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WITH A PERFECT STORM OF CHALLENGES, LOCAL FOOD PRODUCTION GETS MORE DIRE

By Jasper Emmanuel Y. Arcalas
@jearcalas

JUST as the country slowly emerges from the economic downturn caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, Filipinos are not completely out of the woods yet as they face expensive fuel and food prices this year.

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The current food situation of the country did not happen overnight. Farmers were already reeling from expensive fertilizer prices as early as late last year due to tightening global supply. The situation worsened after the world woke up to news that Russia—a key source of potash fertilizer—had invaded Ukraine, sending countries scrambling to balance the global economy and peace in Eastern Europe.

And the Philippines was not spared from that fallout. In fact, the country's agriculture sector was quick to point out the possible impact of the Ukraine-Russia war on food prices. Less than a week after the Eastern Europe conflict broke out, industry leaders from the hog, poultry, egg, and corn sectors warned of higher food prices in the days to come due to lack of raw materials for the livestock and poultry industries and higher fuel prices.

The National Federation of Hog Farmers Inc., Federation of Pork Producers Inc., Philippine Maize Federation Inc., and United Broiler Raisers Association were in unison that the government must prioritize domestic food production over imports as the Ukraine-Russia conflict showed anew the problems of being import dependent.

Boost local production

"I HOPE this time the government [would] really realize the importance of local food production and make serious and tangible actions to support local agriculture rather than relying on imports," ProPork President Nonon Tambago said.

"We encourage our farmers amidst this crisis in Russia...our local corn farmers must plant more corn in their farming areas to guarantee supply for our end users—the livestock, poultry, dairy and industrial corn users," PhilMaize President Roger V. Navarro said.

No less than Agriculture Secretary William D. Dar said the country must implement various measures to combat the detrimental impact of the "converging" global factors on the country's food supply situation.

"It is imperative and urgent for the Philippine government to ensure that we have adequate, affordable and accessible supply of basic food items, and agricultural inputs to ensure continued productivity and increased incomes of farmers and fisherfolk," he said.

Part of the government's efforts to cushion the Ukraine-Russia war was the P500-million fuel subsidy to corn farmers and fisherfolk as well as the continuous rollout of fertilizer subsidy to rice farmers. On top of these, President Duterte greenlighted the P24-billion Plant Plant Plant Part 2 program of the Department of Agriculture (DA), which includes a P20-billion fertilizer subsidy.

Hanging in the balance

BUT the recommendations made by the administration's economic team sent agricultural groups hanging in the balance as they pushed for lower tariffs on corn, expanded corn import volume and extended lower tariffs on pork and rice products until the end of the year.

As expected, industry groups bucked the proposals of the economic team as manifested during the public consultations conducted by the Tariff Commission recently.

And as if the detrimental impact of the Ukraine-Russia war was not enough, the local farm sector faced more problems in the first quarter of the year. Avian influenza came back, affecting quails and ducks in Luzon.

The confirmation of bird flu outbreaks led to local government units (LGUs) issuing transport and entry bans on poultry products, resulting in artificial imbalance in the supply of Luzon and Visayas. This was despite clear-cut guide-

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lines issued by the DA regarding the transport and handling of poultry products amid bird flu outbreaks.

The meat processing sector also suffered a blow to their industry as sourcing of raw materials from the United States and Canada were temporarily halted due to bird flu concerns in the two North American territories. The already stretched raw material supply of the meat processing sector was further pushed into a corner, with manufacturers issuing crystal-clear warnings that their prices would shoot up no matter what.

Just as Filipinos were getting used to a more open economy with lesser mobility restrictions, things had to go sideways. With just three months of the year about to end, and a perfect storm of adversities already visited upon the land, stakeholders in the sector can only wait with bated breath on whether the days ahead would be any kinder.

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33 basic goods in price hike list

Milk, canned items up for new mark-up

A TOTAL of 33 basic necessities and prime commodities (BNPC) —including milk and canned goods such as sardines and meatloaf — are included in the price increase request list owing to rising fuel prices caused by the Ukraine-Russia conflict, Trade Secretary Ramon Lopez said Sunday.

In a Super Radyo dzBB interview regarding the effects of the war in Ukraine, Lopez said: "We have already seen price adjustments.

Groceries and supermarkets have also reported price increases among items not covered by the BNPC."

"Prices of products under the BNPC have no adjustments yet since the Ukraine war broke out. There are 33 products listed in the request for price adjustments, which the DTI (Department of Trade and Industry) is studying," he added.

Diesel prices are expected to climb by as much as P8.30 per liter by Tuesday, the 12th weekly upward adjustment in 13 weeks. Industry sources said kerosene prices will also hike by as much as P8.15 per liter, and gasoline is projected to rise by P2.90 to P3.10 per liter, Unioil said in its weekly forecast.

The spiraling fuel prices are already showing in the prices of basic goods in wet markets in Metro Manila, with an ABS-CBN report indicating that fish and vegetable costs went up by P10 to P40 per kilo at the Mega Q Mart in Quezon City.

Vendors at local markets also said prices were inflated by a lack of supply from the provinces, especially from Benguet, as truckers have limited their trips to

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Manila owing to the runaway fuel costs.

They said the price of carrots is now at P60 per kilo from P50, cabbage at the same price, and tomatoes at P100 from P60, the ABS-CBN report added.

Lopez, meanwhile, said the BNP prices are now being looked at by the DTI's Consumer Protection Group to determine the cost adjustments.

In January, the DTI provided an updated suggested retail prices (SRP) list for BNPCs such as canned food and other food products, bottled water, dairy, and common household or kitchen supplies.

"We are not removing our SRP system as it guides us especially on basic necessities and prime commodities. That is being monitored.

Before the manufacturers can increase their prices, they first need to go through the DTI to see how much they are allowed," Lopez said.

Earlier, Trade Assistant Secretary Ann Cabochan said the department is not keen on freezing prices on basic necessities, as Republic Act No. 7581 or the Price Act has mechanisms in place for mandating so.

The Department of Agriculture warned earlier in the year of rising food prices amid reports of further chokepoints in the global supply chain that lead to upward pressures on production costs.

