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CLOSED FISHING SEASONS

DA CONSIDERS FISH IMPORTATION TO MEET EXPECTED SUPPLY SHORTFALL

By Karl R. Ocampo
@KAROcampo_

As the closed fishing seasons in the country's waters draw near, the Department of Agriculture (DA) is considering plans to import fish to make up for the expected shortfall in supply during the period.

Agriculture Secretary William Dar said consultations were ongoing to determine the volume of imports. According to Undersecretary Cheryl Marie Natividad-Caballero, permits were given to accommodate the importation of 30,000 metric tons of fish last year but only 26,000 MT were brought in.

To allow fish species to spawn and recover, three major seas are subjected to a three-month closed fishing season yearly as per the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR). These are the Northeast Palawan Sea (November to January), Visayan Sea (November to January) and the Zamboanga Peninsula that spans across the East Sulu Sea, Basilan Strait and Sibuguey Bay (December to March).

"This is to make up for that period when supply of captured fish is not available and supply needs have to be augmented," Caballero said, noting that importation would always be the agency's last resort.

Dar said the BFAR was expected to submit its recommendation to the DA by Aug. 20. Stakeholders including commercial and municipal fishers are expected to participate in the consultation as their comments would be crucial in making the decision, Caballero said.

The DA was previously slammed by consumers and industry groups for allowing the importation of *galunggong*. The shortage was due to several factors including overfishing and climate change, which led prices of *galunggong* shooting to as high as P240 a kilogram from only about P100 a kilo in previous years. INQ

PHILIPPINE DAILY INQUIRER
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FROM P250B TO P72B

PROPOSED DA BUDGET SLASHED

By Karl R. Ocampo
@KAROcampo_

The Department of Budget and Management turned down the Department of Agriculture's (DA) ambitious budget proposal for next year, slashing the amount to only P72 billion from the proposed P250 billion.

Agriculture Secretary William Dar said in a briefing organized by the Economic Journalists Association of the Philippines on Wednesday that the revised budget for agriculture, under the National Expenditure Program, was only P1 billion higher than the 2021 budget of P71 billion and was 71 percent lower than the department's request.

"There was no explanation [for the cut]," Dar said in a follow-up interview. "Another P20 billion on top of the adjusted proposal would be a good addition."

On top of its annual budget for this year, the DA got additional funds through the Bayanihan laws, the annual P10-billion rice competitiveness enhancement fund and tariff revenues from agricultural imports which were allotted for specific DA programs.

"We will continue to drum up support from various stakeholders so that during discussions in Congress, our budget could still increase in a big way," said Dar.

"We have seen why we need more budget. In rice, if you bring in all the rice budgetary support ... that's almost P79 billion and you have seen the outcome. The higher the investment, the higher the outcome," he added.

Dar stressed in a phone interview that the DA was seeking a budget that was substantially bigger than the current allocation to be able to significantly increase support to the livestock industry, which was battered by two pandemics—the coronavirus and the African swine fever.

He said they were looking to increase the funding for the subsector by at least P4.5 billion to fast-track repopulation efforts and strengthen biosecurity measures in farms.

The DA also wants to improve financing for the fisheries subsector as it has also been registering declines for the past quarters.

For the first semester, the agriculture sector contracted by 1.5 percent, with only the crops subsector able to register gains. This has prompted the DA to adjust its growth target this year to 2 percent from 2.5 percent. INQ

Malaya
Business Insight

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DA may get less than requested budget

THE Department of Agriculture (DA) said its proposed P250-billion budget for 2022 will likely not be granted and it will only be given P72 billion as indicated in the National Expenditure Program that will soon be submitted to Congress.

The P72 billion is only P1 billion higher than this year's budget of P71 billion.

Agriculture Secretary William Dar said he has been hoping next year's budget would see at least an increase of P20 billion.

In a virtual briefing hosted by the Economic Journalists Association of the Philippines yesterday, Dar said the DA's request for additional budget in recent years is justified especially after last year's record palay production of 19.4 million metric tons (MT).

Meanwhile, Dar also said the National Fisheries and Resources Management Group is now being consulted for the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources' recommended volume of fish that will be allowed to be imported during the country's closed fishing season by fourth quarter.

Dar said the recommendation will be submitted by August 20, and that the National Economic and Development Authority also has a suggested volume which he declined to provide.

The government will have to issue certificates of necessity to import (CNI) if the supply is intended to be sold in wet markets. The permits are eyed to be issued before the close season which starts on October for the additional supply to arrive on time.

Cheryl Marie Natividad-Caballero, DA undersecretary for agri-industrialization and fisheries, said CNI for 30,000 MT of galunggong were issued last year but only 26,000 MT were exhausted and arrived in the country.

Amid the preparations, Caballero said importation is still the "last resort" and that stakeholder comments especially of aquaculture producers of bangus and tilapia will be considered. - ***Jed Macapagal***

BusinessWorld

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DA expecting P72-B budget for next year

THE DEPARTMENT of Agriculture (DA) said it expects to be allocated a P72-billion budget for 2022, well below its proposal for P250 billion.

