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LUNCH WITH THE PRESIDENT

Agriculture, service, sustainability, tourism, healthcare on the menu

By PHILIP CU UNJIENG

A lunch at Bahay Pangulo was the opportunity for an exclusive interview with President Bongbong Marcos (PBBM). The relaxed atmosphere led to lively conversation about plans “beyond-SONA” and beyond-the-statesman image.

I forewarned him that my intent was to offer our Manila Bulletin readers a more personal glimpse into his life, and what his one year in office has been like. In response, he arched one eyebrow, which I conveniently ignored.

It’s been observed that since he assumed office, there’s been dignity and decorum that have been established as benchmarks of what we can expect from his administration. His frequent state visits and trips abroad have maintained these exacting standards, and they’ve been instrumental in casting our nation in a new, enhanced light.

But detractors would ► **9**



Lunch with the President: Agriculture, service, sustainability, tourism, healthcare on the menu 1◀

comment that this is more about style and image, questioning the substance and accomplishments of his first year. We would touch on this, and numerous other topics in the free-wheeling discussion. If there's one statement to highlight, it would be how he said, "After one year, it's time to really buckle down, no more Mr. Nice Guy."

In response to a question about how he would grade his first year, our President was previously tough on himself, and disarmingly said that he would grade himself an "Incomplete".

"I was referring specifically to my stint as Department of Agriculture Secretary. The value chain we were trying to establish, the timetable that was affected by the global situation – it's all added up to how there's still so much to do in the agricultural sector – and I'm the first to admit that."

As concurrent Agriculture Secretary, the President elaborates: "Just recently, the DA had a meeting with the rice industry, and we discussed the effects of El Niño, and it looks like our supply is secure in the months to come. Hopefully, no need to import, but we will also be pragmatic as the need arises."

Talented youth

Speaking of the youth, PBBM talks about talent in the agriculture sector: "I'm very encouraged by the great talent in Agriculture that we have at UP Los Baños and other agri universities. If it's about addressing climate change, adapting new technology, and R&D, it's the younger people pushing this forward—the ones optimizing and modernizing production. improv-

ing yields. And if the private sector will get behind this, help fund the scaling, and bringing to market, that all this R&D requires... "And we both smile, thinking of the what-could-be, how important this all is for both food security and nutrition.

On sustainability

We shift to his second State of the Nation Address (SONA) and the strong statements made to guide future programs. I've spoken to a few city and town mayors who were encouraged by the President's message on Sustainability and the circular economy.

I ask if there are specific departments he expects to champion these concepts, and he corrects me: "It's everyone, not just the DENR or DOT, it's should be the DTI, the BOI, all departments and agencies; working together cohesively to make this national policy. I want a timetable for realizing Sustainability goals; creating significant structural and cultural changes, so that circularity is maximized.

"This will benefit everyone, production costs are lowered, we minimize resources needed to produce; and we can't be thinking short term solutions, or stopgap band-aid remedies. And I'm fully aware that as we set these things in motion, the true benefits may be felt after my term; but so be it, and that's fine. This is our future we're talking about."

'No longer time for Mr. Nice Guy'

It's at this point that I ask our President if he's been so tough on grading himself, what standard will he employ for those in the Cabinet

and branches of the government. This has been another criticism thrown his way in the course of Year One; that he's too kind, doesn't make the tough decisions, and demand more from the people he's appointed. He tersely grins: "After a full year ... no more Mr. Nice Guy."

While he's been consistent projecting coolness and a calm demeanor, he waxes philosophically about the frustrations he's had to encounter over the last year.

It's this attitude of how the kneejerk reaction is always 'no'. How a million reasons for why it can't be done is the immediate litany of excuses, instead of finding the creative solution. And this is why in the SONA, I particularly mentioned that there are so many brilliant young people in government service today. These are not the ones you'll see in photographs or heading the agencies. These are the regular staffers, the ones tirelessly committed to public service, with fiery idealism. I don't want to snuff out their fervor; but want to inspire them to keep the course, and do even more.

Trust the system

"I want them to trust in the system, that there is a rewarding career path based on merit and excellence. It begs the question we often hear about why do Filipinos excel abroad, but can't replicate that here at home. This has to be corrected!

