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DA lifts ban on cattle imports from Brazil

By CATHERINE TALAVERA

The Department of Agriculture (DA) has lifted the temporary ban on cattle imports from Brazil.

In a memorandum order, Agriculture Secretary William Dar lifted the temporary ban, which covers the importation of live cattle, meat and meat products derived from cattle.

The ban was issued last month due to a reported outbreak of Atypical Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) in the states of Mato Grosso and Minais Gerais in Brazil.

Dar said the Philippines requested several documentary requirements from the veterinary authorities of Brazil regarding the profile of BSE positive animals, disease response measures on these outbreaks and their national BSE surveillance activities.

"Brazil provided supporting documents regarding the immediate and timely response after the detection of two atypical BSE cases, extensive national BSE surveillance program and activities to maintain the negligible BSE risk status," Dar said.

He cited World Organization for Animal Health (OIE) Terrestrial Animal Health Code Article 11.4.1 states that atypical BSE is a condition believed to occur spontaneously in all cattle populations at a very low rate thus atypical BSE must be excluded in official BSE risk status recognition.

"Based on the relevant information provided by Brazil, there is satisfactory evidence to show that the risk of importation of cattle and its related commodities is negligible and Brazil maintains to be officially recognized by OIE with negligible BSE risk status," Dar said.

In line with the lifting of the ban, Dar said boneless beef except meat from head, industrial, sangria and neck meat can be sourced from cattle of all ages devoid of any nerves and other BSE-specified risk materials (SRM).

He said boneless beef should come only from healthy ambulatory and not downer cattle.

The slaughter date of the cattle or the production date of the beef should also be included in the packaging label.

The Philippine Association of Meat Processors Inc. (PAMPI) earlier expressed concern over the temporary ban as Brazil is the country's largest source of beef. Several meat processors procure as much as 70 percent of their needs from Brazil.

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'Maring' leaves an agri wasteland, state mandarins corporatizing crop insurance

SUNDAY STORIES

MARLEN V. RONQUILLO

A SMALL farmer in any part of the country could not watch the heartbreaking video feeds and TV footage from severe Tropical Storm Maring's pummeling of agricultural areas in Northern Luzon for long. Standing rice valued at over P1 billion turned into flattened, soaked, matted straw.

Standing yellow corn worth hundreds of millions of pesos crumbling from the sheer force of rushing floods. A farmer trying to save what he could from a bumper corn yield in a drying area with the help of volunteers and netizens, largely for nothing.

➤Ronquillo A5

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■ RONQUILLO FROM A1

'Maring' leaves an agri wasteland, state mandarins corporatizing crop insurance

The grief of the affected farmers, looking at a cursed six months, was truly overwhelming. But what was most depressing was the news of lives lost like the La Union couple swallowed by floodwaters as they clambered up the frail, aging roof of their pig pens. From across the banks of the swollen river, their panicked kids saw a dying light from a flashlight thrust upward into the darkening skies — the last flash of light and life. Saving threatened hog stock is instinctive in any animal raiser even in the midst of a calamity. And there are occasions, like that tragic scene in La Union, that lead to loss of human lives.

A son of a small farmer and a small farmer myself, I am too familiar with the sinking feeling that farming families go through after the savagery of a powerful storm. The wasted crop, the harsh summons from the informal creditor, a full semester of economic toil lost, the uncertainty that the farmer can scrounge funds for two things — food on the table and a small capital for replanting. Most nights after a particular severe storm had passed, a farming kid would wake up at midnight only to hear muted sobs from the father, his own primitive way of meditating about life and loss and perhaps the tragedy of being born a small farmer and being born poor.

Okay, I will add this: the sad realization that a small farmer has no support institutions to turn to post the savagery of natural calamities. No support then and more so now. Unlike in other countries where there are institutions that support agriculture, and small farmers, in a robust and sustained way, Philippine governments, past and present, all paid lip service to agricultural support but all were bad faith actors.

Small farmers thought nothing could beat the indifference of the late former President Benigno Aquino 3rd toward agriculture in general and small farmers in particular. Only to realize that Mr. Duterte's government has only loathing and abject disdain for small farmers magnified a thousand times over. The centerpiece legislation is the Rice Tariffication Law (RTL), which since 2019 has mostly benefited importers and traders, according to data from the Federation of Free Farmers. And made the Philippines, a country with a glorious and proud rice-raising culture, the Number 1 or Number 2 rice importer in the world.