"The National Expenditure Program (NEP)... is now being printed, to be submitted soon to Congress. The indication is that the level of budget projected for the DA is almost P72 billion. It just went up by almost P1 billion if we consider our budget this year," Agriculture Secretary William D. Dar told reporters during a virtual briefing Wednesday.

"There are other special projects on top of the regular budget and we will continue to drum up support from various stakeholders so that during discussions in Congress, it might still be increased in a big way," he added.

Mr. Dar cited improvements in production of palay, or unmilled rice as an outcome of increased budget support. Palay production during the first half rose 4.9% to 8.8 million metric tons.

"We have seen why we need more budget. Take rice for example. If you bring all the budgetary support, production really increases," Mr. Dar said.

Meanwhile, Mr. Dar confirmed that the process is underway regarding the government's plan to issue certificates of necessity to import (CNI) to augment the fish supply with the closing of the fishing season.

He said the National Fisheries and Resources Management Group is being consulted regarding import plans, adding that the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) has been directed to submit its recommendation on CNI volumes by Aug. 20.

"Let's wait on what the recommendation of BFAR will be. We also received recommendation from the National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA) but I will not disclose it in the meantime," Mr. Dar said.

Socioeconomic Planning Secretary Karl Kendrick T. Chua announced Tuesday that the government is planning to issue CNIs to address the upcoming closed fishing season starting October, billing it as an inflation-containment measure.

The PSA (Philippine Statistics Authority) reported Monday that the value of Philippine agricultural production contracted 1.5% in the second quarter.

Livestock and fisheries production declined 19.3% and 1.1%, respectively. Crop production rose 3.1% while poultry output increased 2.5%. — **Revin Mikhael D. Ochave**

THE PHILIPPINE STAR
TRUTH SHALL PREVAIL

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DA hopes for higher budget

By CATHERINE TALEVERA

Dar

The Department of Agriculture (DA) continues to hope for a higher annual budget for next year in a bid to improve the sector.

In a forum organized by the Economic Journalists Association of the Philippines (EJAP) yesterday, Agriculture Secretary William Dar said the DA had submitted a proposed budget of almost P250 billion for next year. This includes its attached agencies.

"Our indication is that – not including the corporations – our level at the DA, the projected budget is almost P72 billion, almost P1 billion higher if we have to consider our budget this year," Dar said.

For 2021, the DA has an approved budget of P71 billion.

"And there are other special projects on top of the regular budget. And we will continue to drum up support from various stakeholders," Dar said.

"In rice, if you have to bring in all the rice budgetary support from government, including that of the National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA), it reaches almost P79 billion. And you have seen the outcome, it really increased. So the investment gets higher outcome as well," he said.

Palay production rose nearly five percent to 8.8 million metric tons (MT) in the first half from 8.4 million MT in the same period last year.

Dar said the country remains on track to hit record high palay production this year as it projects an output of 20.4 million MT, higher than the 19.4 million MT in 2020.

Despite palay's large contribution to the country's agricultural output, the overall value of agricultural production in the country declined by 2.5 percent in the first half .

However, improvements were seen in the second quarter as the decline narrowed to 1.5 percent compared to the 3.4 percent decline registered in the first quarter.

Dar earlier emphasized the need for higher budgetary support for the sector to be able to realize the potential of the agriculture sector moving forward.

"The potential of the country's agriculture and fishery sector could be further unleashed given appropriate budgetary support, and much-needed private sector investments, including those from local government units, "Dar said.

"For 2022, we are proposing a budget of P250 billion, which is three times more than this year. We pray that the country's agricultural sector could be afforded that long-delayed financial support so the Philippines could keep pace at least with our counterparts in the ASEAN region," he said.

THE PHILIPPINE STAR
TRUTH SHALL PREVAIL

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DA extends validity of meat import permits

By CATHERINE TALAVERA

The Department of Agriculture (DA) has extended the validity of sanitary and phytosanitary import clearances (SPSICs) of imported meat by 30 days as part of efforts to ensure the arrival of the commodity amid global shipping woes.

Under DA Administrative Order 21 signed by Agriculture Secretary William Dar, the DA is temporarily extending the validity of the SPS import clearances to 90 days from the original period of 60 days.

The extension was prompted by shipping and other logistical difficulties brought about by the global health crisis and supply contraction of container vans.

"The above mentioned difficulties have prompted stakeholders to request for an extension of the SPSIC for imported food commodities, especially for imported meat," the DA said.

According to the DA, the temporary extension will be effective immediately until end-December.

Sought for comment on the SPSIC validity extension, Meat Importers and Traders Association (MITA) president Jess Cham told **The STAR** that the move was "abrupt" and would "disrupt trade."

Cham pointed out that there are problems with meat imports being seized and confiscated due to the enforcement of new minimum labeling requirements for imported meat and poultry.

"Administrative Order 26 provides for modification of labels. DA should just allow it instead of confiscations and seizures," Cham said.

"Deficiency of label has nothing to do with food safety so DA should not make a big fuss over this," he said.

Based on a recent memorandum circular issued by the National Meat Inspection Service, meat imports are required to include the expiry or best before dates in their labels. Inappropriately labeled meat and poultry products will be seized and subject to confiscation and disposal.

