 2017. Sa ngayon, ito pa lamang ang kompanya na nagpoprodyus ng pre-cooked, packed rice sa bansa.

"Our challenge here in the Philippines is that, Filipinos are used to eating rice straight from the pot. We are still not used to opening a pack, placing it in the microwave oven, and then, having your rice ready to eat in two minutes," saad ni Garcia.

Kaya, para umayon dito sa traditional lifestyle barrier, nagsasagawa ng marketing ang kompanya sa pamamagitan ng exhibits, ang pinakahuli ay ang isinagawa sa National Kidney and Transplant Institute, at tinarget ang mga mamimili mula sa top two income classes.

Sinabi ni Garcia na ang Echigo, na siyang pinakaunang produkto sa Japan, ay produkto ng fermentation gamit ang plant-origin lactic acid bacteria. May mababang protein content, maganda itong supplement sa mga pagkain ng mga tao na nagdaraan sa chronic kidney disease.

Ang Filipinas ay may alarming prevalence of kidney disease, at sinasabi ng medical experts na isa sa mga Filipino ay nasasawi sa sakit na ito bawat oras, na naging ikapito sa nagiging sanhi ng kamatayan sa bansa. Base sa huling datos na nakuha sa National Kidney and Transplant Institute, mayroong 32,077 dialysis patients sa buong bansa noong 2015, at patuloy na nadadagdagan ng 15 porsiyento ang bilang bawat taon.

"This is very important – before, the main cause was chronic glomerulonephritis; now, it's mainly diabetes mellitus and hypertension," pahayag ni Rose Marie Liquete, executive director ng NKTI tungkol sa kidney cases sa Filipinas.

Ayon naman kay Romina Danguilan, deputy director for medical education ng NKTI, na habang nakatutulong ang protein-reduced rice tulad ng Echigo sa kidney patients, kailangan pa ring magsagawa ang NKTI ng kanilang pag-aaral para patunayan ang pagiging mabisa nito.

Ayon kay BiotechJP's Garcia, sa limang taong pag-aaral sa Japan na ang pagkain ng Echigo na tiningnan doon sa mga kumain at nagkaroon ng clinical trial ay nagpakita ng significant decrease sa urinary protein excretion.

Mula nang ito ay ilunsad sa Filipinas noong nagdaang taon, ang Echigo, na mabibili sa retail price ng P55 pesos bawat pakete, ay ibinabahagi na sa ilang dialysis centers sa Maynila.

Makikita ang produkto sa ilang sangay ng isang supermarket at sa online store kung saan ang Insta Rice at Gohan Lite ay mabibili rin.

Dahil ito ay walang added value, ang Insta Rice ang pinakamura sa retail price na P35, habang ang Gohan Lite ay mabebenta sa P45.

Base sa initial assessment, ang Gohan Lite ang may pinakamalakas na tanggap ng mamimili dahil sa mababang calorie content, ani Garcia. Ito ay inirerekomenda rin sa mga may diabetes at doon sa may low-calorie diets.

Samantala ang Rice-to-Go, ay ibebenta primarily sa gobyerno, lalo na sa Department of Social Welfare and Development, dahil ito ay ikinokonsidera na "emergency rice," layon para sa emergency at disaster situations. Ang magiging retail price ay 25 piso.

Sinabi ni Garcia na umaasa ang kompanya na darating ang panahon na lalawak ang bilang ng mga tindahan na magbebenta ng kanilang produkto, ganoon din sa pamamahagi nito.

Base sa kasalukuyang demand, ang kompanya ay makapagpoprodyus ng estimated 60,000 packs sa lahat ng apat na produkto sa isang buwan.

"If there's need for more, we can add more production staff," ani Garcia, dagdag pa na ang production plant ay kasalukuyang gumagamit lamang ng kalahati ng kanilang buong espasyo.

Bagamat ang iba ay may duda na ang kanilang produkto ay hindi agad matatanggap ng mga Filipino dahil ito ay "brand new lifestyle" sa pagkain ng kanin at ang presyo ay medyo may kataasan kompara sa tradisyunal na inihahandang kanin, sinabi ni Garcia na kumukuha ng kompiyansa sa katotohanan na ang mga Pinoy ay mahilig sa kanin, at ang bilang ng mga health-conscious na consumer na patuloy na dumarami.