"I've always been a believer of the system over personality. Like when it comes to typhoon and natural disasters, I'm fine showing up; but I don't want them to think that relief efforts

and funds only arrive along with me. The system should work so it's not just about me; and the assistance will arrive even if I don't physically show up. This is about how a working system is in place, one that supersedes individuals."

On healthcare

I mention that nurses who have passed the board exams are being offered a \$25,000 signing bonus to work in Switzerland. The President shares a discussion with Health Secretary Ted Herbosa:

"If we can't keep our qualified personnel from seeking greener pastures abroad, the least we can do is work out an arrangement with that country so there's some exchange program of training. They implicitly recognize the value of the training we give our nurses, so let's have them sending their candidates for nursing to be taking courses here. Just earlier today, we touched on this with Senator Tammy Duckworth of Illinois."

The family

On the lighter side, we talk about his three sons. "What's funny to observe is how given that all three had pretty much the same kind of upbringing, they're such polar opposites, each with a distinct personality. That puts to shame that whole nature-nurture philosophy!"

"Sandro is his mom, and when you look closer, it's more his mom," he said sharing a story of a family photo which elicited comments of 'Why did you put Sandro in a dress?' When the truth is, that photo is of Liza as a child.

"Sandro is the sociable one, and he's into house music. Simon is into the blues, he's not gregarious, more private, and I see more of me in Simon. Vincent is the 'bunso', and as the youngest, has a little of each of his

brothers. He's into surfing."

World leaders and friends

Asking our President if there's a particular world leader he feels closest to, he's quick to say Prime Minister Anwar bin Ibrahim of Malaysia. "Our friendship goes way back, and when he just got out of detention, we got together. One of the nice surprises I discovered is how he's a real Jose Rizal aficionado; and has even conducted a lecture series on Rizal."

"The other world leader I've become close to is former Prime Minister Tony Blair. I met him through JAZA (Jaime Augusto Zobel de Ayala). He's such an astute observer of global politics, has great connections, and is so willing to share."

The First Lady

My last question was loaded. I preface it by mentioning that he has to admit he had the 'fama' of once being a party boy. What was it in Liza that had him turning his back completely on that kind of life.

He was quick to respond.

"Liza was not like any other girl I had ever met. It was in New York, during my mom's trial, and she was practicing law, and we had a common friend. She's always been this intriguing, fascinating person for me; and I know she'll hate me for saying this, but I think I've semi-figured her out now."

I offer him my observation that I've always seen her as the yin to his yang – that if he was more about vision and direction, she would be about execution and finding the best way to make it happen.

The President thinks about this, and agrees, saying they do complement each other in a way that inexplicably works, and that he loves how they always have each other's backs.



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PhilFIDA revitalizes silk farming tradition

By DANESSA RIVERA

The **Philippine Fiber Industry Development Authority (PhilFIDA)** is revitalizing the rich tradition of sericulture in the country by boosting Cagayan's traditional craft.

Sericulture is the process of cultivating silkworms for the production of raw silk, a raw material for various clothes such as Barong Tagalog and other world-class silk products.

PhilFIDA has implemented the P3.1 million Claveria Silk Project to develop a two-hectare farmland and sericulture training center in Barangay Culao in Claveria, Cagayan.

It has turned over mulberry plantations, rearing houses, a cocoon processing center, and a silk processing and weaving center to the local government unit of Claveria last month.

Mulberry leaf is an exclusive food for silkworms to produce cocoons which will be converted into silk.

The project is targeting the 66 farmers engaged in sericulture to help uplift the community and preserve traditional craftsmanship.

PhilFIDA said the Claveria Silk Project is a testament to the resilience and ingenuity of the local community.

"By embracing sustainable practices and promoting sericulture as a hallmark product of the region, Claveria aims to become a hub of silk production, drawing both local and international tourists," it said.

Meanwhile, PhilFIDA is also implementing initiatives in cultivating abaca within Claveria to boost the region's economic growth and environmental sustainability.



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100 M NEW TREES

Phl seeks to reclaim status as world's top coconut market

By **DANESSA RIVERA**

The **Philippine Coconut Authority (PCA)** is targeting to plant 100 million trees in open areas in Mindanao and where indigenous peoples live to reclaim the country's leading position in the global coconut market.

"The PCA intends to go all out on the planting program more than ever before because we used to have a limited planting target," PCA deputy administrator Roel Rosales in a briefing Friday.