As part of the government's effort to bring down prices and stabilize the supply of pork in the country, President Duterte issued in May Executive Order 133, which increased the minimum access volume (MAV) for pork meat to 254,210 metric tons (MT) for MAV year 2021 from 54,210 MT.

Duterte also signed EO 134 in May, which provides that in-quota pork imports or those under the MAV are imposed a 10 percent tariff for three months and this will be increased to 15 percent in the remaining months. This is lower than the original rate of 30 percent.

Out quota pork imports are slapped with a 20 percent tariff for the first three months, which will be raised to 25 percent in the remaining months. This is lower than the original tariff of 40 percent.

Based on a resolution, the MAV Management Committee (MCC) approved 70 percent or 140,000 MT of the 200,000 MAV plus for this year to be distributed in July to October.

The remaining 30 percent or 60,000 MT will be distributed from November 2021 to January 2022.

With the expected arrival of more meat imports, the prices of meat products in the country are expected to go down.

As of Monday, the price of *kasim* or pork shoulder stood at P330 a kilo, while the price of pork belly or *liempo* was P360 a kilo.

NOTICES

Legal Notices

NOTICE IS HEREBY GIVEN THAT THE ESTATE OF THE LATE WALEIGH CRAIG RASMUSSEN WAS SELF-ADJUDICATED BY HIS SOLE HEIR AS PER DOC. NO. 413; PAGE NO. 84; BOOK NO. XVII; SERIES OF 2021 UNDER NOTARY PUBLIC ATTY. ABEL U. MAMARIL, PH.D.

The Manila Times

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DA seeks P250-B 2021 budget

BY EIREENE JAIREE GOMEZ

THE Department of Agriculture (DA) said it will work on getting its proposed 2022 budget of P250 billion approved by the Congress.

"We will continue to drag up support from various stakeholders so that during discussion in the Congress *ay baka pwede naman madagdagan pa* (maybe we can still add to the budget). We have seen why we need more budget," Agriculture Secretary William Dar said during the virtual forum organized by the Economic Journalists Association of the Philippines on Wednesday.

The approved budget of the Agriculture department this year is P85.58 billion.

Dar was referring particularly to the advancement of the rice sector. For the first six months of 2021, the country's *palay* (unmilled rice) production reached an all-time high of 8.8 million metric tons (MMT) or a 9-percent increase from its level in the same period last year, and by far the highest in Philippine rice history.

In fact, the department is targeting to achieve over 20 MMT of *palay* production for the whole of 2021.

"We have seen in the outcome *na talagang tumataas* (that really increased). So the investments beget higher outcomes as well," Dar pointed out.

The Agriculture chief said the DA has submitted a budget proposal of almost P250 billion for fiscal year 2022.

Last June, the National Agriculture and Fisheries (NAF) Council discussed the DA's budget utilization budget proposal for next year. The NAF Council serves as the highest mechanism for agriculture and fisheries consultations and dialogues between and among national government agencies, local government units (LGUs), civil society organizations and private sector stakeholders.

For 2022, the DA's total recommended budget is P231.76 billion with its Tier 1 Proposal at P77.4 billion and Tier 2 Proposal at P154.3 billion.

The proposed budget for the major agricultural sectors are P33.49 billion for rice, P7.21 billion for corn, P11.34 billion for high-value crops, P22.36 billion for poultry and livestock, and P28.18 billion for fisheries.

During the meeting, the overall increase in the budget of the department was also appealed by the NAF Council to deliver the interventions needed by the agri-fishery sector. At least P2 billion should be allocated for hog credit programs while the Philippine Crop Insurance Corp. should get at least P5 billion to provide the necessary insurance programs of the agri-fishery industries, especially with the onset of climate change.

The DA has been encouraging the participation of the private sector to increase their investments in the agri-fishery sector while the government initiates sound policies and provides financial assistance to farmers and fisherfolk.

The Philippine Chamber of Agriculture and Fisheries Inc. (Pcafi) earlier expressed dismay over the government's lack of prioritization for food production, which is a major input to a nation's food sufficiency and food security.

Of the total national budget of P4.506 trillion, the share of agriculture is a measly 1.5 percent or P66.4 billion despite contributing 10 percent to the country's total gross domestic product.

With this, Pcafi urged President Rodrigo Duterte to issue an executive order that will require LGUs to allocate a mandatory 10 percent of their internal revenue allotment for food security and help develop Philippine agriculture.

BusinessMirror
A broader look at today's business

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'Appropriate budget will unleash full potential of agri sector'

BUSINESSMIRROR FILE PHOTO

AGRICULTURE Secretary William D. Dar is optimistic that his agency would receive a substantial increase in its budget for 2022, which will allow the Department of Agriculture (DA) to hit its production targets.

Based on the National Expenditure Program, Dar said the DA's budget for 2022—excluding the allocation for government owned and controlled corporations under the agency—is estimated at P72 billion, or just P1 billion higher than its 2021 budget.

"We will continue to drum up support from various stakeholders so that during discussions in Congress our budget could still be increased in a big way," he said during a virtual forum organized by the Economic Journalists Association of the Philippines and Aboitiz on Wednesday.

