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New law writes off P57-B farmers' debt

BY CATHERINE S. VALENTE, JANINE ALEXIS MIGUEL AND JAVIER JOE ISMAEL

PRESIDENT Ferdinand Marcos Jr. on Friday signed a new law that condones over P57 billion worth of loans of more than 600,000 farmers who are agrarian reform beneficiaries (ARBs).

Republic Act (RA) 11953, which writes off "all principal loans, unpaid amortization and interests, and exempting payment of estate tax on agricultural lands awarded under the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform

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New law writes off P57-B farmers' debt

Program," was signed in a ceremony in Malacañang.

"Pinangako ko sa ating mga kababayan na itutuloy ang (I promised our countrymen that we will continue the) Agrarian Reform Program. I'm here today to build on that promise because our beneficiaries deserve nothing less. Ituloy natin ang repormang agraryo (Let us continue the agrarian reform)," he said in his speech.

But the President added that genuine emancipation required more than just the distribution of

land, and that handing titles to ARBs was just the first step toward more sustainable farms and higher income for farmers.

He also pledged to speed up the resolution of agrarian cases.

Marcos reaffirmed his commitment to revitalize the agricultural sector by training a new generation of young farmers "who will become the driving force behind a modernized and profitable agriculture sector that fuels sustainable rural

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development."

"It is time to give our farmers the recognition that they deserve as the providers of our nation's sustenance, the providers of life to all of Filipinos," he said.

He enjoined the people to "work together to realize this dream, our dream, as it was my father's dream to give every Filipino farmer and his or her family, a life beyond mere survival, a life free from hunger or fear of the future."

The new law condones all loans, including interests, penalties and surcharges that covered the land awarded to ARBs under Presidential Decree (PD) 27, RA 6657 and RA 9700.

PD 27, the Tenant Emancipation Decree, was signed by the President's father, the late president Ferdinand Marcos Sr., on Oct. 21, 1972.

RA 6657 is the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Law of 1988, while RA 9700 extends the acquisition and distribution of agricultural lands under the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP) of President Corazon Aquino.

These laws require the beneficiaries to pay for the land awarded to them in annual installments for 30 years.

RA 11953 writes off the unpaid debt of 610,054 ARBs tilling 1.173 million hectares of land.

The government will also assume the P206,204,776.41 owed by 10,201 ARBs tilling 11,531.24 ha of land as compensation for landowners under the Voluntary Land Transfer or the Direct Payment Scheme.

Under the newly signed law, the ARBs will also be included in the Registry System for Basic Sectors in Agriculture of the Department of Agriculture (DA), which Marcos currently heads.

Their inclusion entitles them to all support services given to farmers by the DA and other government agencies.

Sixty days after RA 11953 takes effect, the Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR), in coordination with the Executive Committee of the Presidential Agrarian Reform Council, will issue the law's implementing rules and regulations, or IRR.

The New Agrarian Emancipation Act is the fulfillment of Marcos' call on Congress during his first State of the Nation Address last year to pass a law condoning the farmers' debt.

In an interview following the ceremonial signing of the law, the President

said that even after the farmers have been rid of their debt burden, the government will continue to support them.

"Kung nagawa na natin ito, nakapagbigay na tayo ng titulo, at na-condone na natin ang utang, ang pinakamahalaga ngayon ay ang patuloy na suporta (If we have managed to give lands and condone debt, the most important thing now is the continued support)," Marcos told reporters.

He assured that the government would strictly monitor the implementation of RA 11953.

"It is important to us that this succeeds, not just for bragging rights but because this is the development of a very crucial part of our economy, a very crucial part of our food security, and it is something that is absolutely necessary," Marcos said.

Shortly after the signing rites, the President led the ceremonial awarding of titles to ARBs.

In his speech, Agrarian Reform Secretary Conrado Estrella 3rd said the DAR simultaneously distributed a total of 32,441 land titles to 27,132 ARBs covering 39,269 ha.

"Now, Mr. President, we can say that in your first year as president of the Republic, you have done a lot for your country," Estrella told Marcos.

Several farmer groups welcomed the signing of the New Agrarian Emancipation Act.

The Federation of Free Farmers (FFF) National Manager Raul Montemayor said the new law frees farmers from payment for lands distributed to them under CARP.

"At the same time, we call on Congress and the President to complete the distribution of some 600,000 to 700,000 hectares of "CARPable" lands that had remained undistributed under the previous administration," Montemayor said.

The Samahang Industriya ng Agrikultura (Sinag) said the law is social justice that will correct the injustices to farmers.

"The debt condonation will enable farmers to start again," Sinag Executive Director Jayson Cainglet said.

The Unyon ng mga Manggagawa sa Agrikultura (UMA) stressed the need for genuine agrarian reform.

While RA 11953 would put an end to the unjust collection of amortization fees from ARBs, "it would not undo the damage" that CARP had already inflicted," said Ariel Casilao, acting UMA chairman.

"Putting an end to amortization fees is overdue, but on its own, the New Agrarian Emancipation Act will not reverse the re-

concentration of land back to the ruling elite," Casilao said.

He said that seven to nine out of 10 peasants remained landless, and it was landlessness that pushed them into selling their labor power.

The Kilusang Magbubukid ng Pilipinas (KMP) said the condonation of amortization fees is a welcome relief for more than 600,000 ARBs.

The KMP also noted that the next challenge for President Marcos is to enact a new and genuine agrarian reform program.

"We sincerely hope that farmer-beneficiaries will fully benefit from RA 11953 or the New Agrarian Emancipation Act, and will not turn out like the Ferdinand Marcos Sr.-era Presidential Decree 27 that further burdened and deprived rice farmers of lands to till," KMP Chairman Danilo Ramos said.

Sen. Maria Imelda Josefa "Imee" Marcos lauded the passage of RA 11953.

"It fills me with great hope and expectation that the Filipino Farmer will soon own the land he has been tilling since time immemorial," she said on Friday.

"Freeing our farmers from debt through the passage of the New Agrarian Emancipation Act today, July 7, 2023, is the first concrete step towards fulfilling the vision that our late father, President Ferdinand Edralin Marcos, enunciated more than 50 years ago, when he signed Presidential Decree (PD) 27 decreeing the 'emancipation of tenants from the bondage of the soil,'" the senator said.

She said she is gratified that her work in the Senate has allowed her to somehow continue her father's legacy.

