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PHL wants to start shipping chicken to South Korea

BUSINESSMIRROR FILE PHOTO

By Jasper Emmanuel Y. Arcalas
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THE Philippines may soon resume chicken exports to South Korea after Seoul lifted the temporary import ban on local poultry products due to the avian influenza outbreaks last year, the Department of Agriculture (DA) said.

In a memorandum, Maria Alilia G. Maghirang, agriculture attaché in South Korea, has informed Agriculture Secretary William D. Dar that the South Korean government has given its final approval to lift the temporary import ban on chicken meat and pet birds from the Philippines.

"We are pleased to inform the good Secretary that the Philippines can already export live birds (other than poultry) to South Korea. Post expects Philippine chicken meat export may commence upon approval of the poultry establishments," Maghirang said in her memorandum, a copy of which was released to the media.

South Korea's Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (MAFRA) issued in mid-July an administrative notice authorizing the removal of the temporary import ban on Philippine poultry and pet birds, which took effect last August 6.

To facilitate the resumption of exports of poultry products, the Philippine Agriculture Office (PAO) in Seoul coordinated with the Bureau of Animal Industry and National Meat Inspection Service to comply with the requirements of South Korea's Animal and Plant Quarantine Agency (APQA).

The requirements include the revision of the Philippine veterinary health certificates (VHC) for chicken meat and pet birds as well as the submission of application for the renewal of accreditation of poultry export facilities in the country.

For the VHC revision, Maghirang said APQA and South Korea's Ministry of Food and Drug Safety approved the changes made by the Philippines last August 11.

She added that the NMIS is now in the process of renewing the accreditation of Philippine poultry facilities to export to South Korea. The government is targeting to complete the renewal process within the month.

Ana's Breeders Farms Inc., Carino and Sons Agri-Dev. Inc, LDP Farms Food Corp., Johanna's Chicken Processing Center Inc., Bounty Fresh Food Inc., and Integrated Meat and Poultry Processing Inc. are seeking renewal of their export accreditation to South Korea.

Once these poultry facilities secure the approval of Seoul, they may resume chicken exports to South Korea, Maghirang said.

In March 2020, South Korea imposed a temporary import ban on Philippine chicken meat and pet birds following the confirmation of bird flu outbreaks in the country.

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'House aims to hasten economic recovery by raising agri budget'

By Jovee Marie N. Dela Cruz
@joveemarie

THE chairman of the House Committee on Ways and Means said the lower chamber will push for a higher agriculture budget in the proposed 2022 General Appropriations Act (GAA) to fight inflation and hasten the country's economic recovery.

Albay Rep. Joey Sarte Salceda, the panel chairman, said lawmakers are eyeing to raise the Department of Agriculture's (DA) allocation by at least 10 percent.

"The economic fleet only goes as fast as the slowest ship. If we move agriculture, we move everything," he said. "I think we can go [for] at least 10 percent additional funding although we probably need more and I'll try to deliver more. We have competing budget priorities, but food is the most essential priority."

Earlier, Agriculture Secretary William D. Dar said he is optimistic that his agency would receive a substantial increase in its budget for 2022, which will allow the 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.

Moreover, Salceda said "the agriculture budget is still much smaller than it should be. It's a sector with [an] 8 percent output and 22 percent of the employed force, but just less than 2 percent of direct public expenditures."

According to Salceda, he had discussions with Dar on the potential of the agriculture sector to resolve price worries and drive economic recovery as well as their local initiatives.

"We had a discussion [last Friday]

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on the prospects of the agriculture sector. I explained to Secretary Dar three observations. First, prices will go up as the lag-effects of low interest begin to show. The only way to mitigate that is an increase in the stability and volume of food supply," he said.

"Second, as I explained in a long lecture as laureate of The Outstanding Filipino or TOFIL award, I am seeing signs of a financial bubble in Southeast Asia. You need something of a 'sponge' that will suck up excess financial capital. The most undercapitalized industrial sector in the Philippines is the agriculture sector."

Third, he said, agriculture in the Philippines still has so many "self-imposed restrictions" on land size, efficiency, use, and ownership.

"If we can ease some of those restrictions while investing in its development, we can really boost output, far beyond the 2 percent per year sector growth targeted by the Department of Agriculture," Salceda said.

"We already secured an 18 percent increase in the research and development budget of the national government. I am confident that the House leadership is convinced of the importance of the agriculture sector."

Urgent

FOLLOWING the recent resignation of Budget Secretary Wendel Avisado, lawmakers want the Palace to declare the P5.024-trillion 2022 National Expenditure Program (NEP) as urgent for its fast and smooth passage in Congress.

Salceda, House Committee on Appropriations Chairman Eric Yap and Speaker Lord Allan Velasco, said they are now awaiting the submission of the NEP for 2022.

The Department of Budget and Management (DBM) said it is planning to submit the proposed national budget on August 23, days ahead of their August 25 deadline.

Under the Constitution, the Executive branch has 30 days from the opening of the regular session of Congress to make the submission to lawmakers.

Yap said his committee will start its hearings on the national budget three days after its submission to Congress.

According to Yap, they are targeting to pass the national budget on third and final reading by September 29 or 30.

Among the Covid-19 response efforts that will be sustained through the 2022 budget are the procurement of Covid-19 testing kits, continuous hiring of human resources for health, the establishment of the Virology Institute of the Philippines, and the continuous implementation of health programs in accordance with the Universal Health Care Act. In addition, funds for the procurement of the Covid-19 booster shots will also be allocated under the unprogrammed appropriations.