"The agriculture sector this year will confront global challenges, such as other countries stockpiling fertilizers and fuel prices going up. Our country will have to contend with rising consumer prices, as the rest of the world, even developed countries, is doing," said Agriculture Secretary William Dar.

Dar said the DA recognized the urgency brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic and vowed to speed up the enforcement of more local balanced measures to ensure affordability for food consumers.

The DA noted that global food prices reached record highs during the pandemic, with the United Nations Index revealing a 28-percent rise, from grains to meat, in the last two years. Record levels of food inflation were last seen in 2011.

Labor shortages in transport and high freight costs also grounded goods, especially during the recent surges in COVID-19 infections in most countries.

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Senate resumes probe on agri smuggling today

By PAOLO ROMERO

The Senate committee of the whole resumes today its inquiry into the unabated large-scale smuggling of agricultural products that is crippling farmers and fisherfolk while hampering the country's economic recovery from the COVID pandemic.

The committee is resuming its probe following what Senate President Vicente Sotto III said was the panel's receipt of additional documents and testimonies on the smuggling of vegetables, fruits and fish.

Sotto, who is running for vice president, made the announcement after he and his standard bearer, Sen. Panfilo Lacson, met last week with local officials and farmers' groups in Nueva Ecija as part of their campaign dialogues with various sectors.

"We've summoned (Agriculture) Secretary (William) Dar and the people involved in importation, smuggling of vegetables. We've been given new evidence (of smuggling)," Sotto, chairman of the all-member panel, told reporters.

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He lamented that since the enactment of Anti-Agricultural Smuggling Act (Republic Act 10845), not one smuggler has been convicted despite billions of pesos worth of agricultural products seized by the Bureau of Customs (BOC).

Lacson has said the DA is "killing" farmers and fisherfolk due to its "importation mentality" and warned that smugglers, cartels and corruption have rendered laws to boost agricultural production and improve the lives of farmers useless.

"Instead of helping farmers, you're killing them if you import," Lacson said.

He cited the Rice Tariffication Law (RA 11203) and RA 10845 as among the statutes not meeting their objectives due to poor implementation by corrupt officials allegedly in the pockets of smugglers and cartels, who make money out of importation of agricultural products.

Lacson and Sotto said their program for agriculture, if elected, is for the government to buy half of the farmers' produce at their prices to allow them profits, eliminate middlemen, and ensure productivity and food security.

Also the tandem has proposed a "paluwagan" or rotating savings and credit system for micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs), farmers and fisherfolk.

Pacquiao bucks lower tariffs on corn imports

For his part, PROMDI Party standard-bearer Sen. Manny Pacquio said the government should not add more burden to farmers with its plan to lower tariffs on imported corn and increase the minimum access volume (MAV or minimum quota) for the food staple.

"It is not right for the tariff on imported corn to be lowered because, again we will be flooded with corn, just like what happened in the importation of rice, which will be to the detriment of our hardworking farmers," he told a press briefing in Santiago, Isabela.

Accompanied by Gov. Rodolfo Albano III at the Sophia Hotel in Cauayan City, Pacquiao highlighted the fact that farmers are already suffering because of the flooding of cheap imported rice and the unabated smuggling of agricultural products.

Pacquiao also slammed all past administrations' borrowing spree which led the country to its record-high P12 trillion foreign debt.

"What is happening now is that our country's expenses are higher than its earnings because we have no more income," he said before Go Negosyo's "KandidaTalks" last week.

Pacquiao took advantage of his time in the forum hosted by presidential adviser on entrepreneurship Joey Concepcion to turn the tables on his critics and more seasoned politicians in rival camps.

"They say that they are intelligent, and claim to be smarter, but why is it that not only in the past decade but in the past three or four decades, they allowed the country to spend more and earn less? Why did you let this happen? I thought you were all intelligent?" he quipped.

Practice sustainable fishing, recycling

Meanwhile, senatorial candidate and Antique Rep. Loren Legarda reminded fishefolk in Malabon and Navotas cities to practice sustainable fishing and promote safety and sustainability within their households and communities through waste segregation, recycling and upcycling.

During a visit to the two cities, she mentioned the practices in Barangay Potrero in Malabon, which is a zero-waste model community. Both Navotas and Malabon are considered fishing ports.

"We have been blessed with the bounties of the Earth, but amid this abundance, we must be mindful. The pandemic and the climate crisis pose many development challenges, but it also presents the opportunity to promote sustainable growth for our own survival and for the generations to come," Legarda said.

– With Delon Porcalla

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Ecija agri breeding hubs inaugurated

BY JONAS REYES

SCIENCE CITY OF MUÑOZ, Nueva Ecija – Agriculture Secretary William Dar and People's Republic of China to the Philippines Ambassador Huang Xilian inaugurated three new breeding laboratories at the Philippine-Sino Center for Agricultural Technology (PhilSCAT) Multi-Purpose Hall here.

According to PhilSCAT Director Marvin Cinense, the inauguration and turnover of the breeding laboratories signify the continuous promotion of advanced technologies in agriculture and hybrid rice production.

"This day marks another milestone in the history of PhilSCAT as a vision in establishing a modern hybrid rice breeding station is now a reality. Today, we shall witness the turnover of the facilities and equipment as the Technical Cooperation Program III is about to end," Cinense said.

The three breeding laboratories of PhilSCAT is set to produce high-yielding and quality rice varieties by improving the country's agricultural promotion, production, and research.

"China is ready to cooperate with the Philippines to promote the development of more than agricultural sciences and technology to make a great country's solution to food security and improve our people's living standards," Ambassador Huang Xilian said in his message.

The collaboration between the DA and the Chinese Embassy includes a cold-water irrigation system and seed multiplication of the Thermogenic Male Sterile to develop TGMS-based or two-line hybrid rice.

Dar expressed his gratitude to the Chinese Embassy and PhilSCAT for their relentless efforts in helping and assisting the agriculture sector in the country.

"This PhilSCAT is a part of the legacy of friendship, cooperation, and collaboration. If you have to ask me whether we are interested in having a TCP IV, I will say we will strongly support TCP IV. I hope I can pursue this before the end of my term," Dar said.

He believed that the Technical Cooperation Program IV is important and must focus on smart agriculture and smart rice production.