The knee-jerk reaction to a shortage in any food item is reckless importation, propped up by tariff cuts. Even if that shortage was caused by an epidemic that could have been reined in by government. True to our laggard-in-everything status, we are now the laggard in the control of African swine fever. And we are set to import 500,000 metric tons of pork this year. From this October to March next year, we will import 200,000 metric tons of fish, while our fishermen are being driven away by Chinese fishermen within our own territorial waters.

And as Tropical Storm Maring ravaged much of Northern Luzon, Mr. Duterte's finance and agricultural mandarins are plotting to corporatize the crop insurance program to develop a so-called "business model" for crop insurance with the aim of either limiting or scrapping altogether crop insurance subsidies.

Look at the two contrasting pictures. For the rich, a tax cut that would soon bring the corporate income tax to 20 percent. For the poor and struggling small farmers always at the receiving end of whiplashes from natural calamities, a "business model" for crop insurance. In terms of unbridled cruelty toward the small farmers, no administration in our contemporary history has done it at the scale of Mr. Duterte's stewardship.

The version of the government is that over the past two decades, it has spent heavily on crop subsidies, around P29 billion. The government's finances have been bleeding from the crop insurance subsidies and reforms should be undertaken.

Left unmentioned is that crop insurance is a risky business, according to peasant groups, and the Philippines is one of the unlucky countries in the world in the path of natural calamities such as super typhoons. Crops should be subsidized, heavily subsidized.

The amount poured into crop subsidies is offset by penalties that monetary authorities collect from Philippine banks, whose predisposition is to just pay penalties instead of following the letter of Republic Act (RA) 10000, or the "Agri-Agra Law." The penalties from erring banks, which would rather violate the Agri-Agra Law than lend money to small farmers and agrarian reform beneficiaries who are deemed as *balasubas*, certainly ease the government's subsidy for crop insurance.

Crop insurance is one of the very few areas done by the government for farmers and food producers. There are no low interest loans for agriculture. The Department of Agriculture has morphed into a press release factory. Whatever monies that are raised from the RTL are monies squeezed from the suffering of small rice farmers, not fresh investments from the state. The overall and primary policy is to neglect agriculture, more so small-scale agriculture.

The government of Mr. Duterte has no legitimate reason to really complain about the "financial bleeding" that comes from the crop insurance subsidies. It is a mandate and the collection from the RA 10000 penalties can always be directed at the crop subsidies to ease the financial burden from them.

Efforts to put in place "reforms" in crop insurance is just a naked attempt to obliterate with extreme prejudice the already negligible support for agriculture in general and small farmers in particular.

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ACROSS THE COUNTRY

Red tide alert up in 10 VisMin areas

DAGUPAN CITY – A shellfish ban has been imposed in 10 areas in the Visayas and Mindanao.

In shellfish bulletin 28 dated Oct. 21 the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) said shellfish collected in the coastal waters of Dauis and Tagbilaran City in Bohol, Dumanquillas Bay in Zamboanga del Sur and Lianga Bay in Surigao del Sur remain positive for paralytic shellfish poison or red tide toxins beyond the regulatory limit.

Also under red tide alert are Villarueal, Cambatutay and San Pedro Bays in Western Samar; Carigara Bay and the coastal waters of Leyte town, and Matarinao Bay in Eastern Samar.

The BFAR said all types of shellfish gathered from the areas are not safe for human consumption.

Fish, squid, shrimp and crabs are safe to eat provided that they are fresh and washed thoroughly, and internal organs such as gills and intestines are removed before cooking.

In Pangasinan, all types of shellfish gathered from the coastal waters of Alaminos City, Bani, Bolinao, Anda and Sual towns are free from red tide toxins and safe for human consumption.

– Eva Visperas

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DA tasked to temper rising prices of fertilizer

By CATHERINE TALAVERA

Senators are urging the Department of Agriculture (DA) to implement measures to address the rising prices of fertilizers and to boost local production.

During the Senate budget deliberations yesterday, Sen. Juan Miguel Zubiri told the DA to come up with an action plan on addressing the surging fertilizer prices which have significantly affected farmers.

"We can probably approve the budget of the DA, with the collatilla that before we take this to plenary,you give us an actual plan in terms of what steps you are doing to help farmers to have affordable inorganic and organic fertilizer," Zubiri said, referring to the DA's proposed budget of P91 billion for next year.

Fertilizer prices in the international market have been rising since May mainly due to larger demand from countries as well as higher freight cost.

Latest data from the Fertilizer and Pesticide Authority (FPA) showed that the average retail price of prilled UREA in the country registered at P1,630.95 per 50-kilo bag based on prices from Oct. 11 to 15.

This is around 56 percent higher than the P1,047.94 price in the same period last year.