"We do not have any ounce of worry as we believe that there are many capable public servants who shall perfectly fill the shoes of a DBM Secretary and take up on the task of fulfilling the agency's mission to lead public expenditure management," Yap said.

"But regardless of who will be appointed to lead the DBM, I am very confident that the 2022 budget deliberations will be smooth as far as coordinating with the DBM is concerned and it will be passed on time with the able support of our colleagues in Congress."

Velasco assured the public that the resignation of Avisado will not affect the upcoming budget deliberations in Congress.

"The House of Representatives eagerly awaits the submission of the NEP so we can start the deliberations on the 2022 national budget and pass it on time, much like we did last year," he said.

Also, Salceda said the resignation of Avisado will "pose no risk to the early passage of the 2022 national budget, as Congress continues to work well with the budget department and its Officer in Charge."

"To address the most important issue with this resignation, we assure you that this will not hamper the early passage of the 2022 budget. The Speaker and the entire House leadership is committed to fast-tracking the General Appropriations Act in view of the pressing economic circumstances," Salceda said in a statement.

Bayanihan 3

MEANWHILE, Salceda said that discussions on the national budget and a possible Bayanihan 3 are "going strong and well as if no leadership change has taken place."

"From our perspective, the Budget Department is functioning with very little if any disruption. The DBM bureaucracy is very strong. Just this week, we have had talks with the economic managers, including DBM Officer-in-Charge Tina Rose Canda, to discuss what we could do to fund a possible Bayanihan 3. We discussed this in view of the need for possible 'ayuda,' other health interventions such as genome sequencing and additional testing, and more recently, the need to augment healthcare personnel."

He said the lower chamber and the DBM will meet again this week to further study funding provisions of the Bayanihan bill.

"The first meeting was open and very productive. Offhand, it seems that we will need to realign from the 2021 budget. That's fine; it appears that we still need the power to realign anyway, with all the ECQs being declared and requiring 'ayuda.' The government can't just keep on declaring savings, and the dividends will also run out at some point," Salceda said.

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S Korea lifts import ban on PH chicken

By MADELAINE B. MIRAFLOR

The Philippines can now export chicken meat to South Korea after the latter finally lifted its import ban on the commodity coming from the Southeast Asian nation.

In a formal communication to the Philippines' Department of Agriculture (DA), Maria Alilia Maghirang, the country's Agriculture Attache in Seoul, said the Philippines has already obtained the final approval of the Korean government to lift the temporary prohibition of chicken meat and pet birds (birds other than poultry) imports from the Philippines.

"We are pleased to inform the good Secretary that the Philippines can already export live birds (other than poultry) to South Korea. Post expects Philippine chicken meat export may commence upon approval of the poultry establishments," Maghirang said.

To recall, the Republic of Korea, through the Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Rural Affairs (MAFRA), prohibited the imports of Philippine chicken meat and pet birds in March 2020 amid the outbreak of H5 avian influenza (HPAI) in the Philippines.

It was just in January of this year when the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE) has declared the Philippines free from HPAI.

The OIE declaration came less than a year since bird flu was again detected in the Philippines, particularly in a commercial layer poultry farm in Pampanga and a backyard poultry farm in a village in Rizal.

Finally, on July 15, MAFRA issued an Administrative Notice No. 2021-58/ Notification No 2021-272 for the removal of the temporary suspension to import poultry and pet birds from the Philippines, effective August 6, 2021.

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Looming pork, fish and veggies supply lack poses inflation risks

By Ben O. de Vera
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The projected shortage in fish, pork and vegetable supply should be addressed to keep prices stable especially amid the wet season and with La Niña threatening food production by year-end, state planning agency National Economic and Development Authority (Neda) said.

"While the outlook for some food items remains favorable, the supply forecast for other food products may fall short of demand. The government will work actively to support their availability and ease potential price pressures," Neda said in its latest inflation report on Friday.

The Neda said the government was also ensuring an "unhampered supply chain" despite the revert of some areas, including Metro Manila, to stricter lockdown measures this month.

Citing estimates of the Department of Agriculture (DA) as of mid-July, Neda said pork supply would end 2021 with a 199,344-metric ton (MT) deficit, or 45 days' worth of stocks, despite a 175.9-percent year-on-year jump in imports during the first half.

"Imports covered by the temporary increase in the MAV (minimum access volume) allocation and the reduced tariff rates began to arrive in July. Of the first-tranche target of 140,000 MT, 13.8 percent has been utilized. Nonetheless, supply needs to be further augmented with the arrival of more imports given the projected pork deficit by year-end," Neda said.

The government slashed tariffs and increased quotas on pork to ramp up importation amid the local African swine fever (ASF) outbreak, but Neda said "the government will remain vigilant amid reports of new ASF cases in other countries" like Germany.

In July, meat inflation slowed year-on-year ,but remained high at 16 percent, mainly due to lower chicken prices as those of pork remained flat.

Besides a possible pork shortage, Neda said "lowland vegetable production and fisheries supply are also expected to undershoot at 1,267,804 MT and 135,135 MT, or only at 80 percent and 96 percent sufficiency level, respectively," citing DA and Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources reports last month.

Even as headline inflation returned to within-target 4 percent last month, food prices rose 5.1 percent year-on-year due to more

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LOOMING PORK, FISH AND VEGGIES

FROM B1

expensive vegetables and faster fish price hikes caused by low supply. Rising fuel prices also jacked up delivery costs of these products.