It can be recalled that 22 years ago, the Chinese and Philippine governments established the PhilSCAT, which symbolizes their alliance and strengthens the partnership in achieving communication and technical cooperation in agriculture and other sectors.

Officials present during the event were Daimei Wu, Co-Director of PhilSCAT; Dr. Edgar Orden, Central Luzon State University president; Noel Reyes, Assistant Secretary for Strategic Communications and Department spokesperson; Dr. William Medrano, Undersecretary for Livestock; Crispulo Bautista Jr., DA Central Luzon Regional Executive Director; Dr. Eduardo Lapuz Jr., Regional Technical Director for Operations and Extension and AMAD; and other officials.

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BSP: RATE HIKES WON'T EASE INFLATION WOES

By Bianca Cuaresma
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THE Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas (BSP) said the Executive department should "do the heavy lifting" in keeping inflation at bay, as price surges stem from supply side pressures.

In a message to reporters over the weekend, the governor said non-monetary policy measures will be more effective in trying to keep commodity prices from rising too fast, instead of monetary policy interventions like rate hikes.

"Since inflation pressures are coming from supply side factors, a monetary response in terms of policy rate adjustment is neither appropriate nor responsive. An increase in policy rate will not change the reality that energy and other commodities have surged owing to the Russia-Ukraine conflict," the governor said.

Just last week, BSP Governor Benjamin Diokno decided to retain all monetary policy levers, keeping to his guidance of maintaining an accommodative stance of monetary policy "for as long as possible" to support economic recovery.

"It is when there are clear second round effects on the demand side, say for example, higher wages and higher transport fares, that the Central Bank may choose to act to mitigate inflation pressures," Diokno said.

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"In this instance, the Executive Department should do the heavy lifting. And it had demonstrated in recent episodes that they are able and willing to do so," he added.

Diokno urged the executive to continue to open up the economy, citing the impact of strict mobility on economic activity.

The governor has also put out a list of policy recommendations on non-monetary interventions that should be needed to reduce the likelihood of second round effects in the economy.

Below is the governor's list of recommendations to the Executive:

■ For gasoline and diesel, it can increase fuel subsidy for public utility vehicles; and continue promotional discount of oil companies.

■ For coal, expand supply and reduce price by lowering the most favored nation (MFN) 7 percent tariff rate to zero until December 2022; and maintain buffer stock at the current 30 days minimum inventory.

■ For electricity, stagger the increase in generation charge; and encourage energy conservation in all government offices.

■ Overall support to agriculture: provide fuel vouchers to farmers and fishermen; provide targeted fertilizer vouchers to farmers; and expand supply through bilateral discussion with fertilizer producing countries.

■ On rice, the Department of Agriculture should monitor rice inflation, and the National Food Authority should closely monitor buffer stock; accelerate the implementation of the Rice Competitiveness Enhancement Fund and other parts of the national rice production program to increase production; facilitate the release of Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) import clearance especially for shipment arriving for the lean season starting July; and expand supply and reduce price by extending the MFN 35 percent tariff until December 2022.

■ On corn, expand supply and reduce price by lowering the MFN tariff to 5 percent in quota and 15 percent out quota with MAV of 4 million MT until December 2022; import more feed wheat and produce more cassava (as feed substitute).

■ On pork, expand supply and reduce price by extending the lower tariff of 15 percent in quota and 25 percent out quota with MAV of 200,000 MT until December 2022; accelerate release of imported pork from cold storage; and continued implementation of strict biosecurity measures, and partnership with private sector groups/hog breeders to speed up the repopulation program.

■ On fish, issue CNI for small pelagic fish valid from Q2 to Q4 2022. It needs an additional 140,000 to fill up the projected supply gap of 200,000 MT.

■ On chicken, accelerate the release of Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) clearances from National Meat Inspection Service (NMIS) cold storage warehouses to push up inventory to pre-pandemic level; issuance of guidelines by the Department of Agriculture on the movement of poultry products and by-products following the detection of Avian influenza in some duck and quail farms to mitigate potential spread of the disease.

■ On sugar, address the temporary restraining order (TRO) on sugar import; and allow direct importation by industrial users; implement a 1:1 domestic to import ratio.

■ On wheat, expand sources of wheat, for example, India; and promote non-wheat flour substitutes such as the Sagip-nutri flour (made from cassava, sweet potato, mongo, and others) and banana flour.

The BSP is expected to hold its next monetary policy meeting on May 19.

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PHL corn imports may go up by 50%—report

By Jasper Emmanuel Y. Arcalas
@jearcalas

THE Philippines's corn imports in marketing year (MY) 2022-2023 may expand by 50 percent to 750,000 metric tons (MT) as importers will try to fill the anticipated supply gap in feed wheat due to the Ukraine-Russia conflict, an international agency said.

"Post forecasts MY 2022/23 corn imports at 750,000 MT, up 250,000 MT from the previous year, due to the disruptions and market uncertainty of feed wheat caused by the Ukraine conflict," the United States Department of Agriculture-Foreign Agricultural Service in Manila (USDA-FAS Manila) said in its latest report published recently.

The USDA-FAS Manila noted that the country's corn imports in MY 2021-2022 reached 500,000 MT. The marketing year for corn starts in July and ends in June of the following year.

The agency said higher corn demand from the poultry sector, which is expected to grow by as much as 2 percent, would offset the constrained demand from the livestock sector, which is still reeling from the impact of African swine fever (ASF).

"Moreover, there is an ongoing effort at the Tariff Commission to reduce the MFN [most favored nation] corn tariff rate to 5 percent and raise the Minimum Access Volume to 4 million MT [MMT] to lower the cost of production for pork and poultry," it said.

"Proponents of the petition note that feed constitutes about 70 percent of the total cost of production, and corn represents half of feed costs. The Tariff Commission held a public hearing on March 18, 2022, with results expected in the coming weeks."

The USDA-FAS Manila projected that local corn production in MY 2022-2023 would increase by 2.46 percent to 8.3 MMT from 8.1 MMT in the previous MY. The agency attributed the increase to "favorable farm-gate prices tempered with high fertilizer costs."

