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# Metro Manila food supply deemed adequate in event of lockdown

AGRICULTURE Secretary William D. Dar said Metro Manila's food supply will be sufficient in the event of a lockdown and movement restrictions due to the increasing number of coronavirus (COVID-19) cases in the National Capital Region (NCR).

Speaking to reporters Tuesday, Mr. Dar said Metro Manila has rice stocks equivalent to five to six months' consumption to sustain it until the next harvest if ever the NCR is locked down.

According to Mr. Dar, supply of other foods is ample due to the harvests in March and April.

"We have enough supply for food products such as rice. March and April are harvest seasons which means that there should be no worries about food supply," Mr. Dar said.

He said COVID-19 is not the only disease to worry about, with African Swine Fever (ASF) also afflicting the pig herd nationwide.

Mr. Dar said measures being considered in the event of a lockdown include urban agriculture.

"There so much space in urban areas like Metro Manila. It is also a good time to plant this season. Government agencies such as the Bureau of Plant Industry (BPI), Agricultural Training Institute (ATI), and the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR), have been asked to accelerate their interventions during this time," Mr. Dar added.

Mr. Dar also urged the public to avoid panic-buying because there is no lockdown yet.

"*Wala pa namang* lockdown. *Huwag nating pangunahan yung* potential scenario. *Ginagawa ng gobyerno ang lahat para matulungan ang publiko*, (There is no lockdown yet. Let's not get ahead of things because the government is doing everything it can to help the public)," Mr. Dar said. — **Revin Mikhael D. Ochave**

ACCORDING TO AGRICULTURE Secretary William D. Dar, supply of other foods is ample due to the harvests in March and April.

BusinessMirror
A broader look at today's business

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# DA assures ample food supply amid concerns of corona virus spread

By Jasper Emmanuel Y. Arcálas
@jearcalas

THE Department of Agriculture (DA) on Tuesday assured the public that the country has sufficient food supply, notably rice, amid growing concerns about the spread of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) in the country.

Agriculture Secretary William D. Dar said the country has overflowing stocks of rice, which he noted was sufficient to last for 80 days.

Furthermore, Dar added, the volume is expected to rise to five months to six months worth of staple supply after the ongoing palay (unhusked rice) harvest.

In terms of fish supply, Dar said, catch and harvest in Taal Lake has started to normalize, assuring sufficient delivery of tilapia and *bangus* to Metro Manila.

Dar said the DA is also encouraging farmers to plant other cash and fast-growing crops to take advantage of better weather and planting conditions to boost the country's food supply.

Among the crops identified by Dar is the planting of mung bean, or *munggo*, which, he pointed out, is a "good source of protein" and would also help farmers to "rejuvenate their soil."

"We are starting now to plant *munggo* in big ways in areas it is possible [to grow]," Dar said.

Dar said they would also intensify efforts to promote and implement its urban gardening program amid COVID-19 concerns. Through urban gardening, he explained, Metro Manila and other metropolis in the country may be able to ensure steady flow of food supplies within their areas.

"I have to enhance now the proper implementation of urban agriculture in metropolis, so that when there's tightening of food supply from provinces there's enough food within the metropolis as well," he said.

## Suggested retail price

THE Agriculture chief disclosed that the DA is now considering to impose suggested retail price (SRP) at the traders level in its bid to bring down prices of commodities at the retail level. "We are strengthening the teams. We are trying to study if we can impose SRP at the level of traders so they cannot put too much mark-up, which will allow retailers to give consumers much lower prices," he told reporters in an interview on March 10.

"We are studying if we can do that. The [Department of Trade and Industry] is part of that team," he added. Furthermore, Dar said the DA is currently reviewing SRP it has set earlier on certain commodities, particularly garlic, to adjust them to prevailing market prices.

Dar also clarified that the SRP set by the DA in Metro Manila only covers public markets and is not applicable to supermarkets and grocery stores.

"This is our view right now: we will let the consumers decide where they want to buy," he said.

"Some are saying that it is even cheaper to buy in supermarkets [compared to public markets]. [If the goods are] expensive [in supermarkets] then do not go there," he added when asked why supermarkets are exempted from the SRP.

Dar issued the remarks after Laban Konsyumer Inc. (LKI) pointed out that SRP covers both public markets and supermarkets in Metro Manila.

As for garlic, Dar said they are now reviewing the P70-per-kilogram SRP on imported garlic after certain supermarkets stopped selling the commodity due to DA's SRP.

A supermarket in Manila visited by the BusinessMirror posted an announcement that garlic is not available in their shelves as "current market prices are above government prescribed P70 per kg."

