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By Bong S. Sarmiento
@InqNational

LAKE SEBU, SOUTH COTABATO—A couple living on a secluded hill in the village of Lamlahak here have been enjoying their retirement years in the company of rabbits. Their goal though is to make these hopping mammals a meat staple to be served on the table of average Filipinos.

Virginia Compañero, 64, who worked for 36 years in the government's Agricultural Training Institute, and her husband, Rodel, 57, a real estate agent, are now focused on breeding rabbits for meat consumption in their 4-hectare property, clearing a pathway many citizens might consider taboo.

Most Filipinos consider rabbits as lovable pets; hence, butchering them could be misconstrued as a "heartless" act.

But Virginia pointed out that the meat of what many see as pets had been consumed in many parts of the world, including the United States and Europe, alongside chicken, pork and beef, and had been among the items displayed in the meat section of supermarkets.

"Rabbit meat is healthier than pork and chicken. It has higher protein content, and lower fat and bad cholesterol," she told the Inquirer.

Raising rabbits for food



ALTERNATIVE MEAT Rabbits are raised at the Compañero family farm in Lake Sebu, South Cotabato, in an effort to introduce an alternative meat to Filipinos. —PHOTOS BY BONG S. SARMIENTO

"It's high time to introduce rabbit meat for a healthier lifestyle. Nowadays, we have much morbidity due to our food intake that is high in fat and bad cholesterol content," said Virginia, who also heads the Soccsksargen Rabbit Raisers Association.

She acknowledged that changing the mindset of Filipinos to become rabbit meat eaters would be a big challenge, but she said this could be met with proper education.

Healthier lifestyle

For now, Virginia said, rabbit raisers in Soccsksargen are more concerned about having stable stocks for meat. "Our goal is to make rabbit meat an alternative to pork," she said..

Last year, Agriculture Secretary William Dar pushed to make rabbit meat an alternative to pork, following the onslaught of the African swine fever that devastated the hog industry and affected the livelihood of most small-scale hog growers in different parts of the country.

Propagating rabbits is easier, Virginia said. It was introduced in the country by US Peace Corps volunteers in response to the food shortage after World War II.

Even small farmers can afford rabbit farming due to its low production cost, Virginia said.

The animals consume only roughly 50 grams of commercial feed pellets a day, which is economical. The pellets, however, should be supplemented with unlimited foliage with low water content, such as "napier" grass, Para grass, star grass, ca-

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rabao grass and "rensoni."

Rabbits multiply fast, with the doe (female) giving birth five times a year, based on a 70-day birthing cycle. A rabbit can live up to 10 years and can weigh 2 kilos after five to six months, and 1.2 to 1.3 kilos when dressed, Virginia said.

Scarce supply

Due to its scarce supply, rabbit meat has been selling at P400 to P450 a kilo these days.

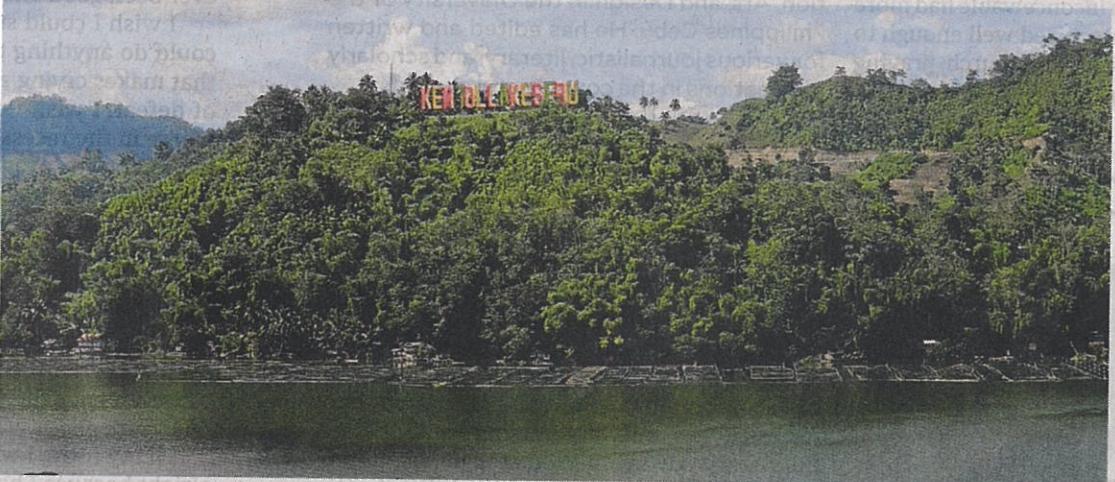
Virginia said her group hoped to bring the prices down to make it affordable to average consumers. They can do this by raising more rabbits to a larger population.