It said the Philippines's total corn consumption in the current MY would expand by 300,000 MT to 9 MMT due to "higher feed wheat prices." Out of the total estimated corn consumption, about 6.9 MMT would be for animal feeds.

"Post raises MY 2021/22 feed consumption by 200,000 MT due to the disruptions from the conflict in Ukraine reducing feed wheat availability," it said.

"The Bureau of Animal Industry reported several Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza outbreaks in January and February 2022, which Post does not expect to affect broiler or layer production."

The Philippine Maize Federation Inc. (PhilMaize) earlier said it does not see the need to reduce tariffs on corn as local corn is still cheaper than imports from the United States and Brazil.

PhilMaize claimed that the price of local corn nationwide averaged at P21 per kilogram (kg), or P3 lower than the average price of P24.50 per kg for imported corn from the US and Brazil.

"It is rather disturbing why we want to favor other nations' corn when our own is much cheaper and could help local corn farmers," PhilMaize said in its position paper on the proposed tariff reduction on imported corn.

Disputing statements from "unidentified self-interest groups," PhilMaize said there is no empirical study that would show the "direct correlation" between corn prices and prices of meat products in the market.

"Data from the economic studies have shown that there is no empirical direct correlation on corn prices against increases or decreases of meat and poultry prices in the market contrary to claims of the self-interest groups that made the corn industry more vulnerable in the advent of ASF and now implicated in the Russia-Ukraine war."

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Ducks, quails culled to prevent spread of avian flu

THE Philippines culled over 40,000 birds, mostly ducks and quails, to curb the spread of bird flu, the government said in its latest report to the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE).

The government also confirmed to the OIE an outbreak of the HPAI subtype H5N8 in a farm in Pampanga.

In two reports to the OIE, which were published recently, the Philippines said it recorded 17 more outbreaks of bird flu in the country, 16 of which were caused by the HPAI H5N1 strain.

Based on the reports, the government said 13 outbreaks had already been resolved, including the very first H5N8 outbreak.

The 17 new outbreaks reported to the OIE had a total susceptible bird population of about 23,561, which were mostly ducks and quails from backyard farms. The Philippines's reports showed that about 15,899 birds died from bird flu while 7,636 were culled.

Since confirming the resurgence of bird flu this year, the Philippines has culled 46,444 birds while 60,289 birds died due to the disease, based on the country's reports to the OIE.

In its second-follow up report regarding the H5N1 outbreaks in the country, the Philippines said the new outbreaks were recorded in Nueva Ecija (six outbreaks), Camarines Sur (six outbreaks), Laguna (two outbreaks), Bataan (one outbreak) and Tarlac (one outbreak).

The 16 H5N1 outbreaks resulted in the death of 15,899 birds and the culling of 4,906 birds.

In a separate report, the Philippines confirmed the very first H5N8 outbreak in a farm in Pampanga, which resulted in the culling of 2,730 ducks.

The BUSINESSMIRROR broke the story last February that the Philippines lost its bird-flu free status after the government reported its first confirmed outbreaks of HPAI H5N1 that killed over 42,000 quails and ducks in four Central Luzon farms. ***(Related story: https://businessmirror.com.ph/2022/02/22/phl-reports-new-avian-flu-outbreaks-in-central-luzon-farms/)***

The confirmation of bird flu outbreaks in Luzon led to the imposition of inter-island movement restrictions on poultry products by certain local government units (LGUs).

Earlier this month, poultry industry leaders warned of a supply imbalance for table eggs and chicken meat as LGUs in Luzon and Visayas imposed entry bans for poultry products due to bird flu concerns. The bans were deemed "over-and-above" the guidelines of the Department of Agriculture ***(Related story: https://businessmirror.com.ph/2022/03/08/lgu-curbs-could-tilt-table-eggs-chicken-meat-supply-balance/).*** *Jasper Emmanuel Y. Arcalas*

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Short-term measures eyed to tame inflation

By ELIJAH FELICE ROSALES

The Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas (BSP) has urged Malacañang to pursue several initiatives, including expanding social interventions and trimming import duties, to tame inflation in the short term.

BSP Governor Benjamin Diokno said the central bank finds no reason yet to hike interest rates to hold off inflationary pressures caused by rising oil prices due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

He said the BSP can only pull the trigger on a rate hike when second-round effects coming from the demand side, including minimum wage and transport fare increases, begin to influence inflation.

"An increase in policy rates will not change the reality that energy and other commodities have surged owing to the Russia-Ukraine conflict. It is when there are clear second-round effects on the demand side – say, for example, higher wages and higher transport fares – that the central bank may choose to act to mitigate inflation pressures," Diokno told reporters.

For the meantime, Diokno said, the executive branch should increase fuel subsidies for drivers of public utility vehicles to increase their cash pool against fuel rate spikes. Also, the government should widen the options for promotional discounts from oil firms to mitigate the impact of price surges.

The BSP chief also prodded Malacañang to boost the supply and cut the prices of coal by zeroing the most favored nation (MFN) rate until December and maintaining a buffer stock of 30 days at the minimum.

Diokno said increases in generation charges should also be staggered and government offices should minimize their power consumption to save on electricity.

He urged the Department of Agriculture (DA) to extend fertilizer vouchers to affected farmers and to bolster fertilizer supply by negotiating with producing countries.

On rice, the DA was asked to monitor rice inflation and its reserves to make sure that prices are kept steady for the duration of the ongoing conflict. Diokno said President Duterte should extend the MFN rate for rice imports of 35 percent until December.

The BSP chief likewise proposed multiple actions centered on increasing supply in agricultural commodities, particularly corn, pork, fish, chicken, sugar and wheat. He said carrying out these proposals would make inflation issues bearable, as compared to some advanced and emerging markets where rate hikes were necessary.

The BSP's policy-setting Monetary Board last week decided to retain the interest rate for the overnight reverse repurchase facility at a record low of two percent, countering other central banks, including the US, which raised benchmark policies to weather inflationary threats.

However, the BSP now expects annual inflation to breach the government's target of two to four percent, adjusting its 2022 outlook to 4.3 percent from 3.7 percent due to higher oil prices.