"We have seen why we need more budget. In rice alone, we brought in the budgetary support and we have seen the outcome. [Production] really increases. Higher investment means higher outcome."

Last month, Dar revealed that the DA proposed a budget of P250 billion for 2022, which is "three times" higher than this year's budget of P85 billion, to sustain its efforts to ensure the country's food security.

The DA made the pitch despite concerns over a limited budget space for departments in light of the implementation of the Mandanas-Garcia ruling next year, which will increase funding for local government units (LGUs) by at least P234 billion.

Dar said the potential of the agriculture sector "could be further unleashed" if it will get "appropriate" budgetary support, as well as much-needed private sector investments and financing from LGUs.

"We pray that the country's agriculture sector could be afforded that long-delayed financial support so the Philippines could keep pace at least with our counterparts in the Asean region."

In the same forum, Dar maintained that the agriculture sector can still grow by 2 percent this year despite the 2.5-percent contraction in the value of agricultural output for the first half.

Citing Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) data, Dar noted that the agriculture, forestry and fishing contracted by only 0.1 percent.

"We will exert more effort and hard work to intensify our services and agriculture interventions to our farmers and fisherfolk."

The agriculture chief is also optimistic that the crops subsector would serve as the driver for overall farm growth in the second semester following a bountiful harvest in the first semester.

The BUSINESSMIRROR earlier reported that the country's farm output in the first half contracted by 2.5 percent as the gap in the livestock and poultry production widened on an annual basis. ***(Related story: https://businessmirror.com.ph/2021/08/09/farm-output-shrinks-2-5-on-livestock-poultry-woes/)***

The Philippines is also on track to achieve a historic 20.4 million metric ton palay harvest this year following a record palay output of 8.8 million metric tons in the first half. ***(Related story: https://businessmirror.com.ph/2021/08/09/barring-adverse-weather-condition-in-h2-phl-on-track-to-historic-palay-yield-in-2021/).***

Jasper Emmanuel Y. Arcalas

Abante TONITE
MABILIS SA BALITA

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DA pababahain imported isda

Niluluto na ng pamahalaan ang pagbubukas sa merkado ng Pilipinas para sa mga imported na isda.

Batay sa sulat ni Socioeconomic Planning Secretary Karl Kendrick Chua kay Department of Agriculture (DA) Secretary William Dar, awtomatik nang magbubukas ang merkado ng Pilipinas sa mga imported na isda oras na mapasama ang panukala sa Kongreso na magaamiyenda sa Fisheries Code kung saan sa ilalim ng panukala, hindi na oobligahin ang mga importer na kumuha ng Certificate of Necessity to Import (CNI).

Suportado ni Chua ang planong magpasok ng 200,000 toneladang imported fish sa bansa simula sa Oktubre dahil umano sa mangyayaring kakulangan ng isda kapag nagdeklara ang Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) ng anim na buwan na closed fishing season.

Noong mga nakaraang taon ay tatlong buwan lamang ang tagal ng closed fishing season kung saan pinagbabawalan ang mga mangingisda na pumalaot para makapangitlog ang mga isda at mas lalo pang dumami.

Sabi ni Chua, kailangang umpisahan na ang proseso ng pag-aangkat para makarating na ang mga imported fish bago tumaas pa lalo ang presyo nito.

"The importation process should be initiated the soonest possible time to ensure the timely arrival of the imports," sabi ni Chua.

Aniya, galunggong, alumahan, bariles, tamban at mga isdang hinuhuli sa laot ang aangkatin at hindi mga tilapia at bangus.

Sabi ni Chua kay Dar, dapat nang maghanda ang DA na mag-isyu ng mga karagdagang permit para sa imported fish upang mapunan na ang pangangailangan bago mag-Pasko.

"The DA is also reminded that as per agreement in the Economic Development Cluster held last 19 April 2021, the issuance of CNI to cover the estimated supply deficit during the closed fishing season should be automatically be done while we await the passage of the draft bill amending Section 61 of Republic Act 8550 or the Fisheries Code which proposes the removal of the CNI requirement for the importation of fish for wet markets," sabi ni Chua sa liham na may petsang Agosto 9, 2021. **(Eileen Mencias)**

MANILA BULLETIN

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Senate probe sought on rising cost of fertilizer

By MADELAINE B. MIRAFLOR

Farmers are seeking a Senate probe on the rising cost of fertilizer despite the supposed government interventions to bring down farm inputs in the country through the Rice Competitiveness Enhancement Fund (RCEF).

In a statement, Kilusang Magbubukid ng Pilipinas (KMP) urged lawmakers to probe the steadily rising fertilizer prices burdening rice farmers.

Furthermore, KMP Leader Rafael Mariano said the Department of Agriculture (DA) should explain to Congress where the ₱10-billion RCEF is going and why it is not helping bring down the cost of farm inputs in the country.

As part of the Rice Tariffication Law (RTL), which liberalized rice importation in the Philippines, RCEF is where the tariff collected from rice imports will be deposited. RCEF is also supposed to be injected with ₱10-billion sure funding annually from 2019 to 2024.