Rosales said Mindanao has a lot of areas there that can be utilized for coconut planting while the PCA will work with indigenous peoples' groups "because they also have a lot of open areas."

"We are very particular that we do not cut forest trees to give way to coconut trees nor do we allow that young

coconuts are cut in favor of a certain variety," he added.

According to Rosales, the Philippines used to be the top producer of coconuts worldwide.

However, Indonesia then India have overtaken the country, which now fell to the third spot.

"That somehow threatens the position of the Philippines in the international market," the PCA official said

Data from the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) showed coconut production remained steady at the 14 million metric tons (MT) in the past three years.

In 2021, Indonesia was the world's largest producer of coconut at 17.1 million MT followed by India at 15.7 million MT and the Philippines at 14.7 million MT.

While the Philippines still

remains as the top coconut oil exporter in the world, Rosales said Indonesia is fast catching up.

In the past decades, the agency said coconut exports contributed an annual average of 35 percent to the country's total agricultural exports.

Last year, coconut exports amounted to \$3.2 billion, accounting for 43 percent of the country's total agricultural exports.

But recent PCA data showed the volume and value of country's coconut exports declined sharply from January to February this year as compared to the same period last year.

Rosales said demand for Philippine coconut oil has softened amid global issues, calamities and the release of Indonesia's palm oil supply, which is a major competitor

of coconut oil.

To push for planting, the PCA is working closely and directly with accredited farmers' organizations through the Sagip Saka Law.

"In this case, government agencies are allowed to work closely, directly with farmers organization that are accredited to be able to provide the inputs for the productivity program. But there are very stringent rules that govern us also. It's not something that you freely work with farmers," Rosales said, noting government has to follow the Government Procurement Reform Act.

"We need to plant more and actually more than planting also, we need to fertilize our coconut so that productivity on a per hectare basis can be increased in a quick turnaround way with planting first," he said.



SENSES OF THE SEA: A SARDINES MUSEUM

The ubiquitous canned sardines, a staple in Pinoy households, gets the spotlight in a center showcasing how it ends hunger, feeds the mind.

By RODERICK L. ABAD

Photos by Bernard Testa

SARDINES are among the precious sea treasures of the Philippines. Their abundance makes them a vital source of healthy and affordable protein, which is not only good for the empty stomach, especially of poor Filipinos, but also for the brain to function well.

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"Humans have consumed sardines for hundreds of years," Vice President Sara Z. Duterte said in her message for the recent opening of the Senses of the Sea: The Mega Sardines Museum of the Mega Prime Foods Inc. (MPFI) in Santo Tomas, Batangas. "[It's] a staple in every Filipino household."

dried or smoked, majority of the populace never fail to turn to them as their "comfort food" at all times through thick and thin. No wonder they are a staple in the pantry for regular consumption and even in relief packs given away in case of a disaster or emergency.

Since time immemorial, the sardine industry has mostly con-



BATANGAS Governor Hermilando I. Mandanas cuts the ceremonial ribbon opening the Senses of the Sea: The Mega Sardines Museum, with Mega Prime Foods officers, including Marvin Tiu Lim, Chief Growth and Development Officer; CEO Michelle Tiu Lim-Chan and founder William Tiu Lim, Department of Tourism Region 4A Director Marites Castro and PAEC President & CEO Lance Tan in their new plant in Santo Tomas, Batangas.

tributed to the country's agri-fisheries sector. It has supplied not just quality and budget-friendly food to the people, but also generated livelihood to fisherfolk and profits and jobs to manufacturers and their workers.

However, the national output has started to dwindle due to several factors, like illicit, unreported and uncontrolled fishing, as well as climate change and some environmental threats, among others.

By the numbers

ACCORDING to a report published by the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF) Oceans on June 8, the average sardine production in the Philippines topped 358,000 tons from 2018 to 2022.

The Department of Agriculture-Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (DA-BFAR) revealed in the first-ever National Sardines Management Plan 2020-2025 that sardines account for about 15 percent of total fish

catch—of which 68 percent come from the commercial fisheries industry, while 32 percent are from the municipal fisheries sector.

Zamboanga Peninsula accounts for the largest sardine production, contributing 60 percent to the national output. Other sardine-producing areas are Bicol, Palawan, the Visayan Sea, Samar, Iloilo, Cebu and Masbate.