Manila-based traders and retailers told the BusinessMirror that imported garlic sold at P150 per kilogram. Some retailers said wholesale price of garlic in Divisoria is at P150 per kilogram, while at Blumentritt it is at P160 per kilogram.

Latest DA price monitoring reports showed that the average retail price of garlic in Metro Manila pegged about P152 per kilogram, which is more than double than the P70-per-kg SRP that it set.

The Manila Times

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**CEREMONIAL HARVESTING** Agriculture Secretary William Dar (in white shirt) leads the ceremonial harvesting using a combined harvester in a lot planted with seeds from the Rice Competitiveness Enhancement Fund-Seed Program in Barangay Lelemaan, Manaog, Pangasinan last March 5. PNA PHOTO

THE PHILIPPINE STAR
TRUTH SHALL PREVAIL

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# Phl has enough food supply amid COVID

By LOUISE MAUREEN SIMEON

The Philippines has enough food supply to meet demand, the Department of Agriculture (DA) said as it appealed to consumers not to engage in panic buying amid the increasing cases of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) in the country.

Agriculture Secretary William Dar assured the people yesterday that there is sufficient supply of rice and other prime commodities in the market with the public expected to stock up on supplies.

"We have enough food supply. In terms of food like rice, we have excess supply, good for 80-day rice inventory. And then this March and April will be harvest season, so I can see that we have five to six months of rice inventory," Dar told reporters.

"And also on fish with Taal (Lake in Batangas) is coming back, they will start harvesting. Taal supplies 60 percent of the total requirement of tilapia and bangus of Metro Manila. This will really be a big factor, plus we've been connecting big farmers and producers from Central Luzon and Calabarzon," he said.

The government has announced that the number of individuals with COVID-19 has risen to more than 30, prompting the metro-wide suspension of classes.

The increasing cases of COVID-19 may likely prompt panic buying among consumers, similar to what happened in other countries like Italy, Hong Kong and Singapore.

"There should be no panic buying. Let us call on the Filipino people that while there is a big problem like COVID, let us not panic. The government is on top of the situation," Dar said.

Albay Rep. Joey Salceda has recommended a lockdown for Metro Manila but President Duterte maintained that the metropolis has not reached the level where lockdown is an option.

"But even if that happens, the movement of food supplies will not be affected. Let us not hope for such a potential scenario but all scenarios are being looked at by the whole nation approach of the government," Dar said.

The DA said it continues to revise its action plan as COVID-19 is not the only problem of the sector right now, but also the increasing cases of African swine fever.

As consumers ramp up their buying, Dar said the DA is strengthening its monitoring of the implementation of the suggested retail price (SRP) of commodities as such is not being fully implemented in the market.

For one, fully dressed chicken's prevailing price is at P150 even if the SRP set is P130. Galunggong (round scad) is also priced higher at P200 per kilo versus its SRP of P130.

The DA is now studying if it can impose an SRP at the level of traders and not just retailers.

**– With Mayen Jaymalin**

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• SALAMIN NG KATOTOHANAN •

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### Tiniyak ng DA

# SUPLAY NG PORK PRODUCTS SAPAT

**NANANATILING sapat ang suplay ng mga pork product sa bansa.**

Ito ang pagsisiguro ng Department of Agriculture (DA) sa kabila ng pagtama ng African Swine Fever (ASF) sa hog industry ng bansa.

Ayon kay Agriculture Undersecretary Ariel Cayanan, sa 12.8 milyong baboy ay 237,000 lamang ang naapektuhan ng sakit mula pa noong Marso 2.

Napag-alamang ang mga pinatay na baboy na tinamaan ng ASF ay maliit lamang na porsiyento sa suplay ng baboy sa bansa.

Sinabi ni Cayanan na hanggang anim na buwan aabutin ang suplay ng karne ng baboy sa bansa.

Kamakailan lamang ay inamin ni DA Secretary William Dar na umaabot na sa P80 bilyon ang pagkalugi sa industriya ng babuyan sa buong bansa.

**BENEDICT ABAYGAR, JR.**

Manila Standard

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# SM arm starts KSK agri training in Benguet town

KAPANGAN, Benguet—Farmers and guests gathered at the Municipal Hall here to participate in the launch of SM Foundation's Kabalikat sa Kabuhayan Farmers' Training Program on Sustainable Agriculture.

With the launch, farmers began their 12-week training on effective backyard planting and small-scale farming techniques for fruits and vegetables.

To date, this is the 219th batch of SM Foundation's KSK program.

