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Pinoys urged to buy local fruits for New Year

By LOUISE MAUREEN SIMEON

Filipinos have been urged to patronize local fruits as part of the annual tradition of preparing round fruits during the New Year.

Round fruits are believed to bring good luck and prosperity when included in preparations for the New Year.

The Department of Agriculture issued the call after noting that most Filipinos prefer to buy imported fruits such as apples, oranges and grapes for the New Year revelry.

Agriculture Secretary William Dar said buying local fruits would increase farmers’ incomes and support the development and commercialization of the local fruit industry.

“Promoting our own homegrown fruits will boost not only the country’s fruit industry, but also provide farmers and their families more income,” Dar said.

“These are available year-round and can be bought in every market. Let us promote and take pride in them, thus giving our tradition a deeper meaning by nurturing our agricultural sector,” he added.

For instance, instead of imported oranges, consumers can buy perante, satsuma or Vizcaya ponkan, which are grown in Nueva Vizcaya.

There are also local grapes from La Union, as well as citrus fruits from Central Luzon and Bukidnon.

Other popular Pinoy fruits include ananás, atis, avocado, bignay, civic, coconut, dalandan, duhat, guava, lanzones, maholo, mangosteen, melon, papaya, pomelo, rambutan, santol, siniguelas, tisue and watermelon.

For non-traditional consumers, there are round varieties of jackfruit, pineapple, mango, marepul, durian, bulubting or star fruit and dragon fruit that can be bought from farmers.
Agriculture rises despite challenges

BY JUN YAP

The Department of Agriculture (DA) said that 2020 has officially become the most challenging year for the Philippine agriculture sector.

According to DA Secretary William Dar, massive stresses faced the country’s farmers and fishers — from volcanic eruption, infectious animal diseases, crop pest infestations, a viral pandemic that resulted in a health crisis, to falling prices of staples, and then finally a series of typhoons in the last quarter.

We believe that this record achievement proves the correctness of our policies as Filipino rice farmers are starting to reap the benefits from the Rice Tariffication Law.

“But it was also the year when the agriculture sector rose to the occasion and kept the country’s economy afloat with steady and affordable food supply for the population, amid what is possibly the worst economic crisis since World War II,” he stressed.

According to him, while many considered 2019 as a particularly challenging year for the sector, mainly because of the birth pains of the implementation of Republic Act 11303, or the Rice Tariffication Law (RTL) and the initial outbreak of African swine fever, nobody saw things would take a turn for the worst in 2020.

Promising reboot

He said it was a promising reboot for the DA at the start of 2020 as it was supposed to be a “rebound year” as farm growth was initially projected to hit two percent to three percent, from the dismal 0.6 percent and 0.7 percent growth performance in 2018 and 2019, respectively.

The year opened with rice prices at stable levels, inflation in check, and the full implementation of the Rice Competitiveness Enhancement Fund (RCEF), a component under RTL, in full swing.

It said that the ASF outbreaks were also manageable through heightened quarantine measures nationwide, however, a series of unfortunate events erupted — quite literally — beyond the control of man.

Starting the year with a bang

To recall, Taal Volcano erupted in January, exacting some PhP0.8 billion worth of damage and affecting some 15,700 hectares of coffee, cacao, pineapple, rice, coconut and other high value agricultural crops.

The fisheries sector around Taal Lake likewise sustained the biggest hit with PhP1.6 billion in losses.

“Your department was able to offset these losses through the immediate delivery of assistance and services to those affected by the eruption. The DA initially awarded PhP2.788 million worth of assistance including crop insurance, livelihood, seeds and seedlings, and farm machinery, among other donations to the affected farmers and fisherfolk of Talisay, Tanauan and Sto. Tomas. This was on top of the PhP60 million worth of interventions awarded to the agricultural communities surrounding Taal,” Dar said.

Avian influenza prevention

In February, the Philippines reported the second case of bird flu in the municipality of Jaen, Nueva Ecija.

But compared to the same episode three years ago, the DA leadership was more prepared in containing its spread with targeted quarantine measures and policies now in place.

Dar said that upon confirmation, authorities were able to immediately stamp out and dispose of all birds from the infected farm in Nueva Ecija.
DA’s decision to extend validity of import permits to pull down palay prices

By MADELINE B. MIRAFLOR

The decision of the Department of Agriculture (DA) to extend the validity of issued sanitary and phytosanitary import clearance (SPS-IC) for rice imports is feared to bring down palay prices during the next harvest season.