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BioPrime Nano Fertilizer: Indispensable "Game Changer" for Filipino Rice Farmers

During the 2020 Wet Season (WS), the Philippine Rice Institute (PhilRice) Central Experimental Station (CES) in Nueva Ecija reported an unprecedented increase in yield of 15.85%. The secret? Applying the 50% recommended rate of Rice Crop Manager (RCM) and adding 20 grams of BioPrime 5-5-5.

BioPrime 5-5-5 is a bio-fertilizer product of BioPrime Agri Industries, Inc, (www.bioprime.ph), the pioneer in exclusive Nano-based precision technologies in the field of agriculture and bio-fertilizers.

Continued testing of BioPrime by PhilRice CES in 2021 WS (wet season) revealed an increase in yield of 6.86% with the application of 50% recommended rate of RCM plus only 15 grams of BioPrime 5-5-5.

The Department of Agriculture used the results in 2021 WS (wet season) PhilRice CES trials as the solid basis for the procurement of BioPrime. The 2021 WS trials proved to be the lowest investment or production cost at P31,129 per hectare, with the highest increase in net income for the farmers at P14,107 per hectare.

Currently, BioPrime is conducting an Inbred DS (Dry Season) scientific trial with PhilRice, the results of which will be released in May 2022.

In addition, BioPrime partnered with PhilRice RiceBIS (Rice Business Innovation System) to conduct one-on-one demonstration trials with farmer-participants in the program, which delivered the following results of 2021 WS (wet season) as follows:

- Mangatarem, Pangasinan – around P10,000 higher income for farmers as compared to current farmer's practice. Each farmer applied 15 grams of BioPrime 5-5-5.
- Gerona, Tarlac - around P10,000 higher income for the farmer as compared to current farmer's practice. Each farmer applied 15 grams of BioPrime 5-5-5.
- Bayambang, Pangasinan - around P13,000 higher income for farmers as compared to current farmer's practice. Each farmer applied 25 grams of BioPrime 5-5-5 (which included a 10-gram soil treatment, since soil tests proved the overworked conditions of the soil).

Collaborating with the Department of Agriculture, BioPrime commenced a program of "Balanced Fertilization," starting with rice and corn crops, in test partnership with PhilRice and Isabela State University.

Over the past 2 years, BioPrime has expanded its trials to farmers in multiple regions across the country, with focus on region 3.

Following are the feedback and testimonials of just a few of the farmers who presented their results after harvesting:

- Mr. JoJo Bugtong: JoJo, a hardworking farmer from Barangay Pasong Intsik, Guimba, Nueva Ecija, was a former Field Coordinator of SL8 and Longping. As a Field Coordinator, he saw various technologies in crop production until he tested BioPrime 5-5-5 as a growth booster and soil conditioner. He said that with the use of BioPrime, he achieved a yield of 221 bags per hectare using 14 bags of inorganic fertilizer + BioPrime. Reported net profit was P144,000 using the hybrid variety SL8 in 2020 Dry Season.
- Ms Amalia Gamilla: Amalia, a large landowner in San Miguel, Quezon, Nueva Ecija, is one of the pioneer users of BioPrime 5-5-5. She appreciated the use of this technology because of the significant yield increase she achieved in 2020 Dry-Season and 2021 Wet Season. In 2020 Dry Season, she observed the robust and healthy growth of rice with the combined use of 15 grams BioPrime plus 13 bags of Inorganic fertilizers. She reported a yield of 174 bags/ha using the hybrid Longping 937. During 2021 Dry Season, she started reducing the use of inorganic fertilizers from 13 bags to 9 bags with 15 grams BioPrime. Her rice farm will be showcased to farmers on April 8th during the balanced fertilization workshop to be held in San Miguel, Quezon, Nueva Ecija. This is hosted by BioPrime and the Department of Agriculture Workshop where Secretary Dar will provide the keynote address.
- Reymundo Peter Banaga: Reymundo is one of our BioPrime co-operators of Barangay Malibong, Mangatarem, Pangasinan who engaged in the use of BioPrime 5-5-5. Based on his experience, he observed the following: (1) uniform seed germination; and (2) easier-to-pull and robust rice plants, resulting in better yield and income. (3) He also significantly reduced the rate of inorganic fertilizer by 25% from 9 to 7 bags, combined with 15 grams of BioPrime.
- Yolindo Viernes: Yolindo, a seasoned farmer of Barangay Sembrano, Gerona, Tarlac, is one of our BioPrime co-operator's. At the time he started to apply BioPrime treatments, he reduced his applications of inorganic fertilizers by 25%, (from 8 to 6 bags in combination with 15 grams of BioPrime. Yolindo's yield increased by 20%. He also observed that the seedlings sprayed with BioPrime were much easier to be pulled and had more robust roots rather than other seedlings without the benefit of a foliar spray application of BioPrime.
- Others:
  - Zaldy Valdez: "Amazing product for bountiful harvest. Let us give BioPrime a try."
  - Melencio Valdez: "BioPrime is an immense help for us farmers because I saw very good germination and growth."
  - Rod Vargas: "Hoping that I will be included in the agricultural program in giving free BioPrime. It is a growth booster and soil conditioner, which is needed for an exceptionally good harvest for us farmers."
  - Lyndi Cadiente: "BioPrime is a powerful help among farmers. Not only as organic fertilizer for exceptionally good harvest but sustainable and particularly good for the environment."

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Veggie smuggling fight hounded by woes

BY ALDWIN QUITASOL

BAGUIO CITY — The Department of Agriculture (DA) and the Bureau of Plant Industry (BPI) in a recent meeting with the vegetable industry stakeholders admitted to farmers that lack of budget and manpower is hampering anti-smuggling operations.

According to Augusta Balanoy, spokesperson of the League of Associations at the La Trinidad Vegetable Trading Post (LALTVTP), during the meeting, Federico Laciste Jr. assistant secretary, chief implementer, Agriculture Dialogue and Information Network Groups, admitted that they lack manpower and budget to cope up with operations required to stop illegal smuggling of agricultural products.

Laciste, informed the group that aside from being undermanned, "they do not even have a vehicle to use in their operations that even responding to reports, they use their personal vehicle and their personal fuel," and requesting for additional personnel for operations is not even feasible.