Aside from the 165 farmer-participants, those who attended the launch were representatives of project partners TESDA, Department of Agriculture, Department of Social Welfare and Development, St Isidore the Farmer Learning Center, Philippine Information Agency, Local Government of Kapangan, Macondray Philippines, SM Markets and SM Supermalls-SM City Baguio.

With SM Foundation's partnership with TESDA and St. Isidore the Farmer Learning Center, farmer-participants are trained in organic agriculture production that could lead to a TESDA NC II certification.

Kapangan is mainly an agricultural municipality with 13.7 hectares of its almost 17-hectare land area devoted to agriculture. It is divided into 15 barangays namely Balakbak, Beleng-Belis, Boklaoan, Cayapes, Central Kapangan, Cuba, Datakan, Gadang, Gaswiling, Labueg, Paykek, Pongayan, Pudong, Sagubo and Taba-ao.

Situated on the northern part of Benguet, Kapangan is 29 km from Benguet's capital town of La Trinidad and can be reached by a 2.5-hours ride from the city of Baguio.

The 165 farmer-participants listen to the 219th lecture of SM Foundation's KSK program.

The Manila Times

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# RCEF is a year-old bust

MIDWEEK COMMENTS

**MARLEN V. RONQUILLO**

FOR the nth time, let me refresh the nation's collective memory a bit. A collective memory that is often dulled, oblivious of the past and unaware of the great — and painful lessons — of history. The part of history that is related to a great undertaking that has been marginalized — agriculture.

I will start with what transpired in the dying days of 1994, the time the Philippines officially signaled its accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) with an overwhelming Senate vote (and officially became a WTO card bearer in January 2005).

The accession period was that of intense optimism. The Ramos administration's economic mandarins, after successfully branding the anti-WTO advocates as quislings (I was one small farmer-quisling), rolled out what was supposed to be an ambitious program to jump start Philippine agriculture and make it a competitive force in the global agricultural landscape. Indeed, on paper, there was reason for the optimism.

The Department of Agriculture's post-WTO Action Program was a dream investment program: P27 billion in fresh irrigation investments, P8 billion for a massive farm-to-market roads program, P762 million for post-harvest facilities and P64 million for the construction of grains centers (silos, warehouses, drying facilities, etc.). From the funding aspect alone, it was a mini-Marshall Plan for the agriculture sector.

The jumbo allocation was supposed to fund an ambitious agricultural renaissance, the likes of which had yet to be witnessed in the oft-neglected, oft-marginalized agriculture sector. The ambitious targets were the following:

– A P3.4-billion yearly increase in the earnings from agricultural exports

– The agriculture sector's gross value added (GVA) would at least be P60 billion a year

– Jobs, jobs, all around — around 500,000 agri jobs would be created yearly.

Seven years after the accession of boundless optimism and grand dreams, a review of the agricultural landscape post-accession was made. The results would make one weep.

– Agricultural jobs were lost in massive numbers.

– Agriculture's GVA not only failed to meet the grand increase of P60 billion a year, it atrophied across all agri subsectors.

– Agriculture's exports dropped — in embarrassing numbers.

Even if only half of the promised close-to-P40-billion investments had been made, the dismal results of the post-accession review was reason enough to give a pause to any program that says "deregulation" and "liberalization."

The lessons of the WTO accession have been unheeded.

The Rice Tariffication Law (RTL), which just turned one year old a few days back, was anchored on the same grand idea — open up a critical component of the agriculture sector and good things would come out after the transition pains. Congress passed a law, giddily signed by Mr. Rodrigo Duterte, that lifted the quantitative restrictions (QRs) on rice and substituted QR with a two-tier tariff, one set for rice imported from the Southeast Asian region and another from countries outside of it.

The RTL created a fund, the Rice Competitiveness Enhancement Fund (RCEF), which on paper was to allocate P10 billion a year from rice tariff collections to fund another action program supposedly aimed at propping up the rice farmers, to a point of regional competitiveness.

One year after the RTL and the accompanying RCEF, what has transpired is this: the RTL was a death sentence on the country's 3 million small rice farmers. The P10-billion-a-year RCEF, assuming that there is really P10 billion a year, is inutile as an amelioration program for small rice farmers. The P10-billion fund is inadequate. The program scheme is underwhelming and poorly designed. Instead of "transition pains," the small rice farmers now see a permanent damage to a rice planting culture that is older than the arrival of Christianity in the country.

A peasant group that studied the loss dealt by the RTL to the country's small rice farmers said it was P34 billion more than what was gained by the consumers from the cheaper rice that came with the lifting of the QR. And to think that the premise of the law was to sacrifice the 3 million rice farmers for the sake of more than 90 million consumers. Now that "consumer gain" has been debunked, the utter bankruptcy of the law has fully unravelled.