The price of ammonium sulfate fertilizer was recorded at P850.55 per 50-kilo bag, 41 percent higher than the same period last year, while the price of complete fertilizer prices also increased by 31 percent to P1,404.23 for a 50-kilo bag.

Similarly, ammonium phosphate fertilizer prices jumped by 41 percent to P1,396.24 per 50-kilo bag while the price of muriate of potash (MOP) fertilizer also rose 20 percent to P1,449.51 per 50-kilo bag.

Asked on what the DA has been doing to address the rising prices, Agriculture Undersecretary Ariel Cayanan said they have been distributing fertilizer vouchers under its National Rice Program.

He said rice farmers covered by the Rice Competitiveness Enhancement Fund – Rice Farmers Financial Assistance (RCEF-RFFA) program could also use their P5,000 assistance to purchase fertilizers.

Sen. Cynthia Villar suggested that the DA also encourage the local production of fertilizer, particularly organic, to make prices more affordable to farmers.

She said the DA should allocate P1 billion out of the P4 billion annual budget for the distribution of composting machines to allow farmers to produce their own fertilizers

Zubiri acknowledged that there are private sector firms producing organic fertilizers in the country,

However, he lamented that the government has no similar efforts.

Turn to B2

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Gov't opens up agri insurance

By ELIJAH FELICE ROSALES

The government has started opening up agricultural insurance to the private sector by inviting non-life insurers to explore opportunities in the farm sector.

Under the Insurance Commission (IC)'s Circular Letter 2021-60, non-life insurers can file proposals on how they can extend insurance services to agricultural stakeholders.

• Collaboration between state-run Philippine Crop Insurance Corp. (PCIC) and the private sector is now allowed, paving the entry of reinsurance and coinsurance firms to enter a business that was long monopolized by the government.

Non-life insurers interested in taking part in the regulatory sandbox piloting agricultural insurance should submit a formal proposal to the IC. The filing should contain full details of the partner firm and its experience in agricultural insurance.

It should also dedicate the objectives and roles of the partnership, including technical details on coinsurance and reinsurance. Further, the proposal should enclose the product information like policy name, basis of indemnity, perils covered, deductibles, basis of valuation, among others.

Loss assessments and payments under the pilot should also be carried out by qualified people in the area of agriculture losses, and the PCIC, along with the private sector, can hire adjusters deemed eligible by the IC.

The regulatory sandbox will run for five years to assess how the entry of the private sector in agricultural insurance will affect the sector's performance and stakeholders.

The IC, for its part, may conclude the pilot after the expiry of all policies covered by the program, allow the extension to a further date or even require the transfer of agreements from the test run to a new regulatory framework.

Subsidies received by the PCIC amounted to P28.6 billion in the past two decades, according to Finance Secretary Carlos Dominguez. More than 81 percent at P23.3 billion came from the national budget, while the other P5.3 billion originated from loan penalties collected from banks.

As the new PCIC board chairman, Dominguez wants the PCIC to work with the private sector in insuring the crops of farmers, as he intends to reduce the agency's reliance on state subsidies.

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Rice imports in 9 months undervalued by P3.1 B – FFF

By CATHERINE TALAVERA

A farmers' group is claiming that there has been an undervaluation of rice imports by P3.1 billion in the first nine months of the year.

In a statement the Federation of Free Farmers (FFF) presented its own analysis of Bureau of Customs (BOC) data showing rice imports were undervalued by an average of P4,983 per ton in January to September or about four percent higher than the degree of undervaluation in 2020.

According to the FFF, the shortfall is almost equal to the foregone tariffs during the whole of 2020.

The group estimates that total tariff collections lost due to undervaluation has reached P7.5 billion since the implementation of the Rice Tariffication Law (RTL) in March 2019.

"Undervaluation and misdeclaration of rice imports have actually worsened, despite assurances from BOC that they would adopt reforms in their classification and valuation procedures based on FFF's recommendations," FFF national manager Raul Montemayor said.

Meanwhile, the FFF is surprised over the BOC's recent move to stop the publication of reference prices for certain grades of rice.

Reference prices are internationally quoted prices for rice imports and are compared to declared values of importers to detect undervaluation.

"Up to now, the BOC has failed to publish reference prices for rice coming from countries like China and for certain grades of rice regularly being imported from various countries," Montemayor said.

"To make matters worse, it inexplicably stopped publishing reference prices for rice with 10 percent and 15 percent brokens starting September 2021. Instead of plugging loopholes, the BOC has now created new windows for importers to undervalue their shipments," he added.

FFF said the undervaluation further lowers the landed cost of imports and depresses prices received by farmers for their palay.