"With rabbit meat as affordable as pork, and once Filipinos begin to patronize the product, farmers would be earning extra significant income," she said.

To popularize rabbit farming among T'boli tribes in Lake



AGRICULTURE BACKGROUND Virginia Compañero's background in agriculture has given her and husband, Rodel, the confidence in their venture to breed and propagate varieties of rabbit suitable as food.



MOUNTAIN TOWN A group of farmers growing abaca, corn and banana in the scenic mountain town of Lake Sebu is starting to integrate rabbit growing into their agriculture production.

PHILIPPINE DAILY INQUIRER

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Sebu, the couple lent out three breeding pairs of rabbits to three families. Once each pair of rabbits bear offspring, the recipients will return the pair to them, which will again be lent to other families.

At present, the Compañeros are growing 70 rabbits. They already sold some of their stocks for P400 each after starting their venture last year with only a buck and two does.

The New Zealand and California White breeds are the most commonly grown rabbits for meat in the region. The latter has a higher meat to bone ratio, meaning it is meatier than those with smaller bones.

Fertilizer source

Rodel, who heads the Lamlahak Farmers Association Inc., said he wanted to integrate rabbit production in the group's 50 members who are engaged in corn, abaca and banana production.

"They can eat rabbit meat or sell them to earn extra money," Rodel said. "Rabbit meat, for me, tastes better than native or broiler chickens," he added.

A rabbit can be roasted ("lechon"), or cooked the way Filipinos cook goat delicacies, such as "kaldereta," "pinapaitan," adobo, "kilawin" and "sinampalu-

kan," Rodel said. His wife cooks it with curry powder.

He said rabbits could also be a source of organic fertilizer for the banana variety locally known as "balangon," or "bongulan," which is being exported to Japan and South Korea. Rabbit droppings are "cold manure" that can immediately be applied to plants, Rodel said.

Allan de Lima, a triathlon athlete based in General Santos City, first tasted rabbit meat in the 1980s when his father raised rabbits at home.

"Rabbit is food for me. As an athlete, eating rabbit meat helps build my muscles because of its rich protein content," he told the Inquirer.

De Lima is again growing rabbits, now that it is becoming popular in the region. He described rabbit meat production as a "promising industry."

Halal market potential

Virginia said rabbit meat had the potential to penetrate the halal market, noting that some Muslims had been growing and eating the animal in the region.

According to De Lima, there are so far nearly 3,000 dedicated rabbit raisers in Soccok-sargen, which is composed of the provinces of South Cotabato, Cotabato, Sultan Kudarat and Sarangani, and the cities of General Santos, Koronadal, Kidapawan and Tacurong.

To make rabbit meat popular among Filipinos, De Lima said promotion, along with efforts to establish stable stocks, must start at home with family members, friends and the community.

"Many Filipinos eat rats, snakes and even frogs. Why not try rabbits, which are clean and have healthy meat?" he asked. INQ

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Leyte town logs 1st ASF case in Visayas

By LOUISE MAUREEN SIMEON
and MIRIAM DESACADA

The first case of African swine fever (ASF) in the Visayas has been detected in two barangays in Abuyog, Leyte.

The Department of Agriculture (DA)-Eastern Visayas regional office confirmed yesterday that blood samples from hogs in backyard farms in Barangays Can-aporong and Bunga tested positive for ASF.

The Abuyog municipal agricultural office said it received reports on "unusual swine mortalities" in backyard piggeries in the two barangays last month.

This prompted the Leyte provincial veterinary office in coordination with the DA regional office to gather samples from the piggeries.

The DA said four of seven samples tested positive for ASF during initial screening. Confirmatory tests conducted by the Bureau of Animal Industry also yielded positive results.

DA regional director Angel Enriquez said they coordinated with the office of Abuyog Mayor Lemuel Gin Traya to convene a quick response team and finalize an ASF action plan for Eastern Visayas.

Traya created a task force to prevent and control the spread of the disease. He ordered a ban on the movement of hogs to and from the town

until Feb. 15.

"Hogs should be strictly confined in barangays where they are being raised either for commercial or private purposes," he said.

Three veterinary quarantine checkpoints were set up at the boundaries of Abuyog.