And if you go to the heart of the rice farms of Central Luzon, you will observe this hard truth — vast swaths of abandoned paddies. What you see with the naked eye is the most truthful rendition of the RTL's savagery.

The official data from the unreliable Philippine Statistics Authority said the price of *palay* (unmilled rice) dropped to P15 per kilogram. False. Palay below the moisture content sold between P10 to P12 per kilo during the last harvest season. Production cost is P12 and that does not count the labor of the farmer-tiller.

The much-hyped RCEF, with its inadequate funding and poorly crafted programs, has a predictable fate. It will soon be buried in the mass grave of failed agriculture amelioration programs, the grandest of which was the post-WTO accession Action Program.

The Agriculture Competitiveness Enhancement Fund, implemented in the early 2000s but was suspended because of corruption and poor supervision, is in that grave. So is one of the best-designed programs, the Agriculture and Fisheries Modernization Act, which failed to receive adequate funding.

It is just one year old, but we can state this with utmost confidence: RCEF — RIP.

The Manila Times

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# LANDBANK LENDS P229B TO AGRICULTURE SECTOR

THE Land Bank of the Philippines has lent out a total of P229.38 billion to the agriculture sector as of January 31, achieving 86.5 percent of its loan target of P265 billion for the entire 2020.

In her report to Finance Secretary Carlos Dominguez 3rd, LandBank President and Chief Executive Officer Cecilia Borromeo said one month into the year, the bank had already assisted 17,681 small farmers and fishermen.

This brings the total number to 1,050,663 assisted farmers and fishermen as of end-January while maintaining LandBank's track to achieving the target of assisting 2 million more by year-end.

Of the P229.38 billion loaned out by LandBank to the agriculture sector, P1.36 billion was released through direct lending to farmers and fishermen, while P38.53 billion was given through conduits such as cooperatives, farmers associations and rural financial institutions.

A total of P136.18 billion in loans was extended to small, medium and large agribusiness enterprises while P53.31 billion was released to help finance agri-aqua related projects of local government units and government-owned and -controlled corporations.

Programs administered have cumulative releases of P1.42 billion as of January 31 from the Agricultural Competitiveness Enhancement Fund.

For the Department of Agriculture's Socialized Credit Program under the Sugarcane Industry Development Act, cumulative releases as of January 31 reached P130 million; for the Expanded Rice Credit Assistance-Rice Competitiveness Enhancement Fund (ERCA-RCEF), PP410 million; and for the Survival and Recovery Assistance Program (SURE-Aid), P2.28 billion.

Of these programs, the ERCA-RCEF and SURE-Aid, which were implemented to provide support to farmers after the implementation of the Rice Tariffication Law, have the highest utilization rates of 82 percent and 91.2 percent, respectively.

The cumulative releases as of January 31 under the Credit Assistance Program-Program Beneficiaries Development administered for the Department of Agrarian Reform amounted to P580 million, Borromeo said.

Earlier, she reported to Dominguez that LandBank exceeded its target of providing agricultural credit worth P231.25 billion in 2019, with P236.31 billion of loans extended to the farm and fisheries sector as of end-December last year, representing a 102-percent accomplishment rate.

Borromeo said LandBank also exceeded its target of assisting 1 million farmers in 2019 by 32,982, which represent a 103-percent accomplishment rate for 2019.

**JERRY M. HERNANDEZ**

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# Landbank extends P229.8 B loans to agri sector in January

By MARY GRACE PADIN

State-run Land Bank of the Philippines has extended P229.83 billion in loans to the agriculture sector in January, already meeting 86.5 percent of its target for the whole year, the Department of Finance (DOF) said Monday.

The DOF, citing a report from Landbank president and chief executive officer Cecilia Borromeo, said the bank has assisted 17,681 small farmers and fishers in January, bringing the total number of clients in the sector to 1.05 million as of end-January.

This translated to P229.38 billion in loan releases during the month, which is equivalent to 86.5 percent of the P265 billion goal for full-year 2020.

Borromeo said Landbank is on track to achieving its target of assisting two million small farmers and fishers by the end of 2020.

According to Landbank data, P136.18 billion of the total loans released by the bank went to small, medium and large agribusiness enterprises.

Another P53.31 billion was released to help finance agriculture and aqua-related projects of local government units and government-owned and-controlled corporations.

Landbank said P38.53 billion was given through conduits, such as cooperatives, farmers' associations and rural financial institutions, while P1.36 billion was released directly to farmers and fishers.