"To manage fish inflation and ensure stable supply, the DA will fast-track the issuance of the certificate of necessity to import to cover the domestic demand gap during the closed fishing season starting October," Neda said.

"While the availability of highland vegetables will partly offset the projected deficit in lowland vegetables, the government can proactively adopt measures to ease price pressures on vegetables and fish products," it added.

Highland vegetables production was expected to post a surplus of 797,820 MT by year-end, while chicken supply would exceed demand by 41,928 MT, the DA estimates showed.

Rice stock is also expected to surpass demand by 2.99 million MT by end-2021, as "the reduced tariffs under EO (Executive Order No.) 135 contributed to the arrival of 494,248 MT of rice imports in June and July, which is equivalent to about 30 percent of year-to-date arrivals," Neda said. INQ

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COA faults NIA again for 5th straight year

By Nestor Corrales
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For the fifth straight year under the Duterte administration, the Commission on Audit (COA) has again called out the National Irrigation Administration (NIA) for more multibillion-peso irregularities, including a China-funded irrigation project in Kalinga and Cagayan provinces.

In its 2020 audit report, the COA said the NIA awarded 841 contracts, worth P6.579 billion, to various contractors with deficient documents, including nondisclosure of project cost and percentage of accomplishment, among others, in violation of Republic Act No. 9184, or the Government Procurement Reform Act.

It was the fifth consecutive year that government auditors reported adverse findings in the management of the NIA, now headed by retired Army Gen. Ricardo Visaya, who was Armed Forces of the Philippines chief of staff for a few months in 2016.

Visaya is backed by a board of directors that is chaired by Cabinet Secretary Karlo Alexei Nograles with Visaya as co-chair and lawyer Michelle Raymundo as corporate secretary.

Measly increase in irrigation

The agency's directors are Public Works Secretary Mark Villar, Economic Planning Secretary Karl Kendrick Chua and private sector representative Gregorio Sarmiento.

When Visaya was named administrator, the agency was already under scrutiny because of the measly increase in irrigation coverage despite the P260 billion that Congress had appropriated to the NIA from 2009 to 2019.

The figures have not changed significantly since and the COA instead reported significant delays and slippages in 82 projects, worth P4.54 billion, plus 25 contracts costing P6 billion in 2016.

1,023 delayed projects

Government auditors reported more delays in 436 irrigation contracts and projects with an aggregate value of P11.94 billion in 2017. The following year, the COA said the lack of proper management delayed the completion of 299 irrigation projects, worth P20.7 billion.

In 2019, the COA reported that mismanagement resulted in delays to 288 projects, costing P10.1 billion, spurring Sen. Ralph Recto to demand that concerned officials solve the problems of the agency, which is "vital to putting food on the Filipino family's table."

Yet, the COA reported the same problems in its audit for 2020 and lamented that the problems have even gotten worse.

"It bears to emphasize that compared to last year's report of 339 contracts, the reported 841 contracts during the year increased by 502 contracts, or 148.08 percent, which is attributed to the work arrangement of personnel due to the COVID-19 pandemic," the COA said.

The irregular contracts included three contracts for the Chico River Pump Irrigation Project, which had incomplete documentary and eligibility requirements.

The uncompleted P4.37-billion Chico River irrigation project was the first flagship infrastructure project to be financed by China under President Duterte's "Build, Build, Build" program and started in 2018.

The Chico river project, funded by a soft loan from the China Exim Bank, was meant to irrigate 7,530 hectares in Tuao and Piat, Cagayan, and 1,170 ha in Pinukpuk, Kalinga, benefitting 4,350 families. INQ

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NEWS BRIEFS

10% hike in DA budget for 2022 sought

House tax chief Rep. Joey Salceda wants at least a 10-percent increase in the Department of Agriculture's (DA) budget for 2022. Salceda said he had a meeting with Agriculture Secretary William Dar on Friday on the potential of the agriculture sector to drive economic recovery as the country grapples with the impact of the pandemic. "I think we can go at least 10 percent additional funding. We probably need more and I'll try to deliver more," Salceda said in a statement on Saturday night. In the 2021 budget, the agriculture department had an P85.6-billion allocation but Salceda said this was still "much smaller than it should be." "The economic fleet only goes as fast as the slowest ship. If we move agriculture, we move everything," he added. —NESTOR CORRALES

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'Mega farms' will hike agricultural output, income of planters—solon

TO increase agricultural production and attain food security, a lawmaker on Sunday urged the Duterte administration to invest heavily in "mega farms" across the country by increasing the 2022 budget of the Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR).

Camarines Sur Rep. Luis Raymund Villafuerte asked Malacañang and Congress to raise the outlay of the DAR in the proposed P5.024-trillion national budget for 2022. This, he said, will allow the agency to carry out its plan to develop or consolidate farms into 50-hectare plantations devoted to the specialized commercial production of specific crops.

"Consolidating small farm lots into mega farms for commercial farming is the only way to dramatically boost agricultural output and farmers' incomes, even at this time of the pandemic, as such consolidation will lead to economies of scale," Villafuerte said in a statement.

"The development of 'mega farms' for either priority or high-value crops will help the country attain food security, if not sufficiency, and turn the often anemic agricultural production into a growth driver that will let us achieve soon enough a strong and sustainable recovery from the pandemic-induced global recession."

The Department of Budget and Management (DBM) has committed to submit to Congress on August 23 the government's 2022 National Expenditure Program (NEP), which will be the last spending program of the Duterte administration.