The local government unit will start culling hogs within the 500-meter radius. Affected hog raisers will be indemnified as per DA rules.

Losses due to ASF were pegged at P135 billion.

While the DA said 430,000 hogs were affected by the swine disease, stakeholders claimed more than five million hogs have been culled.

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DA boosts supply of farm machinery

By LOUISE MAUREEN SIMEON

The Department of Agriculture-Philippine Rice Research Institute (PhilRice) inked a technology transfer agreement with Val-Agri Machineries for the fabrication and commercialization of its developed machines.

With the agreement, PhilRice became the first agency to be issued a fairness opinion report facilitated by the Department of Science and Technology.

Under the Technology Transfer Act, technologies funded by the government are subject to a fairness opinion board review and report.

The agreement grants Val-Agri Machineries to manufacture the PhilRice-developed micro tiller, laboy tiller, reversible flatbed dryer

and seed cleaner, which can reduce farm expenses on land preparation and post-harvest activities.

Of the technologies, micro tiller is a lightweight equipment used for tilling small sized paddies, while laboy tiller is intended for land preparation particularly for puddling soil with deep hardened depth.

On the other hand, reversible dryers are a batch type mechanical dryer used to dry grains by introducing heated air at the bottom layer of the grains and then reversing the flow of the heated air at the later part of the drying process.

Meanwhile, seed cleaner is used to remove foreign materials from the seed mass.

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ASF infiltrates Visayas

The Department of Agriculture in Eastern Visayas (DA-8) confirmed that the African swine fever (ASF) infestation in at least two villages in Abuyog, Leyte may have started in December.

DA-8 confirmed that ASF caused swine deaths in backyard farms in Barangay Can-aporong and Barangay Bunga late last year.

The report was based on disease investigation and sample collection on 6 January and real-time polymerase chain reaction tests on blood samples submitted to the Animal Disease Diagnosis and Reference Laboratory of the Bureau of Animal Industry on 11 January.

It was the first ASF confirmation in the Visayas.

There are no estimates yet on the number of hogs that died due to the disease. There were also unverified reports of similar ASF-related deaths in the neighboring towns of Javier, MacArthur and La Paz.

Abuyog Mayor Lemuel Traya created a task force to control and prevent the escalation of ASF cases. No movement of swine and hogs shall be allowed to and from the town until 15 February while hogs will be restricted in villages where they are being raised.

Culling will be carried out within a 500-meter radius from where the infection came from. Owners will be paid P5,000 per head of mature hogs and P2,000 per piglet.

DA-8 said it is still investigating how the ASF entered the region but initial report showed two possible sources: Through swine purchased by a local trader from an infected stock or a traveling boar rendering breeding services.

"Nobody wanted this to happen, especially that we are still facing a human health crisis. Thus, we are admonishing local hog raisers and traders to stop the transport and sale of pork and pork by-products from the suspected ASF areas particularly coming from ground zero," the DA said in a statement on Friday.

Neighboring municipalities have also implemented border controls against the entry and exit of live hogs, pork meat, processed pork products and cooked pork.

Hog traders passing through and going to other destinations are required to have documents, such as shipping permits approved by quarantine officers from the points of origin to avoid confiscation of their products. E. RECUERDO

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PAGCOR aids PhilFIDA with P6.1-M grant

BY JUN YAP

In its effort intensify the production of fibers in the country, the Philippine Amusement and Gaming Corporation (PAGCOR) has turned over P6.1 million to the Philippine Fiber Industry Development Authority (PhilFIDA).

According to PAGCOR, this is a vital assistance to PhilFIDA, the government agency in-charge of developing and sustaining the country's fiber industry.

"The financial grant shall be used for the construction of the Phase II building of PhilFIDA's Ilocos Cotton Processing Center as well as for the supply, delivery, installation and testing of cotton fiber processing equipment in Ilocos Norte," PAGCOR chair and CEO Andrea D. Domingo said.

Acceptance of the P6.1 million is a completion of the P26 million assistance of President Rodrigo Roa Duterte to the cotton farmers and weavers of the Pinili, Ilocos Norte.

On the other hand, PhilFIDA deputy executive director Annray Villota Rivera said the phase II of the processing center is where the cotton yarns will be processed and PAGCOR's donation will help facilitate the work of the cotton farmers.

"Acceptance of the P6.1 million is a completion of the P26 million assistance of President Rodrigo Roa Duterte to the cotton farmers and weavers of the Pinili, Ilocos Norte," Rivera said.