"Eventually, we would like to introduce the 'bottled water' story to the Filipinos. Before, when you bought bottled water, they would say you are crazy because you can just get water from the faucet. But eventually, Filipinos got used to buying bottled water for 20 pesos anywhere. We would want that to happen to our products," sabi niya.

Dagdag pa niya, na ang kompanya ay makakukuha ng pag-asa sa lumalagong middle class sa bansa, at nagpapakita ang trend ng mga consumer ng isang kilalang international coffee shop, na nagsimula lamang sa top two income classes at bandang huli ay lumawak na kasama na rin ang lower income classes.

Bukod sa apat na produkto, gumagawa pa ang BiotechJP ng low-calorie rice grain, gayundin ang marami pang klase ng kanilang packed pre-cooked rice na maaaring samahan ng ulam o sarsa, isang halimbawa nito ay ang "adobo rice, na akmang-akma sa mga Filipino."

Balita

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Organikong pagsasaka para sa mga dating rebelde

KASALUKUYANG nagsasanay ang nasa sampung miyembro ng New People's Army (NPA) para sa kursong organic agriculture production sa Palawan, bilang bahagi ng kanilang amnestiya sa ilalim ng Local Social Integration Program (LSIP) at ng pagpapatuloy ng pangakong matulungan silang muling makabalik sa lipunan.

Ibinahagi ni Lucita Padul, social welfare officer III ng Palawan Provincial Social Welfare and Development Office (PSWDO), nitong sabado na layunin ng pagsasanay sa Organic Agriculture Production (OAP) NCII na makamit ang tunguhin nitong maibigay sa dating mga rebelde ang kakayahan at abilidad sa organikong pagsasaka upang maiangat ang buhay ng kanilang mga pamilya matapos ang kanilang pagbabalik mula sa pakikipaglaban.

"Patuloy na isinusulong ng Pamahalaang Panlalawigan katuwang ang ibang ahensiya ng pamahalaan ang pagtataguyod ng kapakanan ng mga nagbalik-loob sa pamahalaan o rebel returnees sa pamamagitan ng LSIP na ipinapatupad sa ilalim ng PSWDO," ani Padul.

Ang OAP NCII ay binubuo ng mga pagsasanay na kinakailangang makamit tungo sa produksiyon ng organic farm products, tulad ng mga manok at gulay, kabilang ang produksiyon ng organikong suplemento, tulad ng mga pataba (fertilizer), concoction, at extract.

Sa pagtatapos ng kurso, makakatanggap ang mga kumuha ng 'OAP NCII qualification,' bilang patunay na natapos nila ang pagsasanay sa paggawa ng mga organic supplement o pataba.

Ayon kay Padul, bahagi rin ng kurso ang ilang lektura tungkol sa 'drug abuse prevention' na pangungunahan, aniya, ng mga pulis sa probinsiya.

Bukod sa pagsasanay, makakatanggap din ang mga nagbalik-loob ng counselling, pangkain, tirahan, tulong sa edukasyon, at maging tulong na pamasahe.

"Ang mga ganitong aktibidad ay bahagi lamang ng pagtataguyod ng programa upang mapangalagaan ang kapakanan ng mga former rebels," dagdag pa niya.

Giit ni Padul, seryoso ang administrayon ni Palawan Governor Jose Alvarez na gawing aktibong miyembro ng 'community partners for change' ang dating mga rebelde.

Umaasa naman sila na ang ibinibigay nilang suporta sa mga nagbabalik-loob ay makakatulong upang mahikayat na sumuko nang mapayapa ang iba pang miyembro ng NPA.

PNA

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Soy sinks to new lows

CHICAGO- US soybean futures slid to fresh lows on Friday and the most-active contract closed at the lowest in nearly a decade after a government report reinforced concerns that the trade dispute with China will dent exports and lead to a build-up in stocks.

Corn futures followed soybeans lower, with additional pressure from a favorable weather forecast for much of the US Midwest crop.

Wheat, however, jumped for a second straight day as crop production shortfalls in the EU and Black Sea region stoked concerns about tightening global stocks.

Trade tensions between the United States and China remained a drag on soybeans a day after the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) slashed its US export forecast for the 2018-19 season by 250 million bushels and projected end-of-season stocks at the highest on record.

China raised tariffs on US soybeans a week ago in retaliation for US tariffs on Chinese goods.

Moves by Beijing to shift to other soybean suppliers and alternative feeds, along with expanded soy production in Brazil, could limit long term US soy demand by the world's largest importer of the oilseed, traders said.