"RCEF should be able to help rice farmers. The problem is that RCEF does not give subsidy for farm inputs and fertilizer," Mariano, who was a former Agrarian Reform Secretary, said.

Since May this year, fertilizer prices have constantly increased, further burdening rice farmers who are shouldering the entire cost of production.

According to the Fertilizer and Pesticide Authority (FPA), the average price of fertilizer imported by the country was at $500 per metric ton (MT) as of July, which is higher than the $276 per MT average price registered from January to May this year.

On average, fertilizer prices have increased by as much as 40.5 percent on an annual basis depending on the grade.

In the last week of July, the average price of granular urea rose by 40.5 percent to ₱1,393.32 per 50-kilogram bag from ₱991.45 per 50-kilogram bag in the same period last year.

Based on price monitoring of KMP chapters in the provinces, a price of 50-kilogram bag of urea fertilizer (Triple 14) in Tarlac jumped from ₱1,100 in July to ₱1,500 as of this month. In Nueva Ecija, the price of Swire 46-0-0 brand went up from ₱970 to ₱1,200 per 50-kilo bag in the span of a month, while Triple 14 became costlier from ₱1,250 to ₱1,500 per 50-kilo bag.

In Isabela, farmers observed that the price of Triple 14 went up from ₱1,100 in July to ₱1,350 to ₱1,400 as of this month.

"While the FPA gave assurance that the country has sufficient inventory stocks of fertilizer that can last until the next cropping season or almost 300,000 metric tons MT as of June 21, 2021, there is a need to probe why the retail price of fertilizer is constantly increasing," KMP said.

For his part, KMP Chairperson Danilo Ramos said rising fertilizer prices will affect the domestic rice production, the livelihood of rice farmers, and the country's rice productivity and self-sufficiency.

According to the national peasant women federation AMIHAN, additional fertilizer costs will trim down a farmer's profit to P198 from P302 a day, which could go even lower with the expected decline in palay prices during the lean months of September and October.

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Farm mechanization pushed in Bulacan

AT least 25 individuals from Bulacan have completed their training of trainers (ToT) course on the operation and maintenance of rice farming machines that was spearheaded by the Philippine Center for Postharvest Development and Mechanization (PHilMech).

The training course was conducted by PhilMech's Technology Management and Training Division in Baliuag town in Bulacan last June 21 to 25.

PhilMech said the ToT aims to develop core subject matter specialists to serve as resource speakers for the training courses on rice farming mechanization communication.

During the training, several resource persons discussed various topics like seedling preparation, direct seeding, transplanting, land preparation and hands-on operation of farm machinery.

In a recorded video message, Sen. Cynthia Villar appreciated PhilMech for its continuous distribution of modern machinery to qualified farmers cooperatives and associations (FCAs).

"Isang malaking bagay na patuloy ang pagsasanay ng ating mga magsasaka nang higit pa nilang mapabuti ang kanilang ani at lumaki ang kanilang kita (It is a big thing that our farmers continue to train as they can further improve their yield and increase their income)," Villar said.

"Sa tulong-tulong na pagkilos ng gobyerno at mga idibidwal na katulad ninyo, magiging food secure *ang ating bansa kahit sa harap ng pagsubok gaya ng* Covid-19. (With the concerted effort of the government and individuals like you, our country will become food secured amid challenges brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic)," she added.

PhilMech said there were six participants from local government units (LGUs), eight from FCAs and seven from farm schools.

A participant from Zambales, Antonio Sabangan, expressed his gratitude, saying he was a little hesitant to undergo the ToT as he was not an engineer.

"But I bravely took the chance because I know many farmers depend on me in Zambales. Whether you're an engineer, agriculturist, LGU member or regular farmer, we all came here for one purpose [to] learn and acquire new skills from the training," Sabangan said.

LEANDER C. DOMINGO

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Citicore is assisting in the establishment of farms in areas that host its solar power facilities. PHOTO FROM CITICORE FACEBOOK PAGE

Citicore steps up agro-social initiatives

CITICORE, through its subsidiary Citicore Renewable Energy Corp., continues to expand its agro-solar social program in its host communities.

Citicore said it recently assisted farmers in Mexico, Pampanga to form the 110-member cooperative Buenavista Farmers and Workers Cooperative, composed of farmers and farmworkers.

The cooperative, which will be Citicore's partner for its agro-solar projects, will not only help augment income but also serve as the conduit to different government agencies to develop more effective strategies and value-adding programs.

"We at Citicore believe that the agro-solar initiative and the formation of cooperatives empowers farmers, not only in crop production but more importantly in bringing and selling their produce successfully to the market," said Oliver Tan, Citicore president and chief executive officer.

Citicore also recently partnered with Tarlac State University to provide technical and capacity building training to the newly formed association to further enhance the quality of turmeric processing, as well as branding and marketing campaigns, to generate more job opportunities and maximize profits.

The company also provided advice on other business proposals, such as agritourism and turmeric processing to livestock rearing programs, and linked farmers with agribusiness enterprise networks and urban markets to develop and strengthen value chains.