According to her, the President wants the same PAGCOR chair and CEO Andrea D. Domingo and vice president Jimmy Bondoc.

project to be duplicated in the province of Sarangani in the near future.

Rivera said the Philippines produces different types of natural fibers such as abaca, cotton, pineapple and silk.

These fibers are being used to produce various products like textile, handicrafts, infant products, surgical masks, drug testing kits and even parts for aircrafts and cars. Local weavers also use the country's fibers to produce clothes, she added.

"The country is the largest producer of abaca fibers supplying about 87 percent of the world's requirement for the production of various materials, and we are working to achieve an industry capable of meeting the global demands for renewable and environment-friendly materials," Rivera stressed.

"We are very grateful for the generous support from PAGCOR. This is a big help for the local farmers and supports our efforts in boosting the country's local fiber industry," she pointed out.



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF PAGCOR

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DA, DSWD asked to step up aid for poor amid rising prices

By RYAN PONCE
PACPACO

QUEZON City Rep. Alfred Vargas has called on the **Department of Agriculture (DA)** and **Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD)** to step up their efforts in assisting poor families as food prices continue to rise.

Vargas, chairman of the House committee on social services, expressed concern over the continued spike in food prices after the holiday season.

"It is alarming that in what should be a 'low-demand season' after the holidays, food prices remain high. Kawawa po ang 11 milyong Pilipino at ang kanilang pamilya kung hindi natin ito aaksyunan," Vargas said.

Inflation rose to 3.5 percent in December—its highest jump in more than a year—in part due to in-

creases in food costs, with vegetable prices rising 19.73 percent while meat prices were up by 9.95 percent.

The DA has attributed the increase on tight supply due to the successive typhoons that hit the country in the last quarter of 2020.

The agency said food prices might not stabilize

until March, when harvest season usually begins.

To ease the financial burden of higher food prices on the poor, Vargas said he would ask DSWD to study the possibility of extending additional cash aid, especially as the number of "food-poor" and "borderline food-poor"

families increased due to the pandemic.

"This is an urgent issue that we need to address. Hindi pa tapos ang pandemic. Mas madaling magkasakit ang taong gutom," he said.

Vargas called on the DA to expand its network of Kadiwa rolling stores,

which sell fresh produce at cheaper prices.

"Mas makakatipid ang ating mga kababayan kung hindi na nila kaailangang dumaan sa middle man sa pagbibili ng pagkain. Expanding the network of Kadiwa stores will not only help our farmers, but also consumers," he said.

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PRICE SPIKE 'ALARMING'

By Ryan
Ponce
Pacpaco

QUEZON City Rep. Alfred Vargas has called on the Department of Agriculture (DA) and Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) to step up assistance to poor families as food prices continue to rise.

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MANILA BULLETIN

THE NATION'S LEADING NEWSPAPER

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■ ANI, LBP launch e-voucher platform for farmers

AgriNurture, Inc. (ANI), the listed agriculture company controlled by businessman Antonio Tiu, has partnered with Land Bank of the Philippines to launch an electronic voucher platform to serve farmers in rural communities nationwide. In a statement, ANI said the platform will provide micro-financing for farmers in targeted clusters and cooperatives in rural farming communities in the form of e-voucher. "This will enable the unbanked masses the opportunity to be issued online bank accounts and access to the banking grid despite being located in areas with no access to wired internet," ANI and Landbank said in their Memorandum of Understanding. Under the agreement, ANI and affiliates shall select and endorse farmers and cooperatives for financing by Landbank. It will also enter into marketing agreements with accredited farmers and provide them with technical assistance as well. On the other hand, Landbank will provide financing to the farmers endorsed by ANI and evaluate the feasibility of integrating ANI's online system with ANI's e-voucher system. The overall aim of the Memorandum is to provide a more efficient and convenient financing platform to farmers and other beneficiaries of Landbank, ANI and its affiliates. ANI said it tapped Landbank because the government financial institution is mandated to provide accessible and technology solutions to provide timely and responsive financial services to farmers and MSMEs among others. (James A. Loyola)

MANILA BULLETIN

THE NATION'S LEADING NEWSPAPER

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■ Agri sector to contract in Q1 – think tank