Villafuerte said agriculture's negative growth of minus 2.5 percent in the January-to-June period should serve as "a wake-up call" for legislators to help the Duterte administration reverse the farm sector's anemic growth by allocating a bigger budget for the DAR in the NEP for 2022.

Citing Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) data, Villafuerte said the value of agricultural output in January to June suffered its biggest drop in five years, or since this sector contracted 3.6 percent in the first half of 2016.

Before the PSA's announcement of negative growth for the year's first semester, he said the Department of Agriculture had already lowered its full-year growth target from the previous 2.5 percent to just 2 percent, in apparent anticipation of a weaker performance resulting from the impact of the Covid-19 and African swine fever outbreaks, among others.

Last year, Villafuerte said he pushed a higher allocation for the DAR during the House committee deliberations on the then-DAR budget for 2021.

In particular, the lawmaker said he sought for an increase of P3 billion to P5 billion in the DAR's 2021 outlay so it could finally carry out its Mega Farms and Food Security Program.

"The DAR submitted the mega farms proposal to the House. I have expressed support for this concept as it involves consolidating farms now owned by beneficiaries into 50-hectare plantations in order to develop these for commercial farming. This presents us with the only way to liberate the farmer-beneficiaries of CARP [Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program] from subsistence farming," Villafuerte said.

He had suggested a higher 2021 budget for DAR upon learning during a committee hearing that the DBM approved an allocation of only P8.8 billion for DAR last year, which was 7 percent lower than the department's budget of P9.5 billion for 2020.

The lawmaker said DAR Undersecretary Bernie Cruz also told Congress that the department will not have enough funds to implement its Mega Farms and Food Security Program. *Jovee Marie N. Dela Cruz*

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Rice shipment delays noted, but local supply seen stable

By Jasper Emmanuel Y. Arcalas @jearcalas
& Cai U. Ordinario @caiordinario

THE National Economic and Development Authority (Neda) is growing wary of shipment delays affecting the country's rice imports, but industry players and experts dismissed its possible adverse impact on the country's supply of the staple.

Neda Undersecretary Mercedita A. Sombilla said they are monitoring the stretching delays in the country's rice imports, a result of the global shipping problem arising from lack of vessels and containers and Covid-19-related mobility restrictions.

"[Reasons for the delay is] more on the pandemic—loading of commodities in exporting countries are affected. What I gathered is that from three days loading it has become 10 days," Sombilla told the BusinessMirror.

Shipping industry players confirmed to the BusinessMirror that they are observing delays in the arrival of imports from Southeast Asian countries, including Vietnam, the country's top rice supplier.

"That is correct. Vietnam is showing delays too now," Reefer Express Line Filipinas Inc. president and CEO Felix Ishizuka told the BusinessMirror.

International reports are also noting a mounting pressure on Vietnam's logistics system with port operations, such as loading and unloading of goods, being affected by the rising Covid-19 outbreaks in Ho Chi Minh City that has spread to southern provinces as well.

A Global Agricultural Information Network (GAIN) report has projected that the strain on Vietnam's logistics system coupled by rising record-high sea freight and shortages of containers would lead to a plunge in exports this year from the world's third biggest rice supplier.

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Record local harvest

HOWEVER, industry watchers and experts pointed out that the Philippines's rice supply would not suffer any serious damage— or even the slightest impact— from Vietnam's logistical problems as the country is on-track to hit record palay harvest this year.

"Even if the country's imports dipped year-on-year and continue to slow down, it will not have a significant effect on the country's overall rice supply since we have higher domestic harvest," an industry source that regularly monitors the country's grain situation told the BUSINESSMIRROR.

The country's rice imports from January to July declined by 5 percent year-on-year to 1.43 million metric tons with 90 percent of the volume coming from Vietnam, latest Bureau of Plant Industry (BPI) data showed.

Monetary Board member V. Bruce J. Tolentino explained that higher domestic palay harvest experienced by the country in the past two semesters led to the reduction of rice imports this year.

"Certainly the record harvests of [second half of] 2020 and [first of half] 2021 explain lower imports by the Philippines in [first half of] 2021," he told the BUSINESSMIRROR.

"Shipping bottlenecks are primarily affecting trade between China and the West. Much less impact in [Southeast Asia]. [Shipping problems] may be constraining supplies from India. But the overwhelming factor [to the decline in imports] is recent record harvests," he added.

An industry source added that Covid-19-related problems in exporting countries have slowed down rice exports to the Philippines, worsened by lower domestic staple demand as a result of unemployment and depletion of savings.

The Philippines saw a record palay harvest in the first half at 8.8 million metric tons, boosting confidence from government officials that the historic 20.4-million metric ton production target would be achieved this year.

"And barring bad weather, it looks like [second half of] 2021 will again be a new [harvest] record. This shows the impact of [Rice Competitiveness Enhancement Fund], particularly the productivity-enhancing aspects like seeds, mechanization, and extension," Tolentino said.

Malaya
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Sokor lifts ban on PH chicken

BY JED MACAPAGAL

THE Department of Agriculture (DA) said South Korea has lifted its ban on chicken meat and pet bird imports from the Philippines.

This after the Philippines has complied with two requirements imposed by South Korea: revisision of the veterinary health certificates for chicken meat and pet birds and the renewal of accreditation ng livestock establishments po to be submitted at the end of the month

In January, the World Organization for Animal Health has declared the Philippines free from bird flu.