Citicore pioneered the agro-solar initiative in the Philippines to maximize the use of the land of the solar facilities and at the same time help increase crop production of small-scale farmers, initially through turmeric propagation under the solar panels in all of its Luzon power plants.

Other high-value crops and vegetable varieties will soon be planted to maximize yields during the entire planting season and address climate change issues.

The Citicore project is a proof of concept that agriculture, solar power generation and social development can go hand in hand.

Officials of the Development Bank of the Philippines and the Department of Agriculture expressed strong support for the expansion of the agro-solar models across the country during their visit to Citicore's Solar Farm in Tarlac City. **EIREENE JAIREE GOMEZ**

The Manila Times

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The case of Golden Rice

FINER POINTS

FERMIN ADRIANO

THE old ways are indeed difficult to change.

We saw this in the 19th century when the workers' movement in Britain, called Luddite, destroyed machines in their factories because they were putting workers out of jobs. In more modern times, the shift from the use of big computer machines and desktops to laptops was strongly resisted by giant companies like IBM and its workers because it threatened their jobs. Similarly, we have seen this phenomenon in the replacement of copper by fiber technology in communication. The latter allowed the shift from analogue to digital technology, which was faster and more efficient.

In all these cases, the old ways had difficulty in adjusting to the so-called disruptive technology. But no matter how one resist the introduction of a new technology, if it is proven to be beneficial to the public, there is no way of stopping the march of innovation and progress.

We are seeing the same resistance to the introduction of the Golden Rice (GR) variety among so-called progressive or environmental cause-oriented groups. They claim, without much scientific evidence, that it will be damaging to the local rice varieties. It is not safe to be consumed by the public because of health and safety concerns over the new protein added to GR. Worse, they assert that it will only benefit multinational corporations, which will control its production and distribution.

It is really ironic that subscribers to "dialectical materialism" or "scientific socialism," the supposed intellectual anchor of Marxism, have gone down to the level of being pamphleteers. They have based their opposition mainly against the introduction of GR to nothing less than an ideological posturing or on dodgy studies that purportedly show the threats coming from this new variety. Just like the canards peddled in the social media, their assertions are nothing but as such: fake news.

What is the real score?

Rigorous assessment

GR is a new rice variety bred by the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI), in collaboration with the Philippine Rice Research (PhilRice), which is enriched by beta-carotene through genetic modification. Beta-carotene in food is a source of vitamin A that can help mitigate eye-related problems and stunting among kids. Given widespread stunting among our kids due to poverty, and given the fact that rice is our staple food, enriching the rice consumed by the public by adding beta-carotene can be a major boost in addressing this health problem.

GR underwent rigorous regulatory assessment for five years. The tests included: a complete molecular genetic analysis; the safety of the newly introduced protein; a comprehensive nutrient composition assessment; and phenotypic characterization to identify whether there were unintended and unexpected effects of the genetic modification. It was also established that the new rice variety does not pose any environmental threat to traditional rice varieties, and health and safety hazards when consumed. Moreover, the patent is not owned by any multinational corporation nor local firm because the variety was produced by publicly funded research institutions (i.e., IRRI and PhilRice).

Dissemination plan

Almost 10 years have elapsed since GR was first conceived till the approval of its commercial propagation just last July 21. The approval took so many years because of sustained objection from its detractors all steps of the way. But finally, scientific facts and progress cannot be stopped by ideological posturing and slogans.

Commercial propagation of the new variety is being planned by PhilRice in seven sites in the country where the prevalence of stunting among our kids is widespread. The provinces selected were Quirino and Catanduanes in Luzon; Antique and Samar in the Visayas; and Agusan del Sur, Lanao del Norte and Maguindanao in Mindanao.

In the presentation of the PhilRice staff on GR that I attended, I inquired about whether they can already give samples so that we can test it, particularly its eating quality. I noted that Filipinos patronize a certain rice variety because of its eating quality and not primarily because of its nutritional value. For example, incompletely milled rice (still brownish) is more nutritious than thoroughly milled rice (clean and white) but consumers prefer to buy the latter one because it tastes and looks better.

Unfortunately, there are still no samples for distribution. The public will have to wait for a few more months before they can be released because, as earlier noted, GR's commercial production was just approved by concerned authorities last month.

Meanwhile, expect detractors of the GR to ramp up their opposition against its commercial distribution. The same old and tired arguments will be raised: from the new variety being unsafe and it poses an environmental threat, particularly to local varieties, to being a palliative measure to address malnutrition among the poor consumers and a propaganda ploy to shift away the attention of the public to the real problem of widespread malnutrition in the country that can purportedly be alleviated by GR.

Anti-science

During the term of former agriculture secretary Proceso Alcala under the Aquino administration, the Department of Agriculture (DA) devoted its efforts to attaining two goals for the sector. One was it boasted that it would attain rice self-sufficiency for the country. Second, it claimed that organic farming would be the savior of the agriculture sector. And because of the second item, he scorned the propagation of genetically modified organism (GMO) plants whose experimental area in Mindanao was raided and the experimental plants uprooted.