"There are legitimate concerns that we could lose China as a soybean buyer," said Karl Setzer, analyst with MaxYield Cooperative.

China's soybean imports in June jumped 13.1 percent from a year ago as buyers scooped up Brazilian supplies to avoid potentially higher costs on US shipments.

Brazil is expected to expand soybean plantings to a record high next season, agricultural consultancy Safras & Mercado said on Friday.

Chicago Board of Trade (CBOT) August soybeans ended 15 cents lower at $8.18-3/4 a bushel, down 6.7 percent in the week and the sixth weekly drop in seven weeks. New-crop November fell 15 cents to $8.34-1/4, settling at the lowest level for a most-active contract Sv1 since Dec. 10, 2008.

August through January 2020 all posted contract lows on Friday.

Corn was pressured by forecasts for rain and milder temperatures in the Midwest following above-normal heat over the weekend. Much of the crop is entering pollination, a development stage when stressful weather can hurt yields.

CBOT September corn was 4-1/2 cents lower at $3.41-1/4 a bushel, down 5.3 percent for the week. New-crop December was down 4-1/2 cents at $3.54-3/4.

Wheat prices climbed after the USDA raised its US export forecast and lowered Russia and EU harvest projections.

CBOT September wheat rose 12-1/2 cents to $4.97 a bushel, bud ended down 3.5 percent from a week ago. – ***Reuters***

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Global trade war to be a boon for Black Sea grain

MOSCOW/BEIJING — Trade conflict between the United States and China could further boost already booming grain and oilseed exports from the Black Sea region, traders and analysts said.

New opportunities to sell wheat, corn and soybeans to China and even the European Union are set to open up for the region's main exporters Russia, Ukraine and Kazakhstan, whose recent ascendancy has already ended full US dominance in markets such as Nigeria and Mexico.

The United States and China slapped tit-for-tat duties on $34 billion of each other's imports on Friday, with Beijing accusing Washington of triggering the "largest-scale trade war."

The Black Sea region's share of the international wheat market climbed to about 37 percent in 2017-2018, according to the International Grains Council, comfortably topping the United States and Canada combined.

China is the world's top wheat producer but still imports about 4 million tons of the grain each year.

In the 2017-2018 season (June-May) the United States exported 902,400 tons of wheat to China, down from 1.56 million in the prior season, according to US government data.

For Kazakh wheat, the pick-up in Chinese imports started due to Beijing's Belt Road policy and before the trade dispute took off, but the tariff row accentuates the trend.

"We have just started buying wheat from Kazakhstan this year. Our first order was for several thousand tons," a Chinese wheat trader said. "We will see about sales and profits. If they're good, we will increase imports for sure. It is related to the current trade war."

"Now that you can't bring in American wheat, it gives us more incentive to buy from Kazakhstan. And once your trading of Kazakh wheat reaches a certain volume, you get government preferential support," the trader added.

Among the risks for this strategy are difficult logistics and unstable quality seen in Kazakh and Russian wheat, said another trader who has been looking for more Kazakh wheat deals.

Black Sea wheat may not be able fully to replace its US counterpart due to different quality grades, meaning some traders will also turn to Canadian wheat, he added.

According to statistical data, Russia and Ukraine, whose traditional buyers had been in North Africa and the Middle East, boosted wheat supplies to Vietnam, Indonesia, the Philippines, Spain, Tunisia, Tanzania, Sudan, Oman, Mexico and Kenya in the 2017-2018 season.

One location in which Russia has taken away from US wheat market share is Nigeria, which like Brazil traditionally favors a higher-protein grain such as US hard red winter.

In a sign that may worry some US wheat traders further, Brazil bought Russian wheat in July for the first time in eight years.

"In this new era of trade wars, prices talk louder than words," said Swithun Still, director of Solaris, which specializes in trading Russian agricultural commodities.

"It's likely that China will aim to buy more grains and oilseeds from the Black Sea and more beans from South America. Mexico has been buying lots of Russian wheat and will continue as prices are attractive compared to US wheat," he added.

The trade spat could also boost exports of Black Sea corn and soybeans.

Russian authorities recently reported a record 850,000 tons of soybean exports to China in July 2017-May 2018, more than double the 340,000 tons a year earlier, Svetlana Malysh, Kiev-based Black Sea agriculture market analyst at Thomson Reuters, said. — ***Reuters***