South Korea, through the Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Rural Affairs (MAFRA) prohibited the imports of Philippine chicken meat and pet birds in March last year due to the outbreak of H5 avian influenza outbreak in the Philippines.

The Philippine Agriculture Office (PAO) in Seoul said

MAFRA issued last July an administrative notice for the removal of the ban effective Aug. 6, 2021, following coordination and submission of requirements from the Philippines' Bureau of Animal Industry and South Korea's Animal and Plant Quarantine Agency (AQPA).

However, PAO Seoul said approval of the renewal of accreditation to export chicken meat to South Korea of six livestock establishments in the Philippines

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is needed before the resumption of exports can happen.

Establishments seeking for renewal of accreditation are Ana's Breeders Farms slaughterhouse in Davao; Carino And Sons Agri-Dev. Inc.; LDP Farms Food Corp.; Johanna's Chicken Processing Center Inc. Bounty Fresh Food Inc.; and Integrated Meat And Poultry Processing, Inc.

DA said the National Meat Inspection Service is completing APQA's inspection questionnaires which are targeted to be submitted by the end of the month.

There is no available data on the volume of chicken being shipped by the Philippines to South Korea.

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) in an October 2020 report projected South Korea to import as much as 168,000 metric tons (MT) of chicken this year due to steady demand for processed products that can be easily consumed at home and the expected extra demand generated because of the Olympic games.

The USDA in a July 2021 report said the Philippines will produce 1.33 million MT of chicken for the entire 2021. Last year, the Philippine Statistics Authority recorded the country's total chicken production at 1.8 million MT. - ***Jed Macapagal***

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Mega farms to attain food security urged

By RYAN PONCE PACPACO

GIVEN the 2.5%-contraction of agriculture in the year's first semester— the biggest output decline in five years – Camarines Sur Rep. LRay Villafuerte has called on the Duterte administration to invest bigtime in "mega farms" across the country to attain food security even at this time of the pandemic and finally transform this underperforming yet resources-rich sector into a major growth driver.

Villafuerte proposed that Malacañang and the Congress work on raising the outlay of the Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR) in the proposed P5.024-trillion national budget for 2022, so DAR can carry out its plan to develop or consolidate farms into 50-hectare plantations devoted to the specialized commercial production of specific crops.

"Consolidating small farm lots into mega farms for commercial farming is the only way to dramatically boost agricultural output and farmers' incomes, even at this time of the pandemic, as such consolidation will lead to economies of scale," Villafuerte said.

"The development of 'mega farms' for either priority or high-value crops will help the country attain food security, if not sufficiency, and turn the often anemic agricultural production into a growth driver that will let us achieve soon enough a strong and sustainable recovery from the pandemic-induced global recession," Villafuerte added.

The Department of Budget and Management (DBM) has committed to submit to the Congress on or before the constitutional deadline of August 25—or a month after the President's State of the Nation Address (SONA)—the government's 2022 National Expenditure Plan (NEP), which will be the last spending program of the Duterte administration.

Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) data showed that the value of the agricultural output over the January-June period suffered its biggest drop in five years, or since this sector contracted 3.6% in the first half of 2016.

The value of agricultural output was at P856.644 billion (constant 2018 prices) during this semester, or P21.581 billion lower than the P878.225 billion in 2020. In the second quarter, farm output fell by 1.5%, with the value sliding to P435.6 billion from almost P442.37 over the April-June 2020 quarter.

Before the PSA's announcement of negative growth for the year's first semester, the Department of Agriculture (DA) had already lowered its full-year growth target from the previous 2.5% to just 2%, in apparent anticipation of a weaker performance resulting from the impact of the COVID-19 and African Swine Fever (ASF) outbreaks, among others.

Villafuerte said agriculture's negative growth of minus 2.5 % in the January-June 2021 period should serve as "a wake-up call" for legislators to help the Duterte administration reverse the farm sector's anemic growth by allocating a bigger budget for the DAR in the NEP or GAB (General Appropriations Bill) for 2022, so the Department could go ahead on its plan to consolidate farmers' lots into mega farms all over the country."

Even before the pandemic struck last year, Villafuerte had proposed that the government could achieve much higher growth for the Philippines by complementing President Duterte's signature infrastructure program "Build, Build, Build" with a "Plant, Plant, Plant" initiative that will entail a similarly accelerated state spending, this time on agricultural production and farm modernization.

Villafuerte pushed last year a higher allocation for the DAR during the House committee deliberations on the then-DAR budget for 2021.

He particularly moved for an increase of P3 billion to P5 billion in the DAR's 2021 outlay so it could finally carry out its Mega Farms and Food Security Program.

Villafuerte advocated then for priority state funding for agriculture to ensure national food security, especially at a time when the onset of COVID-19 threatened to disrupt global food supplies.

"The DAR submitted the mega farms proposal to the House. I have expressed support for this concept as it involves consolidating farms now owned by beneficiaries into 50-hectare plantations in order to develop these for commercial farming. This presents us with the only way to liberate the farmer-beneficiaries of CARP (Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program) from subsistence farming," Villafuerte said.

He had suggested a higher 2021 budget for DAR upon learning during a committee hearing that the Department of Budget and Management (DBM) only approved a 2021 allocation of P8.8 billion for DAR, which was 7% lower than the department's budget of P9.5 billion for 2020.

Undersecretary Bernie Cruz said during that House committee hearing that with this 2021 budget plan, the Department wouldn't have enough funds to implement its Mega Farms and Food Security Program.