MPFI, the maker of Mega Sardines, for instance, has a daily requirement of about 450 tons of

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MEGA Prime Foods founder William Tiu Lim and wife Marylou

this small, near-shore species a day. Overall, the company produces almost three million cans of it a day. Its Batangas plant alone has a production capacity of around 600,000 cans daily.

"We and the fishermen really have to work hard every day to bring the fish so we can produce canned sardines in order to feed [the] Filipino people," MPFI Chief Spiritual and People Officer Mark Tiu-Lim told reporters in a recent briefing.

As one of the biggest producers of canned sardines worldwide, the Philippines generated an average annual value of P10.45 billion from 2018 to 2022, per food advocacy group Tugon Kabuhayan convener Asis G. Perez.

While the domestic preserved sardines market grew by 7.1 percent last year compared to 2021, consumption was relatively flat, based on the IndexBox Platform study released on August 1.

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Looming shortage

OVER time, the volume of sardines fished out of the Philippine waters has declined, with catches at present comparatively just a fraction of their previous levels, mainly due to climate change. Hence, a shortage is highly anticipated in the near future.

In fact, fishing boats in the country now catch only 20 percent to 40 percent of the previous past, Tuna Cannery Association of the Philippines Executive Director Francisco J. Buencamino bared in a virtual forum late last year. He attributed this to the tendency of epipelagic fish like sardines to move to safer areas in order to survive amid the changing weather patterns.

With this in mind, he suggested that large-scale fishing activities be allowed in a catch area of 10.1 kilometers from shore and outward, which are identified as municipal waters.

Commercial fishing vessels with a weight of at least 3.1 gross tons are allowed outside the 15-km municipal waters, under the Fisheries Code of 1998. Annually, the fishing season in the Zamboanga Peninsula is closed from December 1 to February 28 to enable the sardines to reproduce.

In his second State of the Nation Address, President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. asked Congress to amend the Fisheries Code to ensure sustainable fishing in the country. Nevertheless, small fishermen re-



Marvin Tiu Lim, MEGA Prime Foods Chief Growth and Development Officer; CEO Michelle Tiu Lim-Chan; Batangas Governor Hermilando I. Mandanas; founder William Tiu Lim; Malcolm Tiu Lim, Chief Technical and Innovations Officer; and Michael Tiu Lim, VP for Business Development.



jected this proposed amendment, saying this will favor only the big fishing companies.

"In terms of our own experience, yes, there's more fish in between those kilometer-radius. But we're still waiting for a Science-based research from BFAR," MPFI Chief Technical and Innovations Officer Malcolm Tiu Lim admitted.

"Right now, we are strictly monitoring and strictly abiding by the Fisheries Law. So we support the government. We will support the President whatever he thinks...the fisheries need. But I'm sure that, of course, he will also be fair to all businesses and also the consumers. So we trust in his de-

cision," added MPFI President and CEO Michelle Tiu Lim-Chan.

Feeding the minds

BEYOND its objective to provide food to the Filipino people, MPFI has embarked on another mission to feed people's minds with the unveiling of its state-of-the-art educational tour facility at its newest manufacturing plant in Santo Tomas, Batangas.

The Senses of the Sea: The Mega Sardines Museum is the first of its kind in a canned seafood manufacturing company that showcases the firm's unique "Catching-to-Canning" process. This represents the company's role as a government partner in educating students of all ages by showcasing their best practices and innovations in the canned sardines production that are pivotal in feeding the Filipino nation.

"We believe that The Mega Sardines Museum offers experiential learnings to the students—lessons of which can become a core memory that simply cannot be found in textbooks and theories," the president and CEO said.

"We also hope to demonstrate how important it is for us to be able to produce affordable, nutritious and safely packaged seafood products that are suitable for every member of the Filipino family. It's our simple contribution to the country's pursuit of self-sufficiency in food production, as well as to reduce our reliance on imports."

Housed within MPFI's newest manufacturing facility in Santo Tomas, Batangas, the 906-square-meter museum offers the following marine-themed spaces that provide highly interactive and learning experience for its guests and visitors: Briefing Room, Sardine Catching Room, Production Viewing Deck, Mega Fleet of Vessels, Sardines Canning Room, and the Seaside Market.