Despite the stated limitations, Laciste added that their authority and power is very limited that they are only hopeful of larger participation from the Department of Justice and the Bureau of Customs (BoC).

Also, Laciste admitted to the group that just like the BoC and other agencies, there is corruption within the agency, admitting that he too has received phone calls from "congressmen" and other politicians regarding the issue, he however did not elaborate further.

Meanwhile, George Culaste, Bureau Director of the BPI, in the same meeting informed the group that smuggling is also hard to crackdown because their permit application contains items that are allowed for importation, but later on, were discovered to be of fresh vegetables, or cases of misdeclaration, has a permit for frozen vegetables.

Culaste earlier approved the release of two container vans of what was later found out to be fresh vegetables. The container vans which were had a permit for frozen vegetables. LALTVTP questioned the release of these container vans.

REMATE
ANG DIARYO NG MASA

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PCA pinuri ni Bong Go

COCO DEBRIS MGMT PLAN FUND INILABAS

PINURI ni Senator Christopher "Bong" Go si Pangulong Rodrigo Duterte sa pag-apruba sa pagpapalabas ng pondo ng National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council para sa panukalang Coconut Debris Management Plan ng Philippine Coconut Authority bilang suporta sa Shelter Assistance and Recovery Program ng gobyerno para sa mga komunidad na tinamaan ng Bagyong Odette noong nakaraang Disyembre.

"Kinokomendahan po natin si Pangulong Duterte sa kanyang pag-apruba sa pondong ito na layuning mapabilis ang pagbibigay ng reusable housing materials para sa mga biktima ni Typhoon Odette," ani Go.

Sinabi ni Go na siya at ang Pangulo ay nakipaglaban nang husto para maisulong ang hakbang na ito.

"Noong tumama ang bagyo, nakita mismo namin ni Pangulo ang mga pinsalang dulot nito sa agrikultura lalo na sa mga magsasaka ng niyog. Kaya iniutos kaagad niya na matulungan ng gobyerno ang ating mga magsasaka at ang coconut industry," dagdag ni Go.

"Bukod sa nasabing benepisyo, magbibigay-daan din ito sa pamahalaan na mapabilis ang disposal ng mga apektadong puno ng niyog na nagdudulot ng panganib sa kalusugan at kapaligiran sa pamamagitan ng paggawa ng mga ito bilang coco lumbers," patuloy ng senador.

Ang pondo na nagkakahalagang P331,003,192 ay ilalabas sa PCA. Ang plano ay naaayon sa Presidential Directive No. 2022-011 para sa conversion ng mga natumbang puno na muling magagamit na mga materyales sa pabahay para sa mga nakaligtas sa Bagyong Odette.

Ang iminungkahing interbensyon ay magpapadali sa pagtaas ng mobility at pagtatapon ng mga apektadong puno ng niyog na nagdudulot ng panganib sa kalusugan at kapaligiran, maiwasan ang pagkakaroon ng peste, at bubuo ng mga coco lumber para sa pagtatayo ng mga pansamantalang pasilidad ng pabahay para sa mga biktima ng bagyo.

Kasama sa proyekto ang pagkuha ng 11,573 chainsaw operators na babayaran sa pamamagitan ng cash-for-work scheme, na sabay-sabay na ipatutupad sa mga probinsya sa Rehiyon IV, VI, VII, VIII, X at XIII.

Samantala, paulit-ulit na binigyang-diin ni Go ang pangangailangan para sa isang mas mabilis at holistic na pagtugon sa mga sakuna at iba pang kalamidad. Inulit niya ang kanyang panawagan para sa pagpasa ng Senate Bill No. 205, na kilala rin bilang "Disaster Resilience Act".

Ang panukalang batas, na inihain ni Go noong 2019, ay naglalayong tugunan ang mga burukratikong hamon na sumisira sa kakayahan ng gobyerno na mas mahusay na tumugon at magbigay ng suporta sa mga indibidwal na apektado ng mga sakuna.

Para magawa ito, itinatatag nito ang Department of Disaster Resilience, isang highly-specialized na ahensya na maghahanda laban sa mga mapangwasak na epekto ng pagbabago ng klima at magsisiguro ng isang mas maagap na diskarte sa mga natural na kalamidad.

Inulit din ni Go ang kanyang panawagan para sa mandatoryong paglikha ng mga ligtas at maayos na evacuation center sa bawat munisipalidad, lungsod at lalawigan sa buong Pilipinas.

Binigyang-diin ng senador ang kagyat na pangangailangang aksyunan ang disaster resilience measures gaya ng kanyang SBN 1228 o ang "Mandatory Evacuation Center Act", na kanyang inihain noong 2019 upang matiyak na ang mga biktima ng mga sakuna ay magkakaroon ng mga pansamantalang tirahan na magtitiyak ng kanilang kaligtasan, magsusulong ng kanilang panlipunang kapakanan, at bantayan ang kanilang kapakanan habang sila ay nagrerekober sa buhay.

Ang SBN 1228 ay nakabinbin sa Senate Committee on National Defense and Security, Peace, Unification and Reconciliation, kasama ang SBN 205. **RNT**

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The Marcoses and the Ilocano tobacco farmers

YELLOW PAD
PIA RODRIGO

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and natural disasters have left Filipino farmers reeling. Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) data show that agricultural output dropped by 1.7% in 2021.

Transport and logistical breakdowns, travel restrictions, a decrease in demand, and low volume of exports due to the pandemic have bled our farmers dry. Fuel price hikes arising from the Russia-Ukraine conflict will lead to higher transport and production costs, only worsening the agricultural sector's conditions.

It is thus crucial to ask: Will our next President defend farmers' interests and decisively implement interventions to address the many issues they face? More importantly, does our next chief executive have a track record of prioritizing the development of our agricultural sector?

In this piece, I will detail the Marcos family's history with the agricultural sector, particularly the tobacco industry and tobacco farmers in Ilocos Norte.

The latest surveys have Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos, Jr. as the current presidential frontrunner. Bongbong promises to restore the so-called "agricultural golden age" during the regime of his father, Ferdinand Marcos, Sr.

However, one does not have to dig deep to find the ways in which Bongbong Marcos and his family have failed to champion the interests of farmers in their own bailiwick, the Ilocos Region or the "solid North."