Meanwhile, cumulative releases under the Agricultural Competitiveness Enhancement Fund (ACEF) of the Department of Agriculture (DA) amounted to P1.42 billion as of Jan. 31.

Loans issued under the DA's Socialized Credit Program, in line with the Sugarcane Industry Development Act (SIDA), also reached P130 million; while releases under the Expanded Rice Credit Assistance-Rice Competitiveness Enhancement Fund (ERCA-RCEF) amounted to P410 million.

Farmers and fishers also received P2.28 billion in funding support under the Survival and Recovery Assistance Program (SURE-Aid).

ERCA-RCEF and SURE-Aid were implemented to provide support to farmers following the implementation of the Rice Tariffication Law.

In addition, Landbank said cumulative releases under the Credit Assistance Program-Program Beneficiaries Development (CAP-PBD) administered for the Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR) amounted to P580 million.

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# Geothermal leader brews a better life for *kaingineros*, reaps top Anvil award

Lopez-led Energy Development Corporation (EDC) is a global geothermal energy industry pioneer and the Philippines' largest renewable energy company, generating 37 percent of the country's total renewable power.

Throughout the years, EDC has received several recognitions for going beyond generating clean, renewable, reliable power, through their social responsibility, environmental management, and corporate governance initiatives. It has received awards and recognitions for its programs in corporate social responsibility both here and abroad.

And at the 55th Anvil Awards, EDC was awarded the Grand Anvil top prize, along with 12 other trophies for communication excellence in PR, marketing, stakeholder engagement, and sustainability programs.

Billed "Baslay Coffee: Brewing a Better Life for Kaingineros," EDC's entry received a Gold Anvil and was announced as the most outstanding among all other recipients.

To EDC, rampant *kaingin* over 30 years ago was more than just an issue of environmental law violation. There were deep-seated issues of poverty and lack of education in the area. Most of the farmers' harvests were spent for their daily needs and used as payment for their landlords.

The small income they would get from *kaingin* was not enough to send their children to school. These farmers also did not have formal education and were not aware of the concepts of environmental stewardship and enterprise development.

Moreover, the early years (1970s to early 1980s) of the government's reforestation efforts to save the forests and mobilize the people had minimal success. This was mainly due to the mismatch between the type of government intervention implemented and the actual plight of the people.

The government forced the *kaingineros* (farmers) to vacate their farms located within the forestlands because *kaingin* causes deforestation, soil erosion, and loss of wildlife, among others.

As a response, the farmers continued with this unsustainable practice, burning down the millions of pesos invested by the government on reforesting the lands because they saw it as a threat rather than a source of hope.

Given this, then Philippine National Oil Company (PNOC)-EDC entered Barangay Baslay as an enabler — to transform the *kaingineros* into guardians of the forest area — beginning in the 1980s up until EDC's full privatization in 2007.

Subsequently, the fully privatized EDC deployed its Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) team in Negros Oriental to work in partnership with the farmers, local government units (LGUs), and regional and provincial government agencies of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), Department of Agriculture (DA), Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR), and the academe, such as Silliman University and Negros Oriental State University.

EDC organized the Baslay Farmers Association (BFA), which communally owns a 220-hectare organic coffee forest mostly planted with robusta (80 percent) and arabica (20 percent) situated on the foothills of Mount Talinis, the largest remaining forest patch in Negros Oriental. While coffee is a seasonal undertaking for the community association, it has become a platform for the farmers to hone their skills to handle microfinancing and enterprise development as well as best practices in reforestation programs.

The decision of the company to reinforce and strengthen the coffee farming practices of the community farmers while

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The Baslay Farmers Association's (BFA) female members delicately pick the coffee cherries, a crucial step in producing one of the country's best coffee.

Baslay has recently put up its own coffee shop where they serve their own coffee and native delicacies to guests like foreign backpackers who frequent the place.

**Baslay's premium and quality organic coffee is recognized by internationally trained baristas from all over the Philippines.**

safeguarding the forests was born out of the supply shortage and the potential room for growth in the industry. The Philippines ranked 25th among the top coffee-producing countries in the world.

According to the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA), there were only 276,000 coffee farms in the country in 2002, which were mostly owned by small-scale farmers.

Small farmers with only one to two hectares of land were the main drivers of coffee production in the Philippines despite the fact that country is one of the few that produce all four varieties of coffee: robusta, arabica, liberica, and excelsa.

**SUSTAINABLE IMPACTS**

The intervention of EDC helped BFA to narrow the gap between demand and supply, contributed to the resilience of farmers to price fluctuations, and enhanced the farmers' capacity for environmental sustainability.