Regretfully, none of the above materialized despite the DA receiving then practically double its budget under the Arroyo administration. The country never attained rice self-sufficiency despite having more than 60 percent of the DA's budget going to rice productivity-enhancing programs. The US Department of Agriculture noted in its report that we imported nearly 2 million metric tons per year during that time, not counting smuggled rice.

As expected, organic agriculture could not meet the food requirements of our consumers. For one, it registered lower productivity because it is organic. And two, its products were expensive because of low productivity. Only those at the upper income echelon could afford organically raised produce for health reasons.

And GMOs continue to be planted internationally resulting in higher crop production. In the Philippines, yellow corn production is dominated by GMO seeds.

There is no way that Luddism can stop the march of progress through science.

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Meat labeling rules seen affecting food supply

By Jasper Emmanuel Y. Arcalas
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At least 2.5 million kilograms of imported meat products are currently being held in cold storage facilities pending resolution of the labeling issue, which could further stretch the country's food supply system, according to industry players.

Meat Importers and Traders Association President Jesus C. Cham said at least 100 containers carrying 2,500 metric tons of various meat products cannot be sold until the labels are rectified.

"And there are more shipments arriving. Importers are now incurring costs because of this. At the same time they cannot easily sell to the market or their clients pending clearance from the authorities," Cham told the BusinessMirror in a phone interview.

The confiscation of meat shipments started after the National Meat Inspection Service (NMIS) issued a memorandum circular last July 27, which reiterated the strict enforcement of labeling requirements for meat products. ***(Related story: https://businessmirror.com.ph/2021/08/04/traders-worry-over-label-rules-for-meat-imports/)***

The shipments were held in abeyance due to incomplete labels, which did not specify the shelf life or expiration date of the products.

The Bureau of Animal Industry and the NMIS issued a joint memorandum circular (JMC) on meat labeling requirements last August 10 after industry players aired their concerns over the NMIS memorandum circular.

However, the new JMC did not sit well with industry stakeholders. Some of them had pointed out that it contains "legal impediments" and that it had nothing to do with food safety.

The JMC allowed importers to rectify the meat labels of their imports arriving in the country from August 4 to September 30 on the condition that these shipments will be held in abeyance and will only be released upon compliance with the labeling requirements.

The JMC indicated that all meat imports arriving starting October 1 that are not compliant with the minimum labeling requirements "shall be seized and held in abeyance, and subject for confiscation and disposal."

It also stipulated that the two agencies—BAI and NMIS—reserve the right to hold shipments that will not comply with existing rules and regulations for further investigation.

The JMC is anchored on two administrative orders (AO) issued by two previous agriculture chiefs.

"First of all, they should realize that a memorandum circular cannot violate the administrative order of the secretary. And the administrative order allows for modification of labels [even after arrival]," Cham said.

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"The more important concern here is that this [memorandum circular] does not impact food safety."

Concerns

CHAM said he has already aired his group's concerns about the latest JMC with Agriculture Undersecretary for Livestock William C. Medrano, who also signed the new rules.

"We relayed to Medrano that it is better to withdraw these two memorandums because there was no issue before about labeling. The NMIS can very easily go to the importer and tell them you will not get your certificate of meat inspection [if you don't comply with the labeling requirements]," he said.

"What is happening right now is that exporters who cannot meet these labeling requirements are being asked to hold their shipments by the importers, thus, further increasing the landed cost [of meat products]."

Some of the Philippines's trade partners, like the United States and Canada, do not require the inclusion of the shelf life or expiry date of meat products on labels.

In a letter sent to Medrano last August 10, the Philippine Association of Meat Processors Inc. (PAMPI) expressed its "serious" concern about the implementation of the minimum labeling requirements for imported meat products.

PAMPI said NMIS Director Jocelyn Salvador issued the July 27 MC without consulting industry stakeholders. The group noted that the NMIS MC "shocked and surprised stakeholders."

"As far as we know, the aforementioned AOs [AO 26 of 2005 & AO 24 of 2010] were issued at a time when the DA still had jurisdiction and control over processed meats. In 2016, DA ceded jurisdiction on processed meats to FDA [Food and Drug Administration] as mandated by the Food Safety Act of 2013," the group said.

"Existing practices on labeling of imported raw meats have been carried over since 2016, and are presumed to have been regular and acceptable since DA did not make any effort to make amendments or corrections."

According to the group, the two AOs have "contradicting provisions" as AO 26 allows the use of the phrase "best before" or the expiration date to indicate shelf life. Under AO 24, only the expiration date should be included in the label.

The group urged the DA to maintain the status quo ante until the DA chief issues a new AO amending or modifying the existing AOs on imported meat labeling requirements "to avoid further confusion among stakeholders and trading partners."

Industry sources have pointed out that the manner in which the government is enforcing the meat labeling requirements is affecting the country's meat supply at a time when the Philippines is in dire need of meat products.

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Biotechnology firm develops ASF test kit

BIOTECHNOLOGY COMPANY Manila HealthTek, Inc. (MTek) said it has developed a test to detect African Swine Fever (ASF), which is currently constraining the supply of pork due to significant animal deaths in the hog industry.

MTek said in a statement that the product is a molecular-based testing platform for ASF that has been validated by a national reference animal-testing laboratory.