The economy of Ilocos Norte, which has had a Marcos or close Marcos relative as its governor since 1971 (with the exception of Rodolfo Fariñas, who was governor from 1988-1998), is anchored on its agricultural sector and it is a major tobacco-producing province.

During the Senate interpellations of sin tax laws passed in the past decade, both Bongbong Marcos and his sister Imee Marcos staunchly opposed tobacco taxes, claiming to defend tobacco farmers and the tobacco industry in doing so.

This is how Marcos Jr. explained his opposition to the sin tax law on his website: "During his tenure as Senator, BBM was known to constantly defend the interests of tobacco farmers against the unreasonable and disproportionate increase in excise taxes on tobacco products. According to him, the imposition of unreasonable excise taxes would destroy the livelihood of tobacco farmers and the tobacco industry as a whole."

However, since the implementation of Republic Act 10351 or the Sin Tax Law of 2012, local tobacco production increased even with substantial increases in excise taxes on cigarettes from 2013 to 2017. From 2013-2017, the average volume of tobacco production was 55,769 metric tons; this is 15,000 metric tons higher than the average volume of tobacco production from 2008-2012, which was only 40,479 metric tons.

Furthermore, Ilocos Norte's tobacco farmers should actually benefit from the sin tax law, as the local government receives allocations from tobacco excise tax revenues, as mandated in Republic Act (RA) 10351. The law stipulates that 15% of the revenues from tobacco excise taxes must be split among major tobacco-producing provinces and allocated towards support for tobacco farmers. This includes financial support for displaced tobacco farmers, infrastructure projects like farm-to-market roads, and alternative livelihood programs.

The onus is on the local government units to use tobacco tax funds for the welfare of tobacco farmers. Sadly, while the Marcoses opposed the sin tax law in the guise of protecting the farmers, when the law was implemented, Imee Marcos was implicated in a controversy regarding the use of excise tax funds that were meant to go towards the farmers' livelihood.

Ilocos Norte is the site of the 2018 tobacco excise tax funds controversy. To quote a *Philippine Star* story written by Audrey Morallo dated July 6, 2018:

"Ilocos Norte Gov. Imee Marcos and other officials of the province should be slapped with graft charges over their alleged involvement in the misuse of their share of tobacco excise taxes, a House committee recommended in its report.

"The House Committee on Good Government and Public Accountability said that Marcos and officials of the provincial government of Ilocos Norte should be held liable for the 'highly irregular and illegal' purchase of 110 units of Foton minicabs.

"'With all premises considered, the committee has determined that the purchase of the subject vehicles by the PGIN was highly irregular and illegal,' the committee said."

According to the committee report, the purchases were allegedly made without public bidding, violating the Government Procurement Act, and were purchased from a direct contractor, Mark Chua. They were allegedly overpriced by P195,000 per unit, resulting in a total of P21.4 million in overpayment. (*http://bit.ly/HR00882*)

During the congressional probe on the matter, Ms. Marcos argued that these vehicles were used by tobacco farmers to transport products and thereby increase productivity. However, at the hearing, Representative Rodolfo Fariñas pointed out that one of the beneficiaries of the vehicles was the barangay captain of Barangay Tres in Laoag City, where tobacco farms are absent.

Farmers from other provinces in the Ilocos region also continue to suffer from issues that the local government could address through the proper utilization of tobacco tax revenues. A focus group discussion (FGD) held by Action for Economic Reforms (AER) and Social Watch Philippines in Ilocos Sur in 2018 showed that tobacco farmers desire support in the form

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of cash subsidies and loans to address their lack of initial capital for farming. Tobacco farmers are also vulnerable to health hazards due to exposure to uncured tobacco, are constantly in debt to tobacco manufacturers, and have difficulty switching to other crops because of the lack of a market for vegetables.

These concerns were echoed in a December 2021 focus group discussion by AER in Bacnotan, La Union, a province in the Ilocos region. Tobacco farmers in the area voiced a need for more support from the government. Notably, the group lamented the absence of a farm-to-market road. This forces farmers to carry tobacco by the side of the road, which adds to their fatigue and takes a toll on their health. Tobacco is a very difficult crop to farm, they said, comparing it to a child that needs to be nurtured, from planting to harvesting.

Farmers have no choice but to plant tobacco in La Union, they said. The lack of access to water in the province makes it difficult for them to fully switch to planting rice. And ever since the COVID-19 lockdowns, farmers have been restricted from directly selling to tobacco companies. They are kept in the dark regarding prices and unable to negotiate the prices of their product, which the farmers believe are too low. "*Resibo na lang dinadala sa amin. Hindi namin alam kung paano 'yung* grading *ng* tobacco *namin* (They just bring us a receipt. We do not know how they are grading our tobacco)," the farmers said.

When asked about their preferred presidential candidate, Bongbong Marcos won unanimously among the Ilocano farmers. "'*Yung sinasabi nila na si* Marcos *daw ay tutulungan niya 'yung mga magsasaka. 'Yun ang gusto namin* (What they say is that Marcos will help the farmers. That is what we want)," the farmers said.

When asked about what the Marcos family had done to help them, they were mostly silent, with some of them bringing up Ferdinand Sr.'s achievements.

We hope that if he is elected President, Marcos Jr. would live up to his promises of championing the rights of Filipino farmers. But the Marcos family has worked actively to block a crucial measure that has provided billions of pesos in subsidies for the welfare of tobacco farmers, has proven to lower smoking prevalence among Filipinos (from 31% in 2008 to 20.7% in 2018), and has generated enough revenue to triple the budget of the Department of Health.

We fear that a Marcos presidency would only enable regressive measures affecting health, revenues, and the economy, thus hurting the marginalized, including our farmers. ■

PIA RODRIGO is the strategic communication officer of Action for Economic Reforms (AER). AER is one of the civil society members of the Sin Tax Coalition, a network of advocates who supported the passage of the Sin Tax Reform Act in 2012.