The BOC recently collected P14.3 billion in duties from 2.18 million metric tons (MT) of rice imports from January to Oct. 8.

It has yet to report on the result of its investigation into importers who were suspected of undervaluing their shipments in 2019 and 2020.

In FFF's meeting with BOC Commissioner Rey Leonardo Guerrero in March, the latter promised to implement key measures to stop the tariff leakage.

One of the initiatives to be implemented by the BOC which were agreed upon during the meeting were the use of an updated and standard tariff classification for rice imports, and provide reference or indicative prices for each variety and grade of rice imported from specific countries.

The parties also agreed to require importers to fully divulge the variety, grade and other specifications of their shipments so that a proper comparison can be made between their declared import costs and BOC reference prices, as well as strictly require importers, whose declared import costs are found to be below BOC reference prices, to post bonds equivalent to the estimated tariff discrepancy before their shipments can be released.

The BOC also agreed to pursue the audit and collection of unpaid tariffs, surcharges and other penalties from erring importers and blacklist them from future transactions with the BOC.

Moreover, the FFF stressed that undervaluation does not only deprive the government of much needed revenues, but also lessens the funds that are supposed to go to rice farmers.

Under the RTL, tariff collections in excess of P10 billion a year will be appropriated by Congress for supplemental support to farmers affected by rice imports.

In a statement yesterday, the Department of Agriculture (DA) said it has commenced the distribution of cash assistance under the Rice Competitiveness Enhancement Fund – Rice Farmers Financial Assistance (RCEF-RFFA), which is sourced from the excess tariffs collected in 2019 and 2020 amounting to P7.6 billion.

Under the RCEF-RFFA, eligible rice farmers tilling two hectares and below will receive a cash assistance of P5,000. This aims to provide temporary relief to eligible farmers throughout the implementation years of the RTL.

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Zubiri tells DA: Give action plan on fertilizer prices before budget approval

MAJORITY Leader Juan Miguel Zubiri laid down in the Senate hearing for the 2022 budget of the Department of Agriculture (DA) a colatilla to the approval of its budget, requiring a concrete plan on the skyrocketing prices of fertilizers before their budget can be taken up in plenary.

This is following an earlier statement Zubiri issued, where he urged the DA to act on the fertilizer problem, citing how urea now sells for around Php1500 to Php1900, from just Php800 to P900 per 50 kilograms some months ago.

Virtually joining the hearing from the province of Isabela—a stop in Zubiri's visit to North Luzon provinces affected by Typhoon Maring—he relayed concerns from farmers regarding the unabated increase of inorganic fertilizer prices over the past few months.

"Kausap namin ang mga magsasaka, at ang problema talaga nila, napakamahal ng abono. Ano ba ang ginagawang hakbang ng DA para mapababa ang presyo ng abono? Ano pong sasabihin ko sa mga magsasaka natin para matulungan sila?" Zubiri said.

DA Undersecretary Ariel Cayanan explained how multiple factors have led to the upsurge in pricing, citing increased demand from other countries and rising logistical costs caused by the pandemic.

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P168-M poultry farms get BoI's nod

BY RAFFY AYENG
@tribunephl_raf

To sustain the local production of eggs and chicken meat, the Board of Investments (BoI) recently approved the establishment of two poultry farms in the provinces of Davao del Sur and Batangas.

BoI approved the applications for incentives of Broilers Club Inc. (BCI) and STMP Agri-business Corp. for projects totaling P168 million as the new producer of eggs of broiler chicken and as the producers of Parent Stock Hatching Eggs Integrated with Growing of Grandparent Stock, respectively, under Republic Act 11534 (CREATE Act) based on the Listing, "Agriculture, Fishery and Forestry," of the 2020 Investments Priority Plan.

"These projects add essential support to the meat processing industry as parent stock breeder farms are considered vital links to the country's poultry supply chain and broiler chickens are reared and prepared for meat consumption," Trade Undersecretary and BoI Managing Head Ceferino Rodolfo said.

4.9-M eggs annually

The BoI stated that BCI's P87.8 million project, comprised of three poultry houses, is located in Sta. Cruz, Davao del Sur with May 2021 targeted for the start of commercial operations with up to 43 personnel and a capacity of 4.9 million eggs annually.

While STMP's P80 million project situated in Nasugbu, Batangas, is scheduled to start its operation in January 2022, providing jobs to 25 personnel, having the capacity of 2.15 million intact eggs, 1.9 million hatching eggs along with growing grandparent stocks of 17,820 female breeders and 1,782 male breeders per year.