Because of this, the Federation of Free Farmers (FFF) is now asking Agriculture Secretary William Dar to come clean and reveal the “concerned stakeholders” who made such request from the government, which was later on approved by Dar.

To be specific, Dar recently issued Memorandum Circular (MC) 43, which states that rice and corn shipments from ASEAN countries, except Myanmar, should arrive in the country within 60 days of the SPS-IC issuance.

Shipment coming from Myanmar and other non-ASEAN countries, on the other hand, should be here within 90 days of the SPS-IC issuance.

The issuance came just a few days after Dar signed MC 38, which is the exact opposite of MC 43 and shortened the validity of SPS-ICs for rice imports from 60 days to 20 days.

This is to not “depress local production prices,” according to Dar.

But then, Dar still proceeded to amend MC 38 and issue MC 43 after consultation with “concerned stakeholders”.

“The stakeholders suggested some adjustments in the days the SPS-IC must be used after issuance to accommodate possible delays in processing shipment by foreign suppliers,” Dar said.

FFF National Manager Raul Montemayor said the DA may have only talked with importers and traders and did not get the opinion of farmers and other affected parties before the issuance of MC 43.

Montemayor said the latest MC likewise contradicted the agency’s previous circulars mandating consultations not only with importers but also producers to “assess local supply and demand appropriately”.

Calling the timing of the extension “ill-advised”, Montemayor said that imports could again depress palay prices just when farmers, who had recently been hit by typhoons, will start harvesting their dry season crop in March next year.

The extension also came at a time when DA is expecting a significant increase in domestic production during the second semester of 2020, thus raising the country’s rice self-sufficiency level despite the successive calamities.

As of December 4, total rice imports for the year amounted to 1.974 million metric tons (MT), surpassing the 1.857 million MT imported during the first ten months of implementation of the Rice Tariffication Law from March to December 2019.

“The DA’s job is to maintain stock levels within a target range and then calibrate the arrival of imports that would supplement local production, so as to avoid supply gluts or shortages. It will be irresponsible for the DA to rely on traders to strike this balance and temper their appetite for making money,” Montemayor further said.
Sugar output improving

By LOUISE MAUREEN SIMEON

Local sugar supply has remained stable as production improves and with overall output for the current crop year likely to increase.

Latest data from the Sugar Regulatory Administration (SRA) showed that local raw sugar production went up 31 percent to 407,770 metric tons as of the first week of December.

The current production is higher than the 311,617 MT recorded in the same period in 2019. Sugar crop year starts every September and ends in August.

Based on data on sugar production for the crop year, output in terms of 50-kilogram bags reached 8.15 million from 6.23 million a year ago.

Further, the country’s raw sugar demand rose 19 percent to 407,569 MT from 343,597 MT.

The total sugarcanes milled during the period was 5.14 million MT, up 38 percent from the previous year’s 3.71 million MT.

In terms of refined sugar, production decreased by 34 percent to 73,290 MT.

Meanwhile, the mill-gate price of the commodity remained flat at P1,510 per 50-kilo bag.

This year, local sugar production will likely go up by two percent to 2.19 million MT.

Almost all sugar produced in the Philippines is consumed locally where about 50 percent of domestic consumption is accounted for by industrial users, 32 percent by households and the remaining 18 percent by institutions.
Phil tobacco export dips, farmers eyeing rebound

The 17 percent decline only refers to unmanufactured or loose tobacco leaf

BY RAFFY AYENG
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The Philippine tobacco industry was not spared from the adverse effects of the global pandemic, forcing the country’s export volume to drop by 40 percent, the National Tobacco Administration of the Department of Agriculture (NTA) disclosed.

Citing data from the agency’s regulation department, NTA administrator Robert Victor Sears Jr. told the Daily Tribune that tobacco export for 2020 suffered a 40 percent drop compared to the figures recorded from 2016 to 2019.

But he explained that the dip was not due to the Tax Reform for Acceleration and Inclusion (TRAIN) Law, but due to the global health pandemic.

To recall, the TRAIN Law, which imposes higher taxes on cigarettes, e-cigarettes and other alternative devices for smoking, enables the government to properly implement the Universal Health Care (UHC) program, in keeping with President Rodrigo Duterte’s commitment to improve the lives of Filipinos by expanding the delivery of healthcare services, especially to low-income families.

The dip was not due to the TRAIN Law, but due to the global health pandemic.