"Shortly after I assumed office during the 18th Congress, I filed Senate Bill (SB) 849 entitled 'An Act Fulfilling the Emancipation of Tenants from the Bondage of the Soil,'" she said.

"When the Covid-19 pandemic struck, former President Duterte immediately signed into law Republic Act (RA) 11494, or the "Bayanihan 2, which I co-authored, where I pushed for the inclusion of Section 4(m) providing financial relief for agrarian reform beneficiaries and condoning interests and penalties to agrarian-related loans," Senator Marcos said.

She said that last year, she filed SB 178, entitled the "Emancipation of Tenants Act," which sought to relieve farmers from the financial burdens on their loans under the CARP.

She said she was grateful to the President, her brother, "for sharing our father's vision and making agrarian reform a priority in his administration."



Marcos condones ₱57-B farmers' debt

New Agrarian Emancipation Act won't affect gov't revenue — Diokno



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By ARGYLL CYRUS GEDUCOS and BETHEENA UNITE

President Marcos has signed Republic Act No. 11953 (the New Agrarian Emancipation Act), which will free agrarian reform beneficiaries (ARBs) from their debt burden.

The new law is a priority legislation of the Marcos administration, even asking Congress to pass the measure in his first State of the Nation Address (SONA) in July 2022.

In his speech during the ceremonial signing of RA 11953, President Marcos said he was ► **5**

EMANCIPATION OF FARMERS — President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. (center, left photo) signs the New Agrarian Emancipation Act, as Agrarian Reform Secretary Conrado Estrella III (fourth from right) looks on, at the Kalayaan Hall in Malacañang on Friday, July 7, 2023. It was a re-enactment of a similar event held 50 years ago on October 21, 1972, (top photo) when then president Ferdinand E. Marcos Sr. signed President Decree No. 27, that likewise freed farmers from bondage of the soil, with then Agrarian Reform Secretary Conrado Estrella Sr. by his side. Also present during the re-enactment are Senators Cynthia Villar and Imee Marcos, and agrarian reform beneficiaries from different regions of the country. (Photos from PPA pool)



Marcos condones ₱57-B farmers' debt 1◀

glad to sign the law as it would free farmers from debt.

However, he said genuine emancipation required more than just the distribution of land. Handing titles to ARBs was just the first step in achieving more sustainable farms and higher income for Filipino farmers.

"Free land distribution must go hand-in-hand with broadening the provision of credit facilities and support services in the form of farm inputs, equipment, and facilities to our farmers, as well as the construction of more farm-to-market roads," Marcos said. "I assure you that we will never stop providing our farmers with the support that they need to help make their farms more productive while also improving their lives and that of their families."

The new law condones all the unpaid amortizations of the principal debt, including any interest and surcharges incurred by the ARBs. According to the President, ₱57.56 billion of unpaid principal debt will be condoned to benefit 610,054 ARBs tilling 1.173 million hectares of land.

In addition, the government will assume the obligation of 10,201 ARBs tilling 11,531.24 hectares of land to pay the remaining balance of the direct compensation due the concerned landowners under the Voluntary Land Transfer (VLT) or the Direct Payment Scheme (DPS) amounting to ₱206,204,776.41.

No effect on fiscal position

Despite the condonation of the ₱57.56

billion of unpaid principal debt, Finance Secretary Benjamin Diokno said it will have no impact on the government's revenue.

Diokno stressed the government has already made plans about the government's target revenue and the condonation of the unpaid amortizations of the principal debt, including any interest and surcharges incurred by agrarian reform beneficiaries are not included in the computation of the government's fiscal situation.

"This has no impact on the fiscal picture of the government because we have planned our deficit target, our revenues over the next five years. This is not included in the computation," Diokno said on Friday, July 7, after the signing of the Republic Act (RA) No. 11953 or the New Agrarian Emancipation Act in Malacañang.

He pointed out that the condoning of the unpaid principal debt "is not part of the collection," neither part of the estimation of revenues on the part of the government.

"So, this has no impact and it will benefit, as mentioned by the President, many agrarian reform beneficiaries," the Finance chief said. "For those running a government, you will not only think about the efficiency but social justice, as well. So, this will fall under social justice."

Addressing farmers' concerns

President Marcos vowed to address the concern of farmers and agrarian emancipation as a tangible reality for

the country's hardworking farmers.

He urged the government to expedite the individual titling of lands covered by collective CLOAs to secure the agrarian rights of the farmers and vowed to enhance the efficiency of agrarian case resolution systems for faster outcomes.

Marcos said the government would continue attracting and training new generations of young farmers to revitalize and make the agricultural sector modernized and profitable.

"It is time to give our farmers the recognition that they deserve as the providers of our nation's sustenance, the providers of life to all of Filipinos," he said. "We will help and support you every step of the way so you can prosper and succeed, and help provide sufficient and nutritious food to our people."

Support to farmers continues

In an interview following the ceremonial signing of the law, the President said nothing would change with how the government supports Filipino farmers.

"If we have managed to give lands and condone debt, the most important thing now is the continued support," he told reporters. "We will make sure the support will not change."

President Marcos said the government would strictly monitor the implementation of RA 11953.

"It is important to us that this succeeds, not just for bragging rights but because this is the development of

a very crucial part of our economy, a very crucial part of our food security, and it is something that is absolutely necessary," he said. "So, we will monitor this closely to ensure our dream of adding almost one million hectares of land for farming."

The new law condones all the unpaid amortizations of the principal debt, including any interest and surcharges incurred by the ARBs.

Not unfair to prompt payers

Agrarian Reform Secretary Conrado Estrella III, meanwhile, said he does not think the New Agrarian Emancipation Act is unfair to Filipino farmers who managed to pay off their agrarian debt before the measure was signed because of how the situation evolved.

"Before, they [farmers] could easily pay off their debt because they were making money. Now, the situation has changed due to many developments in the country and the entire world," he said. "The prices of farm machineries, equipment and other inputs in the entire world increased that's why it was difficult for our farmers to earn money. Then came the pandemic."

Despite this, Estrella assured the prompt farmer-payers that they would enjoy benefits.

"The administration prepared something for our prompt payers like more support services," he said. "It is only natural that we give it to them."

Other developments

● Senate President Juan Miguel Zubiri said the New Agrarian Emancipation Act "is good news" for the

country's farmers as this would relieve them paying amortization.