THE PHILIPPINE STAR
TRUTH SHALL PREVAIL

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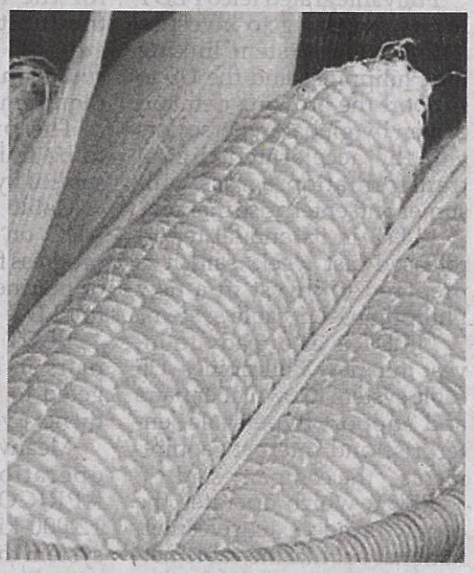
Phl may import 750,000 MT of corn

By CATHERINE TALAVERA



The Philippines may import more corn to supplement some feed wheat demand, as prices of wheat have increased amid the Ukraine-Russia conflict, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) said.

In a report by its Foreign Agricultural Service, the USDA said it sees the Philippines importing 750,000 metric tons (MT) of corn in market year 2022 to 2023, which will start in July.

It said that this is 250,000 MT higher than the earlier projected 500,000 MT corn imports for the current market year.

"Corn is expected to supplement some feed wheat demand, while milling wheat consumption is seen slightly declining for more affordable rice," the USDA said.

The USDA is projecting wheat imports to decline by three percent in the next market year to 6.3 million MT due to the uncertainty from the ongoing conflict in the Black Sea and the high global prices of wheat.

Similarly, wheat consumption is also expected to drop by 350,000 MT to 6.25 million MT in the next market year due to higher wheat prices, with feed demand seen to drop by 300,000 MT to 2.4 million MT.

"Factors include the ongoing Black Sea conflict and efforts by local feed millers to replace wheat with barley because of rising feed wheat prices. Uncertainty also remains in hog feed demand due to ongoing spread of African swine fever," the USDA said.

Meanwhile, the USDA said total corn consumption is projected to reach nine million MT in the next market year, up 300,000 MT compared to the previous year due to higher feed wheat prices.

Corn food seed and industrial (FSI) consumption is expected to reach 2.1 million MT.

Similarly, feed consumption is also expected to increase to 6.9 million MT, 200,000 MT higher than the previous year, mainly due to the growth in poultry feed demand and lower feed wheat consumption.

While the Bureau of Animal Industry reported several Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) outbreaks in January and February, the USDA said it does not expect this to affect broiler or layer production.

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Refined sugar hits highest price in five years as India caps exports

NEW YORK/LONDON — Refined sugar prices on ICE exchange hit the highest levels in five years on Friday amid reports that India, the world's No. 2 sugar exporter, could cap exports in the current marketing year to guarantee local supplies.

Raw sugar also rose, the highest closing price since November.

SUGAR

May white sugar rose $12.10 or 2.2% at $562.70 a ton, having hit its highest since early 2017 at $563.70

India's potential export cap of eight million tons for the year to end-September could result in a de facto ban for exports from May as dealers say mills have already contracted to export seven million tons so far.

Brokers said food security concerns amid the war in Ukraine are boosting sugar prices as they did with other commodities such as corn and wheat.

May raw sugar settled up 0.35 cent or 1.8% at 19.61 cents per pound (lb), the highest closing price since Nov. 23.

The contract also gained support from a strong Brazilian real, which hit its highest value against the US dollar since March 2020.

A strong real deters exporters in Brazil from selling dollar-priced sugar by lowering returns in local currency.

"The sugar price in reais remained at the same level, with the currency offsetting the rise in futures," said a broker.

COFFEE

May arabica coffee was stable at $2.2185 per lb.

Dealers said the market is lacking direction after a recent sell-off by funds cutting their net long position. The strong Brazilian real has also hurt farmer selling.

"Activity is slow, there is a lack of selling interest and that turns into a domino effect, where exporters also abstain from the selling side, due to difficulties to source," said a Brazil-based broker.

May robusta coffee rose $12 or 0.6% at $2,148 a ton.

COCOA

May London cocoa fell £16 or 0.9% to £1,723 per ton, having hit a one-week high on Wednesday.

Dealers said cocoa has an upside bias given producers have largely finished selling the current crop and speculative funds are mostly looking to build up long positions in an illiquid environment.

May New York cocoa fell $21 or 0.8% to $2,562 a ton. — ***Reuters***

Malaya
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India to restrict sugar exports

MUMBAI- India plans to restrict sugar exports for the first time in six years to prevent a surge in domestic prices and could cap this season's exports at 8 million tons, government and industry sources told Reuters.

An announcement could come early next month, they said.

Shares in sugar manufacturers slid on the news, with Dhampur Sugar Mills and BalrampurChini each tumbling 5 percent and Dwarikesh Sugar losing 6 percent.

"Sugar output is going to be a record high, but stocks are depleting fast because of exports. Uncontrolled exports could create scarcity and local prices could spike during festive season," said a senior government official with knowledge of the matter who asked not to be identified.

Two of three sources said the government has planned a cap of 8 million while one official said the government is also exploring the option of a levy on exports to discourage overseas sales.

India's Ministry of Commerce and Industry did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

A cap of 8 million tons for the marketing year to end-September could result in a de facto ban for exports from May as dealers say mills have already contracted to export 7 million tons so far.

Based on March deals for around 1 million tons of exports, they estimate mills could sign contracts for another 1 million tons in April after global white sugar prices jumped to a 5-year high on Thursday.

Lower output in top producer Brazil and firm oil prices which encourage mills to produce more sugarcane-based ethanol have spurred global price gains. Export curbs by India, the world's No. 2 sugar exporter, would likely further lift prices.

Earlier projections estimated domestic sugar stocks as of Oct. 1 could fall to a five-year low of 6.8 million tons due to record exports, but those forecasts now look optimistic after the rise in global sugar prices.

"New Delhi is keen to start the new season with opening stock of 6 to 7 million tons, which is enough to fulfill December quarter demand," an industry official said.

Demand usually jumps during the December quarter due to weddings and festivals such as Diwali and Dussehra.- ***Reuters***