At present, BFA is the first farmers' association in Negros Oriental to produce premium and quality organic coffee recognized by internationally trained baristas from all over the Philippines. And in 2018, BFA opened its coffee shop near the Baslay Hot Springs, in close consultation with EDC.

For this effort, BFA was accredited by the Department of Tourism (DOT) Region 7 in the same year as the only agroeco-tourism site in the province of Negros Oriental.

To make the project more sustainable, the organization continuously underwent more capacity trainings from different institutions such as DTI, DA, DAR as well as the academe on various topics, ranging from bookkeeping and financial management to biodiversity conservation.

Through the intervention of EDC, the community forest in Baslay is now a refuge to 113 species of birds and one of the primary sources of quality coffee (robusta and arabica) in Central Visayas. More importantly, the former *kaingineros* are now masters of interplanting coffee with native tree species.

"Ours was a long and challenging journey towards becoming forest stewards with sustainable livelihood and we have EDC to thank for our transformation and better life," said Ruel Perez, BFA community leader.

Other award-winning EDC campaigns include the Positive Energy Negros Facebook page, #MaketheShift geothermal energy advocacy, BINHI national greening legacy program, GeoSkwela youth dialogue on sustainability, OMGeo eco-tourism vlog series, and CSR initiatives under the Mt. Apo Foundation, Inc. (MAFI) as well as the organization's 25th anniversary coffee table book.

"We believe that just as important as the implementation and positive impact of our various CSR and stakeholder relations programs is the way they are communicated," said EDC CSR – PR head Atty. Allan Barcena.

"We proudly share the awards we garnered with our partner organizations and the people who have made our work successful and those who continuously help us attain our vision of a clean-energy future for the country."

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# Japan turns over ₱2.91-B agrarian, agri projects to Mindanao

By Manuel T. Cayon
@awimailbox
*Mindanao Bureau Chief*

DAVAO CITY—Japan turned over P2.91 billion worth of projects for agriculture and agrarian reform program for seven provinces in Mindanao.

The assistance came in the form of 47 projects under the Japan-Bangsamoro Initiatives for Reconstruction and Development, or J-BIRD program.

The Japan Embassy in Manila said the project consisted of 16 infrastructure facilities, and 31 agribusiness and agro-forestry development subprojects to the Provinces of Lanao del Norte, Bukidnon, Davao del Sur, Davao de Oro, North Cotabato, South Cotabato and Sultan Kudarat.

Embassy of Japan's Minister Masahiro Nakata participated in the ceremonial turnover in Lagu-indingan, Misamis Oriental, of 47 subprojects under the Mindanao Sustainable Agrarian and Agricultural Development (MinSAAD) Project.

The turnover was done on February 26. Agrarian Reform Secretary John S. Castriciones also graced the event, the embassy said.

In his speech, Nakata said the "immense development potential of Mindanao, MinSAAD is a symbol of assurance that this island will not be left behind."

He said the assistance amounting to ¥6,063 million (P2.91 billion) was part of bringing progress closer to farmers on the ground.

The facilities include farm-to-market roads, bridges, postharvest installations and rural water systems.

"Japan believes that the long-term impacts on the lives of many agrarian reform beneficiaries far outweigh the resources devoted to these projects," he added.

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# Davao firm to open direct banana route from Mindanao to Mideast

By Jasper Emmanuel Y. Arcalas
@jearcalas

DAVAO-BASED Reefer Express Line of the Filipinas Inc. (Reefer Filipinas) said it will launch a direct shipping route between Mindanao and the Middle East to allow local banana growers to directly tap the growing Middle Eastern market for their produce.

Reefer Filipinas President and CEO Felix S. Ishizuka told the BusinessMirror they are keen on launching their first Davao-Saudi Arabia-Iran route by April as they are able to consolidate 200,000 boxes of bananas for export to the Middle Eastern market.

Ishizuka claimed this will be the first commercial direct shipping route between Mindanao and Iran. He noted that only one company has a vessel shipping directly to Middle East. This, Ishizuka pointed out, leaves banana growers with no choice but to sell their produce to this company and even competing with the firm's own banana production.

"There is no player going directly to Iran. So, how can our small growers be able to penetrate the Middle East market?" he told the BusinessMirror in an interview at Reefer Filipinas's office in Makati.

Ishizuka said his firm has signed an agreement with the prospective first exporters to use the new route with a current consolidated volume of 150,000 boxes today. He explained that the volume should be at least 200,000 boxes for the route to launch.