● "It fills me with great hope and expectation that the Filipino farmer will soon own the land he has been tilling since time immemorial," Senator Imee Marcos said. "I am grateful, as well, to my brother, President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. for sharing our father's vision and making agrarian reform a priority in his administration."

● "The groundbreaking legislation is a testament to President Marcos' unwavering commitment to the welfare of our farmers and the promotion of agricultural development," said Speaker Martin Romualdez, who was in Malacañang to witness the happy occasion. "When our farmers are freed from the burden of debt, they would be able to invest more in their land and improve their productivity. This can lead to better yields and profits, which can help improve the lives of our farmers and their families."

● The signing of the New Agrarian Emancipation Act is a "defining moment" of President Marcos' first year in Malacañang. "President Marcos' signing of RA No.11953 completes the genuine intent of the Congress to free our farmers from their bondage to generational poverty by condoning their CARP debts, which will gain them access to rural credit that will, in turn, let them make their lands more productive and boost their crop yields," he said. (With reports from Ellson Quismorio and Mario Casayuran)



PRESIDENT Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. is joined by Congress leaders after he signed into law the Condonation on Interests on Amortization of Loans of Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries measure on Friday, July 7, 2023. At the Ceremonial Signing in Malacañang are (from left): Senator Imee Marcos, Sen. Cynthia Villar, Finance Secretary Benjamin Diokno, Executive Secretary Lucas Bersamin, Senate President Juan Miguel Zubiri, President Marcos Jr., House Speaker Martin Romualdez, Agrarian Reform Secretary Conrado Estrella III, Albay Rep. Joey Salceda, and Special Assistant to the President Anton Lagdameo Jr.

Agrarian emancipation law signed; debts of 600K ARBs to be condoned

By SAMUEL P. MEDENILLA

PRESIDENT Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. signed on Friday Republic Act No. 11953 or the New Agrarian Emancipation Act, which will provide debt condonation for over 600,000 agrarian reform beneficiaries (ARB) nationwide.

The law will condone P57.557 billion worth of unpaid amortizations, including interest and surcharges for 1,173,101.57 hectares of awarded lands to 610,054 ARBs.

RA 11953 will also mandate the government to assume the obligation of 10,201 ARBs, who are tilling 11,531.24 hectares of land, in paying the remaining balance of over P206.25 million worth of compensation to concerned landowners under the Voluntary Land Transfer (VLT) or Direct Payment Scheme (DPS).

"The truth is, we can call these [amortization] dormant receivable because we know these farmers have no capability to pay this large debt," Marcos said in his speech during the signing ceremony of RA 11953 in Malacañang.

"It is time for them to be freed from this debt," he added.

Other provisions

THE ARBs covered by the new legislation will be included in the Registry System for Basic Sectors in Agriculture (RSBSA) of the Department of Agriculture (DA), which will give them access to support services from the said agency.

They will be exempted from payment of estate tax.

It also provides for restitution awarded to agrarian reform lands, which were forfeited solely due to non-payment of annual amortizations, and interest shall be restored to the original beneficiaries.

The Department of Agrarian Reform in coordination with the Executive Committee of the Presidential Agrarian Reform Council (PARC) will issue the implementing rules and regulations for the new law within 60 days from its effectivity.

Revitalized agriculture sector

MARCOS thanked members of Congress for hastening the passage of the new legislation, which will provide "social justice" to debt-ridden ARBs.

He vowed to continue providing additional government aid to ARBs to revitalize the country's agriculture sector by making it sustainable and profitable.

"Free land distribution must go hand in hand with broadening the provision of credit facilities and support services in the form of farm inputs, equipment and facilities to our farmers as well as the construction of more farm-to-market roads," Marcos said.

With such reforms, he said he hopes it will attract the young generation to go into farming and "become the driving force behind modernized and profitable agriculture sector."

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'Defining moment': Emancipation law frees 610,054 farmers from debt—House leaders

By JOVEE MARIE N. DELA CRUZ

THE leadership of the House of Representatives on Friday said the New Agrarian Emancipation Act will free more than half a million beneficiaries of the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP) from the shackles of indebtedness.

Speaker Ferdinand Martin Romualdez and Camarines Sur Rep. L-Ray Villafuerte said the new law signed by President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. condones P58 billion debt of 610,054 agrarian reform beneficiaries (ARBs) tilling 1.173 million hectares of land.

"By condoning these substantial debts, the Act aims to alleviate the burden on our agrarian reform beneficiaries, providing them with a fresh start and a renewed opportunity to enhance their productivity, improve their livelihood, and uplift the quality of their lives," Romualdez added.

Under existing laws, ARBs are required to pay for the land awarded to them in annual installments with 6 percent interest for a maximum period of 30 years. The measure condones all the unpaid amortizations of the principal

debt, including interests and surcharges.

The measure also stops the execution of a final and executory administrative or judicial ruling solely due to the failure of an ARB to pay the amortization and interest that would disqualify ARBs, and result in the cancellation of agrarian reform title.

Agrarian reform lands forfeited solely due to the same reason shall be restored to the original beneficiaries.

The government will also assume the obligation of 10,201 ARBs tilling 11,531.24 hectares of land to pay the remaining balance of the direct compensation due the concerned landowners under the Voluntary Land Transfer or the Direct Payment Scheme amounting to P206,247,776.41 million.

Under the new law, ARBs shall also be automatically included in the Registry System for Basic Sectors in Agriculture (RSBA) of the Department of Agriculture, which would entitle them to all support services given to the farmers by the DA and other government agencies.

The law likewise exempts ARBs from payment of estate tax. ARBs who fully paid their agrarian debt will be given priority

of access to credit facilities and support services.

Moreover, Villafuerte said the signing of Republic Act (RA) No. 11953 is a "defining moment" in the Marcos presidency as it will truly emancipate over a half-million farmer-beneficiaries of the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP) from their decades-old debts, opening their access to rural credit, and empowering them to make more productive a combined 1.17 million hectares that they till.

Being freed from their unpaid amortizations, interests, surcharges and penalties on their CARP loans, he said these farmers will gain access to credit and thus be able to invest more in their croplands to improve their yields and incomes, Villafuerte said.