According to MTek, the validation exercise found the ASF test kit to be 100% sensitive and 100% specific. The kit has yet to receive approval from the Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

"Once approved by the FDA, the diagnostic kits will be distributed throughout the country, including remote areas," MTek said.

Raul V. Destura, MTek founder and chief executive officer, said early detection is important to ensure rapid response and containment of ASF.

"ASF threatens not just the livelihood of our farmers but also our food security. With many Filipinos struggling to put food on the table, a pork crisis on top of that problem would be tragic," Mr. Destura said in the statement.

"We do not just want to sit on the sidelines while our foreign counterparts find solutions... The ASF kit is just one of MTek's contributions to finding diagnostics solutions to the country's health problems," he added.

According to the World Organization for Animal Health, ASF is a severe and highly contagious hemorrhagic viral disease in pigs that poses no health risk to humans. The disease was first detected in the country in 2019 and has depleted the hog inventory, resulting in high pork prices.

In July, the Department of Agriculture declared the areas of Lipa City, San Jose, Malvar, Rosario, Taysan, and Nasugbu in Batangas to be officially free from ASF.

The government is also currently conducting trials on an ASF vaccine in partnership with 10 local companies.

According to its website, MTek develops portable diagnostic kits to test for selected infectious diseases.

Some of the kits developed by MTek in collaboration with other institutions include the Biotek-M DengueAqua Kit and the GenAmplify coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) reverse transcription polymerase chain reaction (RT-PCR) testing kit. — **Revin Mikhael D. Ochave**

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Kids Who Farm to get aid from Google employees

KIDS Who Farm, a Zamboanga City-based nongovernment organization (NGO) encouraging young people to go into agriculture, is among the beneficiaries of an NGO that will receive donations from Google employees.

Google employees have set up an internal giving campaign where Googlers from the Philippines and other offices can donate and these donations will be matched by the company. Once final, the funds will go to iVolunteer, an NGO that distributes donations to other nonprofits and matches volunteering opportunities between individuals and organizations.

Unless specified by the donor, iVolunteer will split the donations equally across the following organizations: Citizens Disaster Response Center, Silid Aralan, Solar Hope, and Kids Who Farm to address challenges in disaster preparedness, education, and food security which have been aggravated by the pandemic.

"Giving has always been part of Google. Knowing that the pandemic is far from over with the continuous rise in cases locally and the threat of a new Covid-19 variant, we continue to extend help where possible, especially for our local communities," said Bernadette Nacario, Country Director of Google Philippines. "With this employee-led effort, we remain committed to helping the Philippines get through the pandemic together."

Google has previously enabled similar employee-led donations campaigns for the Philippines, among which was a matching initiative launched in November 2020 for households from vulnerable barangays and municipalities affected by severe flooding caused by Typhoons Rolly and Ulysses.

The campaign was able to raise a total of $100,000 used for cash transfer programming, livelihood interventions prioritizing farming and fishery activities, enhanced health and hygiene support and awareness for Covid-19 protection.

In July, Google announced that it will provide a $7.5-million grant to Asian countries including the Philippines.

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Sugar soars to 4-year high

SAO PAULO/NEW YORK- Sugar prices hit their highest level in more than four years after a report confirmed damage to sugarcane crops in the world's larger producer Brazil from unusually harsh frosts in June and July.

Sugar production in Brazil's center-south region fell by 11 percent in the second half of July to 3 million tons, industry group Unica said, more than expected. Unica added that the three waves of frosts that hit the agricultural areas had further damaged crops already hurt by the worst drought in 90 years.

Market participants were already expecting lower numbers for the second half of July due to the frosts, but the Unica figures were below estimates. Sugar futures on New York's ICE exchange, rose nearly 7 percent on Tuesday in response.

Unica said sugarcane produced per hectare fell 17.9 percent in July when compared to the year-earlier period, as the frosts meant mills had to cut cane before the ideal harvesting time.

Cane crush fell 8 percent from the same period a year ago, to 46.69 million tons.

"Both agricultural yields and the quality of the cane have been hurt by the frosts," Unica's technical director Antonio de Padua Rodrigues said.

The sugar season in Brazil, a country that supplies around 40 percent of the global sugar trade, could end much earlier than usual, causing tighter global supplies. - ***Reuters***

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Wheat eases; soybeans gain more ground

SINGAPORE- Chicago wheat futures slid on Wednesday, giving up some of the previous session's strong gains, although concerns about global supplies and lower Russian crop forecasts provided a floor for the market.

Soybeans rose for a second straight session and corn edged higher.

"The market is continuing to adjust to substantially lower Russian wheat crop estimates," said Tobin Gorey, director of agricultural strategy at Commonwealth Bank of Australia.

The most-active wheat contract on the Chicago Board of Trade (CBOT) fell 0.6 percent to $7.22-1/2 a bushel. The market closed up 2.2 percent on Tuesday.

Soybean rose 0.3 percent to $13.41 a bushel and corn gained 0.1 percent at $5.53-3/4 a bushel.

Russia, the world's biggest exporter, is expecting a lower crop for 2021/22. - ***Reuters***