However, Villafuerte's proposal for a higher DAR budget was not considered in the DAR's 2021 budget.

At that time, DAR Undersecretary David Erro told lawmakers at the hearing that his office had already pinpointed government owned-lands (GOLs) that could be used not only for the implementation of CARP but also for President Duterte's Balik Probinsya, Bagong Pag-asa (BP2) program and the DAR's Mega Farms and Food Security Program.

Villafuerte is also the author of HB 6970 that aims to fast-track the Balik Probinsya program, which has secured the full backing of the Philippine Chamber of Commerce and Industry (PCCI), the country's biggest business organization that boasts 35,000 small, medium and large enterprises nationwide.

Earlier, Villafuerte pushed a "re-prioritization" of the proposed 2021 General Appropriations Act (GAA), with a hefty part of the annual budget going not only to infrastructure and social services but also to agricultural development—"with the long-term goal of attaining sufficiency in rice and other basic foodstuff in the post-pandemic scenario."

"Alongside 'Build, Build, Build,' the Duterte administration needs to likewise put 'Plant, Plant, Plant' on the front burner to best prepare the country for the 'new normal' once the pandemic spawned by the lethal COVID-19 has been contained," Villafuerte said.

On Villafuerte's watch as three-term governor from 2004 to 2013, Camarines Sur posted the highest production growth spike as it rose from being the No. 12 to the No. 6 rice-producing province in the country.

At a recent webinar organized by the Philippine Institute for Development Studies (PIDS), DAR Undersecretary Cruz was reported as saying that in order to boost their productivity, farmers can undertake rural development strategies, including farm consolidation.

Cruz said that the DAR has a World Bank-funded project that supports the fast-tracking of land parcelization for individual farmer-beneficiaries, but added that farmers need to consider land consolidation for commercial production as an option.

He had explained that most of the lands distributed to farmers under CARP were haciendas or big plantations that produced farm goods in large quantities. Hence, the individual distribution of these lands to farmer-beneficiaries had dismantled commercial production.

Cruz said the DAR had taken initiatives to consolidate these lands and help farmers participate in commercial production, with projects like the Inclusive Partnerships for Agricultural Competitiveness Project and "mega farms."

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Golden Rice to save children from risks of serious illnesses

THE recent government approval for the commercial cultivation of Golden Rice (GR) is a most welcome, long-awaited development for the science community, according to National Scientist Emil Q. Javier and Institute of Plant Breeding founder.

GR is a new unique variety of rice specially bred that contains beta carotene, the precursor of vitamin A, an essential nutrient which humans cannot synthesize on their own, and therefore cannot live without.

This rice variety is first of its kind in the scientific world because the genes for beta carotene bred into Golden Rice were obtained by genetic engineering. The beta carotene genes come from a genetically distant edible relative, yellow corn.

"We had been long waiting for Golden Rice's regulatory clearance," according to Dr. Nina Gloriani, former dean of the College of Public Health, UP Manila.

The permit to cultivate Golden Rice was finally granted by the Bureau of Plant Industry after the proponent, the Philippine Rice Research Institute (PhilRice), complied with the lengthy, rigorous food safety and environment regulatory requirements.

This rigorous regulation was prescribed by the Joint Department Circular issued by Department of Science and Technology (DOST), Department of Agriculture (DA), Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), Department of Health (DOH), and Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG).

Lack of vitamin A predisposes people, especially children, to increased risk to respiratory diseases, diarrhea, measles, night blindness, and can lead to death. Vitamin A deficiency (VAD) continues to be a major nutrition and public health concern in low- and middle-income countries, including the Philippines.

It affects some 190 million children under five years of age worldwide.

According to the latest statistics from the Department of Science and Technology-Food and Nutrition Research Institute (DOST-FNRI), the VAD prevalence among children went down from 40 percent to 17 percent between 2003 and 2008. However, among the poorest fifth of Filipino children, VAD prevalence remains unacceptably high at 26 percent.

Moreover, these deficiency numbers have not changed between 2008 and 2018. And therefore, a lot remains yet to be done.

According to the 2019 national nutrition survey FNRI, only two out of 10 Filipino households meet the estimated average equivalent for Vitamin A.

Laboratory and human feeding trials suggest that one cup of cooked Golden Rice can provide 30–42 percent of Vitamin A estimated average equivalent for pre-school children.

Since the beta carotene is naturally embedded in the GR grain, the needed essential nutrient comes at no additional cost and effort to the consumer, a significant benefit to poor households.

Unlike the regular white well-milled rice, the grains of Golden Rice are translucent golden yellow in color.

When cooked, Golden Rice looks very much like the saffron-colored rice in the Spanish paella, a dish many Filipino chefs have adopted as very much part of the Filipino cuisine.

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DBP, DA partner to boost cash aid disbursement

STATE-owned Development Bank of the Philippines has signed a memorandum of agreement with the Department of Agriculture to facilitate the disbursement of financial assistance to the agriculture sector.

DBP president and chief executive officer Emmanuel Herbosa said under the agreement, the bank would provide the disbursement channels to implement the DA's initiatives on direct cash or loan interest rate subsidy and other forms of assistance to qualified agro-fishery enterprises, agriculture cooperatives, farmers, fisherfolk, and other agricultural workers.

Under the MoA, beneficiaries of various DA programs may receive their funding assistance via direct credit to their DBP accounts and/or other banks' accounts/electronic money issuers and other Bangko Sentral-supervised financial institutions through electronic fund transfer channels, such as PhilPASS, and DBP-accredited payout outlets.