"RA 11953 demonstrates President Marcos' commitment to modernizing agriculture and boosting our farmers' yields and incomes, which is in keeping with his government's agenda to achieve food security, if not self-sufficiency, and make economic growth sustainable and inclusive for all Filipinos, including those in the agriculture sector," said Villafuerte.

He added the condonation of the CARP debts of farmer-beneficiaries under RA 11953 will provide financial relief to our farmers who are reeling from ever soaring crop production costs and declining farm yields resulting from the adverse impact of climate change on high-risk countries like the Philippines.

To boost farmers' yields and incomes, Villafuerte is backing President Marcos' push for a balanced fertilization strategy involving the mixed-use of both biofertilizers or organic fertilizers and inorganic imports in farms, "to finally wean away our farmers from decades of overdependence on costly imported inputs that shrink their incomes and impair the environment."

"Freeing our farmers from the decades-long chokehold of pricey imported chemical fertilizers in favor of the use of biofertilizers or organic inputs is an audacious agricultural policy shift that should have happened a long time back, in order to boost palay productivity, raise farmers' incomes and pull down rice prices while at the same time reversing soil degradation and fighting planet warming," Villafuerte said.

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Marcos condones P58 B incurred by 600K farmers

By HELEN FLORES

President Marcos on July 7 signed a law that frees more than 600,000 Filipino farmers nationwide from agrarian arrears, as he reiterated his commitment to improve and modernize the agriculture sector.

Republic Act 11593 or the New Agrarian Emancipation Act condoned a total of P57.65 billion of unpaid amortizations, benefiting 610,054 farmers tilling more than 1.7 million hectares of agrarian reform lands.

In his speech, the President, who is also the agriculture secretary, stressed that "genuine agrarian emancipation" requires more than the distribution of land but also providing assistance and services to the farmers.

The principal loans valued at P14.5 billion of the 263,622 agrarian reform beneficiaries (ARBs), whose names and loan details were submitted by the Land Bank of the Philippines to Congress, shall be condoned outright.

The condonation of the remaining P43.06 billion in loans of 346,432 ARBs will take effect upon submission of the details of indebtedness of ARBs by Landbank and the Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR) to Congress.

The government will also assume the obligation for the payment of just compensation to landowners under the Voluntary Land Transfer or Direct Payment schemes for the benefit of 10,201 ARBs with total payables of P206.25 million.

The DAR said the payment will be coursed through the Agrarian Reform Fund.

"The national government will allocate funds for the Agrarian

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President Marcos leads the signing of the new Agrarian Reform Emancipation Act at Malacañang yesterday. Combo photo below shows the President and DAR Secretary Conrado Estrella III reenacting a

photo of the signing of Presidential Decree 27 signed by then president Ferdinand Marcos with then agrarian reform minister Conrado Estrella Sr. on Oct. 21, 1972. Present during the reenactment are Sen. Cynthia Villar, Sen. Imee Marcos and agrarian reform beneficiaries from the different regions.





Marcos From Page 1

Reform Fund to be able to pay for the P58-billion debts to the Landbank," according to the DAR Public Information Office.

Marcos also reiterated the need to further enable the sector through the provision of credit facilities, farm inputs and equipment and market access, including farm-to-market roads.

The government, he said, would also expedite efforts on individual titling, enhance the efficiency of agrarian case resolution systems and exert effort to train new generations of farmers.

Under existing agrarian laws, each agrarian reform beneficiary has to pay the cost of land given to him in 30 years with six percent interest, the President noted.

"It's time to free them from this debt," he said.

Marcos also allayed fears of massive selling of agrarian reform lands given to beneficiary-farmers, saying the government would be extending sufficient technical support to them.

He said that in the past, farmers were forced to sell their lands because they have no money to buy agricultural inputs.

Food security

The President also stressed the New Agrarian Emancipation Act

would significantly boost the agriculture sector and his administration's goal of attaining food security by improving local production.

He said that with the signing of the law, an additional one million hectares of idle farmlands can now be cultivated by the farmers.

Marcos added with more or less two and a half million hectares of land intended for palay production, adding almost one million hectares could enhance production.

"It's a big thing. Just think it's two and a half million hectares, more or less, planted to rice. Now, it will be three and a half million planted to rice, we're not yet considering second, third cropping there," he said partly in Filipino.

Distribution

Meanwhile, Federation of Free Farmers (FFF) board chairman Leonardo Montemayor also called on Marcos and Congress to complete the distribution of some 600,000 to 700,000 hectares of land yet to be covered by the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP).

"The FFF welcomes and supports the new law that frees our farmers from payment of lands distributed to them under the Comprehensive

Agrarian Reform Program. At the same time, we call on Congress and the President to complete the distribution of ... CARPable lands that had remained undistributed under the previous administration," Montemayor said in a message to **The STAR**.

Kilusang Magbubukid ng Pilipinas chairman Danilo Ramos said that the next challenge for Marcos is to enact a new agrarian reform program that will replace CARP.

"We sincerely hope that farmer-beneficiaries will fully benefit from RA 11953 or the New Agrarian Emancipation Act, and will not turn out like the Ferdinand Marcos Sr.-era Presidential Decree 27 that further burdened and deprived rice farmers of lands to till. However, only through the legislation of a new and genuine agrarian reform program that puts free land distribution as a central principle will correct the injustices of Marcos Sr.'s PD 27," Ramos said.

Hidden gem

House tax panel chief and Albay Rep. Joey Salceda said on July 7 that exemption from estate tax for agrarian reform beneficiaries is the "hidden gem" of the newly signed law.

Salceda underscored the law provides tax exemption to beneficiaries' transfer of agrarian lands to their heirs.

According to Salceda, one of the

reasons productivity from agrarian lands has "stagnated" is because beneficiaries cannot be transferred to the younger generation of farmers, because of "debts and the attached liens... because of estate tax."

He noted this is "a forward-looking policy that encourages the rise of a new generation of farmers."

"Great policy also looks to the future. It creates a better future. That is what this reform does, by including an estate tax exemption that will allow old farmers to transfer their land to a new generation," he said.

Best, biggest

Federation of Free Workers national treasurer Alfredo Maranan said, "FFW joins farmer groups and other individuals who hail this Act as the Marcos administration's 'best and biggest accomplishment' in its first year."

"The Act promises to financially emancipate the farmers, freeing up resources that can be redirected towards achieving food security, marking a significant step forward in Philippine agriculture," Maranan added.