The agriculture sector is expected to contract by more than 1 percent within the first three months of this year on the weight of the lingering impact of strong typhoons, namely Quinta, Rolly, and Ulysses, said a top official of an international think tank. "For the first quarter of 2021, we are projecting that the overall growth rate of the volume of production in agriculture is -1.21 percent," said Glenn B. Gregorio, director at Southeast Asian Regional Center for Graduate Study and Research in Agriculture (SEARCA). "This contraction could be expected as the agriculture sector bounces back after a series of typhoons and floods on top of the disruptions brought about by the COVID-19 lockdown restrictions," he added. Nevertheless, he said fishery is expected to have a positive growth at 3.05 percent, although "such is not the case for crops (-1.17 percent), livestock (6.33 percent) and poultry (-3.99 percent)." Noting the positive growth to be expected from the fishery sector, SEARCA is calling for an improved logistics and transport system to increase the competitiveness of the sector. "The Philippines needs to invest on an integrated infrastructure system that lowers production and transportation costs across the different supply chains," Gregorio said. "The private sector is enjoined to invest in cold-storage facilities where various technological adaptations may be applied in our country given that various designs have been made by more advanced countries on this aspect. We believe that this need is very urgent given that the fishing communities remain one of the impoverished sectors in the country," he added. (Madelaine B. Miraflor)



FOOD SECURITY RESEARCH GRANTS FOR COVID-19 IMPACTS AVAILABLE TO PHL, SOUTHEAST ASIANS

GRANTS for research on transformation through agricultural innovation in Southeast Asia are available to Filipinos and from Southeast Asian countries of Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Myanmar, Timor-Leste and Vietnam.

The research grants are focused on food security during the Covid-19 pandemic and its economic and social impacts.

The grants are under the auspices of a Mentorship Program for Advanced Grants jointly funded by the International Foundation for Science (IFS) and the Southeast Asian Regional Center for Graduate Study and Research in Agriculture (Searca).

This is the first activity under the agreement recently signed by IFS and Searca, a Searca news release said.

Searca Director Glenn B. Gregorio said this is the second collaboration of Stockholm-based IFS and Philippine government-hosted Searca.

"The first was in 2015-2019 on the IFS-Searca Collaborative Grants Pilot in Southeast Asia, which awarded research grants to 12 teams composed of a total of 41 scientists and researchers from seven countries in Southeast Asia. The research focus then was on climate change adaptation and mitigation," Gregorio explained.

He said the IFS-Searca grant is intended to enhance the research capacity of early career scientists in the specified Southeast Asian countries, the news release said.

Gregorio also highlighted the role of higher education and research institutions, particularly in

the global pandemic, to "promote a transformative mindset and produce experts who understand the growing complex social concerns and are able to contribute positive change now and in the future."

IFS Director Nighisty Ghezae pointed out that "no single organization, no matter how large or well-funded, can address future challenges by itself. In this era of interdependence, strategic partnerships with like-minded institutions are not an option, but a necessity. Thus.... this MOA between our two organizations symbolizes a collaboration which we believe will lead to addressing short- and long-term food security challenges, enable us to invest in more resilient food systems, and take us closer to achieving the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals."

Ghezae said: "We are aware of Searca's reputation for excellent work in this field and its strong commitment to creating a critical mass of early career researchers who can generate applicable knowledge."

Searca Program Head for Research and Thought Leadership Pedcris M. Orencio asserted that "research formally articulates the truth" and that collaborative research increases productivity and quality, the news release said.

He likewise affirmed the value of the mentorship program as an approach to enhancing the conduct of research and as an intervention to nurturing young minds and honing skills through the guidance of technical experts and those with decades of research experience.

On the other hand, Ghezae shared that "over the past 50 years, IFS has earned its own place by providing support to early career researchers in low- and lower-middle-income countries, many of whom now occupy leadership roles in the region and around the world."

According to Orencio, "To be eligible for the grants of up to \$20,000, applicants must be enrolled in a PhD program or have recently completed a master's or PhD degree within the five years before the call, with proven limited access to start-up funds for their research."

He added that proposed projects must contribute to knowledge and practice in food security.

The topic of proposed projects must also fall within the common thematic priorities of IFS and Searca, which are biological resources in terrestrial systems, water and aquatic resources, dietary diversity and healthy livelihoods, agri-business models for increased productivity and income, sustainable farming systems and natural resource management, food and nutrition security, transformational leadership for agricultural and rural development, gender and youth engagement in ARD, enhanced ARD towards climate resilience, EcoHealth/One Health applications to ARD.

Moreover, Orencio said the proposed projects must be applied or developmental research—that is, drawing upon explicitly referenced basic research, the news release said.