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New Bayer corn hybrid offers higher farm yield

Bayer CropScience Philippines Inc. is introducing a genetically-modified corn hybrid that can offer higher yields to farmers.

In a statement, Bayer said the new hybrid called Dekalb 8282S has shown reliable performance in both wet and dry seasons with strong resistance to a wide variety of pests.

The corn hybrid can yield an additional 1.7 metric tons (MT) per hectare and can bring Filipino farmers an estimated net income of as much as P70,000 per hectare.

"The corn market in the Philippines is continuously evolving. Year on year, farmer demands change, price fluctuations, drought or heavy rains contribute to farmers' unstable production. This is why Bayer is launching Dekalb 8282S in the Philippines," said Bayer Crop Science Grower Marketing head Erwin Vibal.

"We want farmers to have a stable, reliable product that they can count on despite difficult market and weather conditions and infestations – and Dekalb has a hybrid that provides that protection from risks and losses in corn production," Vibal said.

Bayer said Dekalb 8282S achieves full maturity at 110 days and has a relatively high shelling recovery at 84 percent which is higher than the 72 percent of other hybrids.

The new corn hybrid is also capable of yielding up to 6.2 to 8 MT per hectare, which is an increase of 1.7 MT per hectare compared to the Philippines' national corn average yield of 4.5 to 5 MT per hectare.

Given a conservative price of P15 per kilo at farm gate, Bayer said farmers can earn a gross revenue of P120,000. This is equivalent to P50,000 to P70,000 net income given cost of P50,000 and yield of eight MT per hectare.

"This is true to farmers who follow experts' recommendations including their adaption to recommended agronomic practices such as the ideal planting population of 80,000 to 90,000 plants per hectare," Bayer said.

Bayer likewise noted Dekalb 8282's durability in either rainy or drought periods as evidenced by its stable high yield whether in drought-prone Isabela or the rain-rich farms in Pangasinan.

"Whether it's dry season or wet season, farmers have 88 percent winning chance in using Dekalb 8282S—whether it's corn after rice planting or corn after corn," Vibal said.

Bayer said Dekalb 8282S also has strong resistance to the highly destructive Fall Army Worm (FAW) which has infested corn farms across the Philippines.

It is the only corn seed in the market that has full approval for FAW-resistance from the Fertilizer and Pest Authority.

"Fall Army Worm is very destructive because it is not selective. It does not only attack for one cycle. But it can attack two or three times over seasons," Vibal said.

Aside from FAW, Bayer said the hybrid can also resist other highly destructive pests such as the Asiatic Corn Borer, Common Cutworm, and Earworm.

It cited results from field trials which showed that the corn variety has 46 percent less damaged kernels versus other varieties.

With the new hybrid, Bayer said this can help farmers increase their production and match the rising demand, given recent challenges in local corn production and high demand from the feeds industry. – **Catherine Talavera**

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'Dismal agri budget worsens Phl food sufficiency'

By LOUISE MAUREEN SIMEON

The meager budget allocation for the agriculture sector over the years has resulted in the decline in the country's self-sufficiency level and has sunk more farmers into poverty and hunger, according to research and advocacy group IBON Foundation.

IBON has called on the government to boost funding for the farm sector next year and provide a substantial stimulus package for local farmers and fisherfolk.

It argued that the government has long been neglecting the sector which in turn forced the country to increase its dependence on imports for many commodities.

For its 2022 budget, the Department of Agriculture has proposed over P250 billion, but the Department of Budget and Management only approved P91 billion, just a percent higher than last year's allocation.

Over the past five years, less than four percent of the total national budget is being allocated for agriculture and agrarian reform.

IBON said lawmakers should approve the Makabayan bloc's P94.7 billion in budget amendments for local palay procurement, production subsidy to farmers and fishers.

The group also suggested a stimulus package of P220 billion in agricultural support.

"Production support for small farmers and fisherfolk as part of a larger economic stimulus program is even more urgent," IBON said.

The group maintained that the low prioritization is exacerbating the already declining state of the sector.

Agriculture only managed to grow by an average of 1.6 percent and its contribution to the economy fell to just 9.8 percent under the Duterte administration.

Further, import dependency of the country across major commodities also increased such as in rice, pork and fish, among others. Deficit also surged to an average of $7.7 billion.

IBON maintained that the poor state of the sector is resulting in poverty and loss of livelihoods for stakeholders with poverty incidence averaging much higher than the national level.

"Long term food self-sufficiency depends on a government that truly gives this priority and strengthens domestic agriculture with significant protection and support," IBON said.

"A robust agricultural sector will help create more jobs, raise incomes, and spur economic activity," it said.