Jun Ramirez, national vice president of FFW, said, "The government extended help to the billionaires for many years. Now, it's time for the government to assist the poor who are debt-ridden."

He added, "Just as we bailed out

banks and other financial institutions, it is a matter of social justice to assist our farmers and workers who compose the majority of our population. This is emancipation on a massive scale, from the number of beneficiaries to the amount to be condoned."

Gabriela Women's Party Rep. Arlene Brosas lauded the enactment of the New Agrarian Emancipation Act, noting that agriculture has been "paralyzed and impaired by years of liberalization, privatization and deregulation, and is considered as the most underdeveloped sector of our economy."

But Brosas also challenged Marcos to prioritize the creation of a new and genuinely redistributive agrarian reform program to implement the law. She also asked the President to heed the call of the farmers for government support and subsidies.

Senate President Juan Miguel Zubiri also thanked President Marcos for signing a law that will condone farmers' unpaid debt.

"This is good news for our farmers because it will ease the burden from beneficiaries in the payments of their amortization, as they seek to reclaim the land they till," Zubiri said in Filipino.

- With Bella Cariaso, Sheila Crisostomo, Rhodina Villanueva, Marc Jayson Cayabyab



Despite ₱7-B subsidy, NFA's rice buffer stocks short in 2022 – COA

By CZARINA NICOLE ONG-KI

The National Food Authority (NFA) failed to meet the optimum monthly level of national rice buffer stocks of 300,000 metric tons (MT) in 2022, posing a huge risk to the country's food security in cases of calamity and emergency situations, the Commission on Audit (COA) said.

In its audit report, the COA said the government had allotted ₱7 billion subsidy for the rice buffer stocking, which the NFA is in charge under Republic Act No. 11203, the law on Liberalizing the Importation, Exportation and Trading of Rice, Lifting for the Purpose the Quantitative Import Restriction on Rice.

COA said RA 11203 mandates that rice buffer stocking is the "optimal level of rice inventory that shall be maintained at any given time to be used for emergency situations and to sustain the disaster relief programs of the government during natural or man-made calamities."

But it said the NFA's rice inventory for the entire 2022 ranged only from 111,042 MT to 182,612 MT, only good for 3.31 to 5.44 days or below the required nine-day monthly buffer stock.

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poses risk that NFA might not be able to effectively and immediately respond and provide the needs of the beneficiaries all over the country in times of emergency situations, and non-sustenance of the disaster relief programs of the government during natural or man-made calamities," the COA said.

It said that one of the reasons the NFA failed in fulfilling the buffer stocking is the inadequate information dissemination of its palay procurement program.

"The low absorption rate of the NFA on local palay procurement in 2022 could be attributed to inadequate information dissemination, especially in the top three rice producing regions," the COA said.

The three top rice producers are Central Luzon, Cagayan Valley, and Western Visayas with 3.617 million MT, 2.928 million MT, and 2.322 million MT, respectively, it said.

But COA said the NFA only procured 36,877 MT in Central Luzon, 125,496 MT in Cagayan Valley, and 20,550 MT in Western Visayas or only 2.06 percent of the total production of the top three rice producing regions.

"It was also observed that the NFA procured a total of 257,896 bags from only nine out of the 81 provinces that participated in the Palay Marketing Assistance Program for Legislators

and Local Government Units (PALLGU) in 2022," it added.

At the same time, COA pointed out that there were low number of palay-buying stations and limited number of deployed mobile procurement teams to surplus-producing areas during harvest seasons.

One of the proven effective strategies in NFA's procurement of palay is the deployment of mobile procurement teams during harvest season in the top palay-producing regions of the country, because this answers the problem of farmers in transporting their harvest to the NFA, it said.

Sadly, the number of NFA buying stations and mobile procurement teams decreased significantly from 598 in 2020 to just 232 in 2022.

"The deployment of adequate number of mobile palay procurement teams during harvest season may address the shortfall in palay procurement due to decrease in the number of NFA buying stations as this program is more convenient and economical to farmers, especially those in far flung areas," COA said.

The NFA also revoked various incentives to farmers, such as the Cooperative Development Incentive Fund (CDIF), delivery fee, drying fee, and buffer stocking incentive (BSI).

COA lamented that the NFA discontinued these incentives that have boosted the morale of farmers to sell

their harvest to the NFA. "However, these incentives were revoked in the last part of 2019 in view of the increase of the NFA's buying rate of palay from ₱17 per kilogram to ₱19 per kilogram," the COA said.

"The discontinuance of these incentives had somewhat negatively affected the motivation of farmers to sell their harvests to the government, as private traders offer various assistance to farmers, such as, consignment/advance payments, weighing of palay straight from the rice paddy, and free use of post-harvest facilities. As such, farmers preferred to sell their produce to traders despite the higher buying price of the NFA," it added.

The COA recommended that the top management of the NFA ensure the optimum level of national rice buffer stocking at any given time and intensify information dissemination on NFA palay procurement activities, particularly in the biggest producing regions at the start of cropping season.

The COA also asked NFA to increase the number of mobile procurement teams deployed in areas where harvesting is in progress and strengthen its campaign on Palay Marketing Assistance Program for Legislators and Local Government Units (PALLGU) by meeting with legislators and local chief executives.

"The inability to maintain the required optimum level of national rice buffer stocking at any given time



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DA aid for Antique hog raisers sought

The Department of Agriculture (DA) should provide financial assistance to hog raisers affected by the outbreak of African swine fever (ASF) in Antique, Gov. Rhodora Cadio said yesterday.

In a radio interview, Cadio said the provincial government recently released P5 million for affected livestock growers.

"We hope the DA will help us. We don't know the extent (of the ASF outbreak) as it may reach the entire province," she said.

Cadio said P19 million worth of hogs had been culled to prevent the spread of ASF.

"We are waiting for the DA to provide assistance to help hog raisers, especially small backyard hog raisers. They were supposed to save their pigs for the tuition of their children. We need to help the poorest of the poor who only depend on backyard hog raising," she said.

Cadio said she ordered the setting up of checkpoints in all barangays to monitor the entry of pigs and other pork products.

She blamed the spread of ASF in the province to hog raisers who still sell or give away free pork products.

Aside from Antique, the provinces affected by ASF outbreaks in the Visayas are Aklan, Negros Occidental, Negros Oriental, Capiz, Iloilo, Guimaras, Cebu, Leyte, Northern Samar and Southern Leyte.