"The 50,000 boxes would be easy to fill up. We are very positive that this Philippine-Middle East direct liner service will fly very, very soon. We're looking at April," he said.

"Now, we are giving our small banana growers an option to penetrate the Middle East market," he added.

Ishizuka said the Mindanao-Middle East route would ply every once a month after launching, eventually increasing to twice a month once volume increases and stabilizes.

Through the new shipping rouute, Ishizuka said local growers will have more elbow room to negotiate prices directly with the importers or traders of the importing country.

"At present, banana growers are forced to engage in fixed long-term contracts at low price regardless of market conditions," he said.

Last year, Saudi Arabia overtook Iran as the top buyer of Philippine bananas in the Middle East, with a total volume of 189,268.144 metric tons (MT) worth $66.452 million, according to Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) data.

The volume was more than double the 83,432.030 MT of bananas, worth $28.896 million, exported by the Philippines to Iran in 2019, PSA data showed.

Nonetheless, Philippine cavendish exports to Iran grew 16 percent to 188,822.546 MT, while its value rose 22.29 percent to $58.415 million, PSA data also showed.

Mindanao Development Authority (MinDA) Chairman Emmanuel F. Piñol, a former Agriculture secretary, said the new route to be opened by Reefer Filipinas is a welcome development that allows banana growers, mostly in Mindanao, to find other options amid trade disruptions in China caused by coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19).

Piñol added that they are "working closely" with Reefer Filipinas for the Mindanao-Middle East shipping route.

"We have to find new markets for our Cavendish bananas in view of the current health crisis in China which has affected the shipment of bananas and other products," Piñol told the BusinessMirror.

Economist Pablito M. Villegas, a former Land Bank of the Philippines vice president, said the direct shipping route "would entail lesser costs" for both importer and export—something "good for the economy" and the local growers.

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# 'Pork shortage looms due to ASF, coronavirus'

By LOUISE MAUREEN SIMEON

Consumers should brace for a possible shortfall in pork as African swine fever (ASF) continues to spread and meat imports decline amid global trade disruption due to the coronavirus disease-2019 (COVID-19).

Imports of meat products, particularly pork, have slowed down and the trend is expected to persist due to the increase in the number of COVID-19 cases, according to the Meat Importers and Traders Association (MITA).

"Imports have declined because of high prices. With COVID, it's getting worse because there is trade disruption. In the next three months, arrivals will slow down," MITA president Jess Cham told **The STAR.**

"It will definitely go down not necessarily because of ASF but because of the disruption in the trade flow," Cham said.

Data from the Bureau of Animal Industry showed that pork imports reached 17.8 million kilograms as of January. The volume is 41 percent lower than the 30.2 million kilos of pork imports during the same period last year.

"Hog raisers are saying that in three to six months, we will feel a shortage from local production. I think that's a realistic timeline because we heard the same thing last year when ASF started hitting us," Cham said.

"The law of supply and demand will catch up. Prices will go up and those who are willing to pay for the product will be able to get it. Increase in prices will prompt other people to shift to other protein sources," he added.

Cham also cited a decrease in imports from Europe and the United States, the country's major sources of imported meat.

The US Department of Agriculture-Foreign Agricultural Service had earlier said the Philippines is seen to import 300 million kilos of pork this year, 13 percent higher than last year's 265 million kilos.

It said domestic production would decline by 10 percent to 1.4 billion kilos.

Consumption was also down by eight percent at 1.7 billion kilos as consumers shift to chicken meat.

Government data showed 237,406 pigs, representing 1.85 percent of the country's 12.8 million hogs, have been culled due to ASF.

Pigs in 625 barangays in 160 towns and cities nationwide were hit by the swine disease.

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# 60 sacks of *chicharon* seized in Ilocos Sur

TUGUEGARAO CITY, Cagayan – At least 60 sacks of *chicharon* (pork crackling) feared contaminated with African swine fever (ASF) were seized from a bus passenger in Barangay Villa Quirino, San Esteban, Ilocos Sur on Monday.

Municipal meat inspector Julius Ayson said they received information on the delivery of the items to a certain Albert Rivera of Barangay Villa Quirino.

The seized products were turned over to the provincial quarantine office.

Ayson said Rivera faces charges for violation of a provincial ordinance, which bans the entry of pigs, pork and related products in the province. **– Raymund Catindig**

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NATURAL ELECTRICITY STORAGE

# Stinky durian could help power phones

KUALA LUMPUR—Pungent, spiky durian—a fruit banned in many public places in Asia due to its foul smell—has been used by scientists to store electricity and could one day help power electric vehicles and mobile phones across the region.