Meanwhile, international trade data from the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) showed that for the first three quarters of 2020, or when the Covid-19 pandemic started to pound many industries, tobacco exports dipped 17.6 percent or $93,066,126 from its 2019’s record of $112,997,518.

In 2019, the country exported a total of 32,241,860 kilos of unmanufactured tobacco in the first quarter, while this year, the country has only exported a gross total of 24,781,945 kilos.

But Sears was quick to explain the data, saying that the 17 percent decline only refers to unmanufactured or loose tobacco leaf.

Tobacco products (Product Code 2402) refers to cigarettes, cigars, snus, chewing pipe, cuttifier, homogenized, reconstituted, cuttrags, flavored leaf cut and the likes,” the NTA chief said.

Trading season

Sears also explained that the tobacco trading season already commenced in March, which was the start of a series of lockdowns due to the pandemic, explaining that the tobacco growers have anticipated the nationwide enhanced community quarantine, and were able to sell their produce to their contracted leaf buyers.

But he lamented that the recent typhoons that pummeled the Northern part of the country has not drenched the produce of the tobacco growers, since planting season has started late November in some areas.

“During typhoon ‘Ulysses,’ which devastated farm areas in Northern Luzon, our tobacco growers, who are also rice growers in Cagayan, were affected but not in their tobacco growing activities. Their seedbeds were submerged in flood but the farmers immediately started re-sowing in time for the planting season,” Sears said, emphasizing that the revenue for the tobacco products were redirected to other crops such as rice.

Crop shifting

He admitted though that there are farmers who shifted to other crops due to the low demand on tobacco byproducts, especially in areas where irrigation systems have been established.

“In those areas, tobacco farmers can now plant two to three cropping of rice. In other areas previously planted to native tobacco, like Isabela and Cagayan, many farmers shifted to corn due to the low demand of cigar filler tobacco products,” Sears maintained.

Aside from this, he likewise explained that the affected tobacco growers of Philip Morris in Mindanao caused farmers to shifting to planting corn, revealing that there are still about 41,000 tobacco farmers who are actually planting tobacco at present, although NTA records showed that there are 65,000 registered tobacco farmers.

Will surely bounce back due to high demand

There are now big inventories of cigar filler among cigar manufacturers, hence the slowdown of production.

The NTA chief assured that the industry is still in good shape since there is still high demand for tobacco forms.

“Still, the high demand for cigar filler tobacco for cigars, mainly due to low market requirements of European countries for this tobacco type. There are now big inventories of cigar filler among cigar manufacturers, hence the slowdown of production,” Sears said.

He stressed that the government, through the NTA, is mitigating whatever problems are being faced by the industry.

“Affected farmers are assisted by the DA’s Regional Field Units and the local government units located in tobacco growing areas. Local tobacco growers are also provided with assistance for corn production and livelihood projects,” the NTA chief stressed.

As he assured that the NTA will continue to assist tobacco farmers by providing assistance through subsidies in an effort to attain high yield and quality tobacco produce, in line with the market demand for improved flavor or topped tobacco used as blending materials in cigarette making.
FAILURE OF LOAN PROGRAMS

TRAINING, EDUCATION KEY TO UPLIFTING FARMERS, FISHERFOLK

By Karl R. Ocampo
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While the emergence of affordable and accessible loans for farmers intensified over the years, the country’s premier think tank said these credit programs still remained unsuccessful as the lack of markets and low farm prices continued to deteriorate farmers’ repayment rates.

In a study titled “Towards a More Sustainable Financing of Small Farmers and Fisherfolk’s Agricultural Production,” the Philippine Institute for Development Studies (PIDS) cautioned that the government’s financing ecosystem would remain unsustainable and exclusive to a few if it would not be viewed in the bigger context of the industry’s value chain.

It noted that merely granting farmers and fishers access to affordable loans and increasing the government’s loan portfolio to agriculture would not result in long-term gains for the industry as these programs must be accompanied by other interventions, including the establishment of cold-storage facilities, processing hubs and the provision of insurance coverage.

“There is a need for well-thought-out lending programs, ones that are designed with clear objectives and are implemented when critical requisites are in place,” the PIDS said.

It added that the government’s loan packages must include training programs on financial literacy to educate beneficiaries on the proper use of money and the sustainable way to manage agribusinesses.