The Bureau of Animal Industry said Bohol, Siquijor and Biliran remain free from ASF while Eastern Samar has recovered from the swine disease.

- **Bella Cariaso**



Private sector to the rescue

Instead of increasing food production, which seems to have become a pipe dream, maybe our government should start focusing on cutting post-harvest losses in order for the country to attain food self-sufficiency.

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), post-harvest losses cost Filipino farmers billions of pesos every year. In fact, up to half of the loss of root crops and grains is due to bad management after harvest, it said.

A recent newspaper article pointed out that this issue is especially serious in a country where agriculture is one of the primary means of subsistence for many families.

It noted that inadequate post-harvest management results in a significant decrease in the quality and quantity of produce, which has a negative impact on the income of farmers and their families.

The same article explained that lack of infrastructure and technologies for preserving and storing agricultural products is the root cause of post-harvest losses, with insufficient storage facilities, lack of refrigeration systems, and inadequate transportation networks all contributing to the issue.

Just recently, President Marcos ordered the setting up of cold storage

facilities at various fish ports across the country to reduce post-harvest losses, especially after the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources revealed that fish spoilage is between 25 to 40 percent due to lack of facilities like cold storage warehouses.

A study funded by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) also revealed that mango produced in Iloilo and traded in Manila showed the highest post-harvest losses at 33.9 percent while the Pangasinan-Manila route ranked second at 30.85 percent. The Guimaras-Negros Occidental route ranked third at 19.02 percent.

For onions, total post-harvest loss of freshly harvested onions from the farm in Bongabon, Nueva Ecija to the final market in Divisoria, Manila was at 45.06 percent. The estimated volume of post-harvest losses for red onion reached a value of close to P1.96 billion. And to think that we have been importing red onions to fill in the supply-demand gap.

The ADB study said to reduce post-harvest losses in mangoes, onions and tomatoes, there is a need to invest in cold storage and packing facilities, among others.

It is good that the private sector is coming to the rescue.

Last week, the Czark Mac Corp. (CZM) Group of Companies unveiled its P350-million state-of-the-art cold storage facility and ice plant in Murcia, Negros Occidental. It will serve not only the needs of agricultural and other producers in Murcia but also nearby areas in the province such as Bacolod, Bago, Talisay, Silay, Don Salvador Benedicto, among others.

The construction of the cold storage facility is expected to be completed this month, with start of commercial operation scheduled for the third week of July. It will have a capacity of 1,728 pallet positions, with five frozen rooms, two chiller rooms and two blast freezing rooms. The facility, which has been approved by the Board of Investment (BOI) for non-pioneer status registration, offers services that include storage rental, warehouse management, blasting services, and handling and logistics services and will cater to products such as dairy, vegetables, fruits, fishery and poultry.

The Sapporo facility provides both cold storage solutions for blasting and freezing. In addition, it has chillers for agricultural products not required to be stored below zero degree Celsius. The manufacturing activity of Sapporo will supply crystallized tube ice and crushed ice not only to restaurants but also agro-industrial companies engaged in poultry and fisheries.

CZM currently operates a cold storage facility and ice plant in Guiguinto, Bulacan through its unit Acro Ice as well as an ice plant and soon, cold storage in Batangas under another unit, The Service Warehouse.

CZM chairman and president Caesar Wongchuking explained that they have always identified Negros as one of their preferred areas of investments for the company's cold chain portfolio since the region is heavy in agriculture and identified by the current administration as one of the key growth areas.

Sapporo Ice and Cold Storage Co. Inc., he said, is gearing toward Triple A classification from the **National Meat Inspection Service (NMIS)** with its modern facilities and equipment, the same used by its sister company Nordic Atlantic Logistics Inc. which was awarded a Double A classification on its initial operation and is expected to achieve Triple A status upon next inspection.

He noted that their cold storage facility will play a vital role in the preservation of the harvest at the farmer's level, adding that their Murcia facility is strategically located to cater to the farmers in the area and will provide solutions in improving efficiencies and decreasing wastages of the crops.

The CZM Group and its associates are present in Iloilo, Murcia, Malolos in Bulacan and Batangas City for its cold chain business, but they already looking at future sites in Nueva Ecija, Tarlac and Tuguegarao.

During the facility's inauguration last July 1, Negros Occidental Gov. Eugenio Jose Lacson said in an interview that this cold storage facility can help improve the productivity and incomes of farmers and livestock raisers and reduce their dependence on middlemen.

He pointed out that the provincial government can help farmers' associations and cooperatives to this facility where they can store their produce for longer periods of time instead of selling their harvests directly to middlemen at lower prices to reduce the risk of spoilage.

For his part, Murcia Mayor Victor Gerardo Rojas emphasized that the Sapporo cold storage facility is expected to contribute greatly to the economy of the municipality as well as nearby towns since it can serve as an anchor that can attract business locators, especially those that will be needing the services of the facility.

Rojas added that the ice that will be produced by Sapporo's ice plant will definitely be clean and quality ice considering that even before it is filtered in the plant, the water that will be used is already clean as it comes from natural springs. He said that in fact, the water being supplied by the Murcia water district to residential and commercial users does not even have to be filtered since it directly comes from the natural spring.

Also present during the inauguration is Quirino Gov. Dakila Carlo Cua, national president of the Union of Local Authorities of the Philippines (ULAP) and national chairman of the League of Provinces of the Philippines, explained that this new facility established by CZM without a single centavo from the government is very important since it will help boost the income of farmers whose produce can have extended shelf life.

Cua emphasized that the future is really about logistics, even as he noted that the problem of huge post-harvest losses of the agricultural sector due to, among others, lack of adequate cold storage facilities, is something that should be addressed in order to make Philippines products competitive vis-à-vis its neighbors in the region like Vietnam, which is far ahead in terms of agricultural production.

For comments, e-mail at mareyes@philstarmedia.com

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Phl importing another 150,000 MT of sugar in September

By DANESSA RIVERA

The Philippines is set to bring in another 150,000 metric tons of refined sugar by mid-September to address the supply shortfall and ensure stable prices of the sweetener.

President Marcos, as agriculture secretary and Sugar Regulatory Administration (SRA) board chairman, approved Sugar Order 7 (SO7), which calls for the importation of a maximum of 150,000 MT of refined sugar as the second importation program for this year and the third for calendar year (CY) 2022-2023.