University of Sydney researchers took the nonedible waste from durian and jackfruit—usually disposed of in landfill at a high cost—to create environmentally friendly and odor-free electricity storage for fast charging.

"We looked at durian and jackfruit because about 70 percent of the fruit is not edible," Vincent Gomes, an associate professor at the A6

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university, told the Thomson Reuters Foundation on Monday.

"We thought about using the template that nature provides—a waste material with zero cost that is typically sent to landfill—and processed that into making this super-capacitor electrode," he said.

SMELLY SOLUTION Batteries made from durian would last longer and charge faster than the lithium-ion batteries, according to researchers. —REUTERS

### Like open sewer

Durian, described by some as smelling like an open sewer or turpentine when ripe, is considered a delicacy and is hugely popular across many parts of Asia, where it is known as the"king of fruits."

The region, like other parts of the world, is investing heavily in renewable energy projects in order to meet its international climate pledges and cut planet-warming emissions.

The researchers ground down the durian waste in an inexpensive, nontoxic and nonhazardous process that included heating the substance in water and freeze-drying it, creating energy stores for fast electricity charging.

### Faster charging

Renewable energy can be banked while it is being generated, for use later, with solar power a "particularly attractive" source as there is so much available across Southeast Asia.

"To be able to store that inexpensively, in large quantities, would be a big game-changer," said Gomes, who also "loves" the taste of durian. "One can store the energy and use it at night when the sun isn't shining."

Batteries made from durian and jackfruit would last longer and charge faster than the lithium-ion batteries currently used to power mobile phones, tablets and electric cars, said Gomes.

The researchers are now talking to companies with the aim of making a prototype battery that could eventually be marketed.

"A fantastic outcome would be to have these super-capacitors charge, for example, tuk-tuks or scooters quickly," Gomes said.

"In villages, instead of burning diesel engines they can rely on these energy storage devices to light up throughout the day," he added. —REUTERS

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# US soybean exports in jeopardy

FORT COLLINS, Colo. - US soybean shipments have rebounded from last year's trade war-fueled lull, but recent volumes and sales are well off normal levels and February exports were alarmingly low, raising concerns for the rest of the 2019-20 season.

The United States exported 5.32 million tons of soybeans in January, up 10 percent from last year but down 19 percent from the 2014-2018 average, according to data published on Friday by the US Census Bureau.

Some 40 percent of the January soybean volume was shipped to top buyer China, which is below the 2014-2018 average of 62 percent.

Export inspection data published by the US Department of Agriculture on Monday suggests that around 3.2 million tons of soybeans left US ports in February, which if realized would be a 14-year low for the month. The data also implies last month's bean exports to China were around 600,000 tons, and that would be the lowest February volume in 20 years and the lowest for any month since April 2019.

According to USDA's export sales report, as of Feb. 27, there were just 293,000 tons of purchased soybeans left to ship to China by the end of the marketing year, well below the latest five-year low of 1.4 million tons on the same date in 2016. This raises serious questions about the rest of the 2019-20 marketing year and whether USDA's export forecast is too aggressive.

Total US soybean exports between September and February, the first half of the marketing year, likely came in just below 31 million tons. That is up 14 percent on the year but is otherwise an eight-year low.

USDA's latest 2019-20 export forecast of 49.67 million tons (1.825 billion bushels) would mean that some 18.8 million tons must be shipped in the second half of the year. That is about 8 percent below last year's record high and slightly above the previous year's second-half volume, so it is not logistically unreasonable.

However, a record number of US soybeans would have to be sold in the next several months for this to be possible. Through Feb. 27, about 34 million tons had been sold for shipment in 2019-20, meaning there is still a sales deficit of more than 15 million tons to reach USDA's target.

The recent three-year average for second-half soybean sales is 9.5 million tons, and those sales are more often to countries other than China.

Ever since the trade war began in mid-2018, China's buying pattern of US soybeans has been less regular, lifting last year's second-half exports to the Asian country to a record 9.5 million tons, nearly double the previous record for the period. Before the trade conflict, around 90 percent of China's annual US soybean haul was shipped between September and February.

China's recent lack of interest has been seriously concerning, as February purchases from the United States likely totaled less than 300,000 tons. But China is likely the only buyer that can prop up US bean sales as much as is necessary over the next several months to sustain current export expectations.

US Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue said last week that China will likely get more involved in the US soybean market in late spring and summer, which is when Chinese purchases tend to pick up in a normal year. However, the return of Chinese buying at that time is usually for the next marketing year, not the current one as is needed. - ***Reuters***