Abante
UNA SA BALITA

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Agriculture buhusan ng pondo

HIHIRIT si House Committee on Ways and Means chairperson at Albay Rep. Joey Salceda na madagdagan ang budget ng agrikultura sa 2022 upang dumami ang suplay ng pagkain at malimitahan ang pagtaas ng presyo nito.

Sinabi ni Salceda na maaaring madagdagan ng 10% ang budget ng Department of Agriculture bagama't mas malaki pa ang kinakailangan nito.

"I think we can go at least 10% additional funding. We probably need more, and I'll try to deliver more," sabi ni Salceda.

Sa ilalim ng 2021 budget ang DA ay binigyan ng P85.6 bilyon. Hindi pa naisusumite ng Malacañang ang National Expenditure Program (NEP) para sa 2022.

Sinabi ni Salceda na ang pagtaas ng presyo ng pagkain ay mapipigilan ng sapat na suplay.

Isa umano sa mga paraan upang mapataas ang suplay ay ang alisin ang mga limitasyong ipinataw ng batas sa laki ng lupa, paggamit nito at pagmamay-ari.

Nabatid na nakipagpulong si Salceda kay Agriculture Secretary William Dar noong Biyernes at naghahanap ito ng mapagkukuhanan para mapataas ang budget ng DA. **(Billy Begas)**

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Pangasinan's canned carabao fresh milk

ASINGAN, Pangasinan – A farmers' cooperative in this town is providing carabao fresh milk for the government's nationwide milk feeding program, canning it to prolong its shelf-life for distribution in far-flung areas in the province of Pangasinan.

Bantog Samahang Nayon Multipurpose Cooperative (BSNMC) president Rolly Mateo said the canned carabao fresh milk can last up to six months compared to tetra packaging that lasts only five to 45 days when placed in a freezer.

Mateo said they innovated their packaging to cater to the demands of the Department of Education's (DepEd) supplemental feeding program.

He added they have started distributing the canned carabao fresh milk since July 30 this year.

"We have been in partnership with the DepEd as we provide nutritious carabao fresh milk to the pupils through the department's supplemental feeding program. We are now distributing 600,000 pieces of 200-milliliter carabao fresh milk through DepEd every month," he said.

Despite the new packaging, Mateo said they have not increased their prices and the canned product is yet exclusive for DepEd.

"Due to the lockdown last year, we were unable to sell most of our products because our customers cannot travel. But now, we are glad we have this partnership with the provincial government as well as the local government of Asingan and now with the DepEd," he said. (PNA)

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SURVIVAL COMES FIRST

FISHERMEN DISPLACED BY BULACAN AIRPORT PROJECT RETURN TO SEA

BULAKAN, BULACAN—Former fishermen from an islet in this town who were relocated to new homes to make way for the P745-billion Bulacan International Airport project (New Manila) have returned to fishing.

Residents of Sitio (subvillage) Kinse Island, an islet under the jurisdiction of the coastal village of Taliptip, have been provided community meat stores by food and beverage giant San Miguel Corp. (SMC), which is undertaking the airport project, when they moved to Sitio Pulo Purok 6 in Barangay Bambang here.

But because the economy remains unstable in the second year of the coronavirus pandemic, Teody Bacon, 46, and his five former neighbors had to augment their family income by catching fish, prawns and crabs.

Each time they sailed out to the waters off Bambang village, each of the six men earned a minimum catch worth P1,000 to P4,000, except for the weeks in July when monsoon rains enhanced by Typhoon "Fabian" (international name: In-fa) kept them away from the sea.

Fish traps

It has been a year since they were relocated, but Bacon said he preferred the life on Kinse Island, and would return there given the chance.

The wives of Bacon and the other fishermen were also provided with freezers so they could sell SMC products to their new neighbors.

But because their husbands have gone back to fishing, they spent more of their time making woven fish traps, said Thelma Bantigue, one of the fisherfolk's wives.

The Bacon and Bantigue families were among 300 households living in nine island communities of Taliptip who were provided with land and housing assistance by SMC.

Arvie de Asis, 30, who used to live in the coastal island of Wawang Capiz, has trained to become a heavy equipment operator who will be hired by SMC when airport construction starts. The De Asis family also settled in Pulo.

Liza Valiente from the island Sitio Bunutan has set up a small business after training to be a tailor.

Bulacan International Airport, which would rise in a 2,500-hectare property off the coast of this town, is projected to serve at least 100 million passengers yearly, or three times the size of Ninoy Aquino International Airport, the country's main international gateway located in Metro Manila.

—CARMELA REYES-ESTROPE INQ

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Wholesale food market hosts fisherfolk, farmers

San Miguel Corp. is looking to expand its newly-opened marketplace for fisherfolk and farmers in Sariaya, Quezon, and turn it into a major wholesale market of fresh goods from Southern Luzon and eventually providing food supplies to nearby provinces and Metro Manila.

Dubbed the "San Miguel Market", the new marketplace was soft-opened recently with 56 vendors, many of them coming from the 350 families that SMC has helped relocate from high-risk coastal areas.

The marketplace is the latest addition to SMC's sustainable community project in Sariaya, which includes the 5.4-hectare San Miguel-Christian Gayeta village that features disaster-resilient houses, and a 3.5-hectare fishermen's dock with fishermen's hall that can secure up to 100 boats and store 70 boat engines and other fishing equipment.