It was also signed by Department of Agriculture Senior Undersecretary Domingo Panganiban, acting SRA administrator Pablo Luis Azcona and acting SRA board member-millers' representative Mitzi Mangwag.

The latest importation program will "ensure sufficient actual supply of sugar for domestic consumption, as well as a two-month buffer stock."

"Despite the release of Sugar Order 6 import program Series of 2022-2023, the further reduction of sugar production volume for Crop Year 2022-2023 is forecasted due to early start and early end of milling; and in anticipation of the possible shortfall of supply, and to bridge the gap between the supply and the demand, the SRA finds it imperative to open a second import program to address the demand for CY 2022-2023," the order read.

Issued last February as the first importation program this year, SO6 permitted the importation of 440,000 MT to augment supply and arrest rising retail prices of sugar.

Refined sugar imported under SO7 will be for the consumption of institutional users, retailers, wholesalers, traders and manufacturers/industrial users.

In the latest import order, the SRA board will set and approve the volume allocated to an eligible importer.

Apart from documentary requirements, an eligible importer shall purchase or shall have purchased this crop year an equal volume of locally produced refined sugar as the volume of imported sugar that may be allocated to it under SO7.

"Should the Eligible Importer purchase or has purchased for CY 2022-2023 locally produced raw sugar, the conversion shall be on a 1:1.2 basis. The deadline for the purchase of locally produced refined/raw sugar shall be on Aug. 31, 2024," the order said.

Once in the country, these imports shall be classified as C, or reserve sugar, which will be reclassified as needed by the SRA.

"Only after approval from SRA Board has been obtained can the stocks be released from SRA registered warehouses or from the vessel, for sale to the domestic market," the order read.

Earlier, Azcona said the country's refined sugar production is estimated to be lower by 100,000 metric tons this crop year due to early milling ahead of the usual September start and weather disturbances.

"We are at around 640,000 MT (in refined sugar production), but refineries have ended and we're still far from the 750,000 MT produced last year," he said.

As of June 25, refined sugar production was at 640,908 MT, down 10.99 percent from 720,062.55 MT produced a year earlier.

Based on DA's latest monitoring in Metro Manila wet markets, refined sugar retails at P86-110 per kilo while raw sugar is sold at P78-90 per kilo as of yesterday.

A year earlier, refined sugar retailed at P85 per kilo while raw sugar was sold at P70 per kilo.

In a statement, the National Federation of Sugarcane Producers (NFSP) is requesting the SRA for a calibrated release of additional volume of sugar.

According to SRA, the 150,000 MT additional importation is intended as buffer stock before all mills start their milling operations, NFSP president Enrique Rojas said.

With sugar mills in the country presumably to start producing sugar by Sept. 1, Rojas, however, said not all of them will start milling simultaneously.

He stressed that it takes about two weeks for millgate sugar to reach the shelves of most retail outlets and to consumers. — With Gilbert Bayoran



Demand for chicken, egg drops further

By BELLA CARIASO

The demand for chicken and eggs further dropped amid the spike in retail prices of rice as consumers are forced to prioritize procuring the staple instead of meat products, United Broiler Raisers Association chairman and Philippine Egg Board chairman Gregorio San Diego said.

In an interview yesterday with **The STAR**, San Diego said there is oversupply of chickens and eggs in farms because of low demand.

"Rice is the staple food. From P36 (per kilo) the retail price of rice is now at P41 (per kilo). With a limited budget, consumers will lessen their budget for meat, as rice is more important. It really affected us," San Diego said.

Based on latest monitoring of the retail price, local regular milled rice is sold as high as P42 per kilo; local well-milled rice, P46 per kilo; local premium rice, P50 per kilo and local special rice, P60 per kilo.

The Philippine Statistics Authority has said that the retail price of rice is on the upward trend since April.

"We are a rice-eating country. Even if you have no other food, what is important is you have rice, that's the belief of Filipinos," San Diego added.

San Diego said retail prices of chickens and eggs remain high despite low farmgate prices of chicken and egg.

"The farmgate price of chicken is only P102 (per kilo) and the highest is P109 (per kilo) but the retail price

reached P200 (per kilo) and the choice cuts, P210 per kilo," he noted.

According to San Diego, vendors sell chickens and eggs at high prices to ensure revenues amid the low demand in markets.

He said that eggs are sold as high as P9 to P10 per piece despite the farmgate price of eggs being sold at a low of P4 per piece.

"Many markets ordered less eggs because of low demand from customers," he noted.

Department of Agriculture Assistant Secretary and spokesperson Kristine Evangelista has said that traders complained that the volume of pork being procured by vendors from them was slashed by half.

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FISHERIES BUREAU TOUTS TOP AUDIT MARKS

The Department of Agriculture-Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (DA-BFAR) on Friday said it maintained its "unqualified opinion" rating from the Commission on Audit (COA) in 2022, owing to the agency's "excellence and integrity" in managing its funds.

An "unqualified opinion," deemed the highest audit rating by agencies, is issued when the state auditor finds that a government office's financial statements are prepared "in accordance with the applicable financial reporting framework."

"It will inspire us to work tirelessly toward good gover-

nance, transparency and accountability," BFAR National Director Demosthenes Escoto said of the COA rating.

According to BFAR, this was a significant improvement from the COA's audit report in 2021, in which only the BFAR central office was given an unqualified opinion.

In its report, the COA noted that the audit presented by the agency was "sufficient and appropriate."

Among the government offices that received the same rating are Pag-Ibig Fund and the Metropolitan Manila Development Authority. —MEG J.

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NWRB to cut MWSS, NIA water allocations if Angat Dam level falls below 180 meters

The National Water Resources Board (NWRB) said on Friday, July 7, that it will reduce the water allocations for the Metropolitan Waterworks and Sewerage System (MWSS) and **National Irrigation Administration (NIA)** this month if the minimum water level at Angat Dam continues to drop.

In a statement, the NWRB said that the water allocation for MWSS will be lessened to 48 cubic meters per second (cms) while the irrigation allocation for NIA will be 20 cms until the end of July if the water level at Angat Dam falls below its minimum operating level of ► **5**

180 meters.