The PIDS noted that some small-scale farmers and fishers who availed themselves of government-funded loans did not repay due to the mindset that government money was free, as reflected in Landbank of the Philippines’ repayment rate of 20 percent.

Inadequate markets and low farm-gate prices.

TRAINING, EDUCATION KEY TO UPLIFTING FARMERS, FISHERFOLK

FROM B1

have also hounded stakeholders, making it difficult for farmers and fishers to repay their debts.

These challenges, the think tank said, “deepen as traders and merchants take advantage of the [farmers and fishers’] need to immediately sell their harvests.”

More than providing loans, the PIDS said the government’s vision must be anchored on empowering the country’s food producers through training and education.

At the same time, it should provide enough infrastructure that would allow farmers and fishers to dictate the prices of their goods to unchain them from the grasp of middlemen.

Source
Prawn: A vital export commodity

Farmed prawn has become a vital export commodity for the Philippines, among the known varieties that have a high demand is vannamei, a prawn of the eastern Pacific Ocean which is caught or farmed for food.

While production of the local industry is increasing, it is unfortunate that it is encountering a setback due to prevalence of certain viral diseases affecting the vannamei variety.

Despite the problems confronting the sector, production of vannamei in the Philippines is said to be growing.

Personalized methods

With this development, several industry players started to utilize their distinct methods to reduce or prevent the occurrence of diseases, and to improve yield through sound management practices.

Since prawn is an important aquaculture commodity, a prawn farm in Manapla, Negros Occidental adopted sound management practices and developed its own technologies to boost the local production.

For the feed conversion ratio, a modified feeding schedule has been designed for his farm to minimize feed wastage and production cost.

After all, the vannamei variety is very efficient at utilizing the natural productivity of the ponds.

Following this development, the farm has the potential to achieve a harvest of approximately 20 tons per half hectare pond.

It is expected that the different modifications and technologies developed by the farm management will help boost the local industry.

Even the United Nations’ Food and Agriculture Organization has said that commercial culture of the mentioned species in several areas showed a rapidly increasing trend, adding that Asia has seen a phenomenal increase in the production of vannamei.

But due to fears on the entry of exotic diseases, many Asian countries have been reluctant to promote vannamei farming, where its culture remains confined to experimental testing in several areas.

It can be noted that some countries freely permit its commercial culture but have official restrictions, so that only quality and safe brood stock may be imported.

Similarly, other countries have strict quarantine laws to prevent importation of exotic pathogens with new stocks. JUN ESF.
State university initiates ‘conservation farming’

This farming system ensures stable supply of farm produce to answer issues on food security, especially on rice sufficiency, at the same time guarantee sustainable livelihood for our marginalized farmers.

BY JUN YAP

A state university in Negros Occidental can now preserve and improve soil fertility through "conservation agriculture" which was introduced by the Kansas State University (KSA).

This agricultural innovation was introduced to the Central Philippines State University (CPSU) in Kalambakan City by Dr. Manny Reyes, a research professor at the KSA in partnership with the United States Agency for International Development.

This was initiated through the efforts and leadership of CPSU president Dr. Aladino Moraca.

"This is the sure-win formula to solve the economic dilemma that our country is facing today. This farming system ensures stable supply of farm produce to answer issues on food security, especially on rice sufficiency, at the same time guarantee sustainable livelihood for our marginalized farmers," Moraca said.

No till farming

He explained that conservation agriculture or "no till" farming is also known as regenerative agriculture that increases yield while enhancing health of the soil.

"It is done through three components — minimum soil disturbance (permanent no till), permanent organic soil cover, and diversification of species in rotation, sequence or associations. If one is lacking, it could no longer be called conservation agriculture," Moraca said.

He stressed that constant plowing disturbs and rubs natural elements and compounds present in the soil.

"It is like stripping off the soil's clothes resulting in depletion. In conservation agriculture, the soil is regenerated through organic enhancers," he explained.

According to him, mulching is one way to fertilize the soil, while cover crops such as legumes, which produce organic nitrogen, are used as soil conditioner or fixer. Part of this process is diversification to maximize soil productivity, which means planting various types of crops and plants in an allotted area.

"Add residue to cover the soil regularly and don't practice monocropping. Instead, diversify in species," Moraca emphasized.

As a starter, the CPSU is encouraged to prepare "legacy plots" or permanent areas that are "not and will not be plowed."

These areas will be regularly fortified with compost, and mulched with hay or straw to retain moisture, which encourage development of good microorganisms and minimize if not eliminate weeds.