"This market is just in its initial phase. While it's already operational and benefitting residents from our model community and nearby barangays, our vision is to make this even bigger, to accommodate more farmers and fisherfolk who want to sell their goods here," SMC president Ramon S. Ang said.

Ang said the conglomeate aims to expand this to up to 10,000 square meters or one hectare, from its present 3,000-sq.-m.total area.

"With that size, it can become a major wholesale market or 'bagsakan' of fresh goods from all over Sariaya and the rest of Quezon province. It can be a source of fresh produce for neighboring provinces and even Metro Manila – so many farmers and fishermen from all over South Luzon can benefit," he added.

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DTI HK promotes PH food products

THE Philippine Trade and Investment Center Hong Kong officially launched the "Philippine Flavours" campaign to promote the Philippines as an attractive and reliable source of food products and ingredients for the Hong Kong and Mainland Chinese market on August 5.

Trade and Industry Sec. Ramon M. Lopez called on the 200,000-strong overseas Filipino community in Hong Kong to champion Filipino food and beverages in their respective households.

"We look forward to our OFs in Hong Kong using more of our Filipino products when providing for the food and beverage requirements of your employers and their families. It is through this simple act of pride and patriotism that you are able to shine a light on Filipino food and beverage products, which indirectly contributes to our homeland's economic development," Lopez said.

"[P]hilippine food is a good representation of our country because, despite the diverse cultures throughout the islands, food also unites us—especially when we share it with others. We hope that we can share our food with you today," he concluded.

The launch was done in partnership with the Philippine Consulate General in HKSAR, PTIC – Beijing, PTIC – Guangzhou, PTIC – Shanghai, the Office of the Agriculture Counsellor of the Philippines in Beijing, Department of Trade and Industry -Export Marketing Bureau, DTI Baguio – Benguet, and the Center for International Trade Expositions and Missions,

The campaign is envisioned to kickstart a conversation around Filipino food and beverage products leading up to the country's participation in the Hong Kong Trade Development Council's Food Expo this month.

Raly L. Tejada, consul general of the Philippine Consulate General in HK, stressed the strong and enduring ties between Manila and the territory, noting that Hong Kong is a great platform for Filipino food exporters to test the Mainland China market.

"The relationship between the Philippines and Hong Kong is very important not only because of their proximity but also because they see each other as important trading partners," said Tejada.

In 2020, HK ranked as the country's fourth trading partner, fourth largest export market, and 11th import supplier.

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Climate change hits sushi supply chain amid California water war

IF YOU'VE EATEN sushi anywhere in the US, chances are the rice came from California's Sacramento Valley. Fritz Durst, a sixth-generation farmer, has grown the grain and other crops there for more than four decades. But this year, amid a historic drought, Durst is planting only half as many acres of rice as usual.

Farmers like Durst would be having an even worse year if it weren't for water siphoned from the Sacramento River to irrigate fields. Those diversions, though, have dire consequences for another part of the sushi supply chain: The salmon industry. Low water levels and scorching weather have raised river temperatures so much that almost all the juveniles of an endangered salmon species could be cooked to death this fall, state wildlife officials have said.

The drought is so extreme that California regulators earlier this month voted to restrict river diversions for some farmers to protect drinking water supplies. But that's unlikely to end to water-rights disputes between farms and fisheries, which have tussled in court for decades. As hotter and drier weather drains reservoirs and withers crops, the fight is growing even more fierce, underscoring how climate change is pitting multibillion-dollar industries around the world against one another in a battle for increasingly scarce resources.

"We should be shifting our focus from thinking about drought as an emergency that occurs once in a while, to thinking about it in the context of a long-term shift," said Jeanine Jones, interstate resources manager at the California Department of Water Resources.

In California, the agriculture industry's massive water consumption has long been a sticking point for fisheries, environmental groups and other stakeholders. Farms use about 40% of the state's water on average, according to the nonprofit research group Public Policy Institute of California.

Water rights in California are governed by a complex system that dates back to the Gold-Rush era. Senior rights holders — companies, farmers and cities with claims that were acquired before 1914, and landowners whose property borders a river — are the last to see their supplies curtailed. They wouldn't be affected by the measures approved earlier this month to restrict flows to some farmers.

Competition for water isn't unique to California, however. In Brazil, the Parana River Basin is experiencing its worst water crisis in 91 years, leaving farmers dependent on the river to vie with hydropower plants that provide electricity and water to the country's industrialized south.

Rice, typically cultivated in flooded fields, is among the world's most water-intensive crops. Government data reveals the toll drought is having on California's rice growers, which generate more than $5 billion and 25,000 jobs for the state annually, according to the industry-funded California Rice Commission. In a typical year, the state accounts for about two-thirds of US production of medium- and short-grain rice, the kind used in sushi. By late June, California plantings were 19% below year-earlier levels and the smallest in almost three decades, a US Department of Agriculture report showed.

Lower output will likely translate to higher prices for consumers. California farmers can expect to get $22 per 100 pounds of medium- and short-grain rice for 2021-2022, the most in 13 years, the USDA said.

Tony Gentile, co-owner of Flagship Restaurant Group, which owns 16 sushi bars in six states, said the company has raised menu prices across all of its restaurants in recent weeks as rice and seafood become more expensive and labor costs climb. Though Flagship uses California rice, it's considering sourcing the grain from Japan or other markets outside the US, Gentile said.

"Prices now fluctuate day to day more than any other time that I can remember, and I have been in the restaurant business for more than 20 years. It's scary," he said. — ***Bloomberg***