This is a notable reduction from the current 50 cms water allocation for MWSS and 28.5 cms for NIA as the country prepares for the negative impacts of El Niño, which are expected to be felt toward the final quarter of 2023 up to the first quarter of 2024.

As of 6 a.m. Friday, the water level at Angat Dam was at 180.45 meters.

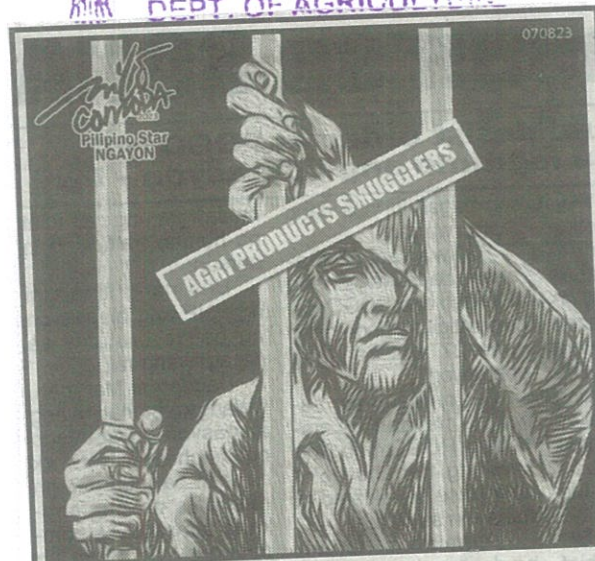
The NWRB emphasized the importance of water conservation measures during this "critical period."

"It is crucial for residents, businesses, and institutions to remain vigilant and actively participate in efforts to conserve water resources," the NWRB said. "Implementing water-saving practices such as rainwater harvesting, reducing consumption, fixing leaks promptly, and optimizing irrigation systems can significantly contribute to mitigating the impacts of the El Niño," it added. (Nicole Magmanlac)

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Editorial

Sampolan ang agri smugglers

HANGGAT walang nakakasuhan at naipakukulong na agri smugglers ang kasalukuyang administrasyon, ang pangako ukol sa food sufficiency, pagpapayabong sa sariling ani at magandang kinabukasan ng mga magsasaka ay hindi magkakaroon ng katuparan. Kahit pa buong termino ni President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. na pamunuan ang Department of Agriculture, wala ring mangyayari. Pawang pangako lang at walang mangyayaring pag-unlad. Ang mga agri smugglers at mga nagpuprotekta sa kanila ang mabubundat sa dami ng pakinabang. Maiwan ang mga kawawang magsasaka na nasagasaan ng talamak na smuggling. Kawawang lalo ang mamamayan na hindi na matitikman ang sinasabing murang bigas. Pinangako ni Marcos ang P20 per kilo ng bigas. Hindi pa ito natutupad. Nasa P30 hanggang P40 ang murang bigas sa pamilihan at may posibilidad na tumaas pa sa darating na buwan.

Pinamunuan ni Marcos Jr. ang DA noong Hunyo 1, 2022 para raw magabayan nang husto ang departamento na matagal na napabayaang ng mga nakaraang administrasyon. Nangako ng pagkakaroon nang sapat na pagkain at tulong sa mga magsasaka. Magkakaroon ng farm-to-market road para madaling mailuwas ang ani. Makabagong teknolohiya ang ipakikilala para magkaroon nang saganang ani. Sa pamamagitan daw ng mga ito, hindi na aangkat ng bigas ang Pilipinas. Nasabi minsan ng presidente na masakit sa kanyang kalooban na umangkat ng bigas at iba pang agri products.

Makalipas ang isang taon, patuloy pa rin sa pag-angkat ng agri products ang bansa. Hindi lamang bigas ang inaangkat kundi asukal, sibuyas, galunggong, karneng baboy at iba pa.

Habang patuloy sa pag-angkat, bumabaha naman ang smuggled agri products. Dagsa ang sibuyas at asukal na nagdadaan pa mismo sa bakuran ng Bureau of Customs. Kung saan-saang port nagdadaan ang mga smuggled agri products na pumapatay sa mga lokal na magsasaka.

Noong nakaraang taon, P30 bilyon ang nawala sa kaban ng bansa dahil sa talamak na smuggling ng agri products. Ngayong taon, tiyak na mas malaki pa ang mawawala sa pamahalaan dahil sa patuloy na pagdagsa ng smuggled agri products.

Mayroong Anti-Agricultural Smuggling Act na inakda noong 2016 pero inutil ang batas sapagkat hanggang ngayon, wala ni isa mang agri smugglers na nakakasuhan at nakakalaboso. Pawang pag-iimbestiga lang ang nangyayari at walang kinahihinatnan.

Noong nakaraang linggo, inatasan ni Marcos ang NBI at DOJ na tugisin ang smugglers ng sibuyas at iba pang agri products. Bakit ngayon lang? Kailangang may masampolan na sa smugglers. Dapat may maitapon na sa kulungan!

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66 lugar sa bansa tatamaan ng El Niño

Tatamaan ang nasa 66 na lugar sa bansa ang maaaring makaranas ng dry condition, dry spell at tagtuyot hanggang sa katapusan ng taon dahil sa El Niño.

Sa advisory ng Department of Agriculture-Division of Risk Reduction and Management Section (DA-DRRMC), 28 lugar sa bansa ang maaaring makaranas ng dry condition — tatlo sa Luzon, lima sa Visayas at 20 sa Mindanao.

Samantala, nagbaba-

dya ang dry spell sa 36 na lugar — 32 sa Luzon at apat sa Visayas.

Maaaring makaranas ng tagtuyot ang mga lalawigan ng Camarines Norte at Southern Leyte.

Ang dry spell ay tinukoy bilang tatlong magkakasunod na buwan ng mas mababa sa normal na kondisyon ng pag-ulan (21-60 porsiyentong pagbawas mula sa average na pag-ulan) habang ang dry condition ay dalawang

magkasunod na buwan ng mas mababa sa normal na kondisyon ng ulan (21-60% na pagbawas mula sa average na pag-ulan).

Ang tagtuyot ay tatlong magkakasunod na buwan na mas mababa sa normal na pag-ulan (60% pagbawas mula sa karaniwang pag-ulan).

Nitong Hulyo 4, itinaas ng PAGASA sa El Niño Advisory ang Alert and Warning System mula sa El Niño Alert. (Angie dela Cruz)