For MPFI Chief Growth and Development Officer Marvin Tiu Lim, this is an ambitious project such that they partnered with the Philippine Amusement and Entertainment Corp. (PAEC), the biggest creator and operator of indoor interactive tourism and educational attractions in the country.

"It's a multimillion investment," he revealed, without citing the exact amount they spent. "Actually, there's no return on investment because we will not sell tickets. It's nonprofit. It's for free care of our [partner] agency, which is the PAEC."

When the museum initially opens on September 1, the top



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executive said they will focus on catering first to students as young as Grade 1 to high school levels. "If we can satisfy the total demand for the students, we will definitely open it [to the general public]."

MPFI put up this pioneering attraction with the end goal of stimulating growth in the economy of Batangas province and the rest of the Calabarzon Region (Cavite, Laguna, Rizal and Quezon) as it boosts the tourism landscape that trickles down to jobs generation and development of domestic enterprises.

"Seen to attract up to 5,000 guests per month, the tour is bound to boost the local tourism of Santo Tomas, Batangas, with the presence of guests from educational and business institutions taking interest in the process of food production," Tiu Lim-Chan said.

Batangas Governor Hermilando Mandanas lauded the Tiu family for establishing not only a manufacturing plant but also a new tourism attraction for the province.

He said: "We are very fortunate to have you operate here. The museum is a very concrete evidence or example of what could be done [more here. It's] now a very bigger part of [our achievements.] The Department of Trade and Industry has already designated Batangas as the 'Asean Logistics Hub' and the Department of Agriculture has designated it as the 'Gateway for the Agro Industrial Business Corridor.'"

For Department of Tourism (DOT)-Calabarzon Regional Director Marites Castro, the Senses of the Sea will help strengthen the province's constant leadership in the tourism industry. In fact, she revealed to the *BusinessMirror* that Batangas is now ranked No. 1 when it comes to overnight visi-

tors—reaching 1,258,609—and No. 2 in same-day tourist arrivals at 3,613,656 in the entire Calabarzon Region as of June 2023.

With this in mind, MPFI signed a partnership with the Department of Tourism Region IV-A, which elaborates the agency's endorsement of the museum to be included in the promotions of tourism in Southern Tagalog.

Through this collaboration, the museum will be included on the list of must-visit locations in the province and recommended to become part of educational tours for students.

"This one-of-a-kind tourist destination in Santo Tomas, Batangas, not only showcases world-class food production processes but also promotes marine conservation and cultural heritage, contributing significantly to the economic growth and development of the entire Calabarzon region," Castro pointed out.

The ceremonial opening event, likewise, witnessed the official execution of MPFI's tie-up with PAEC that will help curate and manage the museum. Such collaboration will strengthen their support to the K-to-12 basic education and Matatag Agenda of the Department of Education as well as the DOT's newest "Love the Philippines" campaign.

"Here in our new plant, we make sure that early on, as young as they are [student-visitors], we can educate them on the humbling process of how to make a sardine can which can feed up to five or six people in a family. It's only P22, so it's a really humble product—very affordable that we have to make sure that the future generations really respect and care for it as well," Marvin Tiu Lim stressed.

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Bohol pork ban: Village chief faces raps

A complaint was filed on Friday against a barangay captain and his wife in Tubigon, Bohol for bringing pork products from Cebu.

Provincial legal officer Handel Lagunay and provincial veterinarian Stella Marie Lapiz filed the complaint against Epifanio Balbin of Barangay Centro and his wife Sol before the Municipal Circuit Trial Court.

Provincial quarantine officer Maria Abisado said two boxes of pork products were confiscated from the couple.

The two reportedly

brought *chorizo*, pork blood, pork chop and pork *mascara* from Mandaue City to Tubigon port on board *M/V Lite Ferry 23* on June 13.

Balbin reportedly refused to sign a notice of violation and pay a fine of P1,000.

Bohol Gov. Aris Aumentado ordered a ban on the entry of hogs and pork products from Cebu in March after the province reported its first case of African swine fever (ASF) in Carcar City.

Bohol logged its first case of ASF in Barangay San Vicente in Pilar town last week. — Ric Obedencio



El Niño's impact on food, health, economy – experts

PARIS: The El Niño weather phenomenon is just warming up, according to scientists, potentially paving the way for higher temperatures and extreme weather events in a year that has already seen plenty of both.

The first El Niño in years began last month, according to the World Meteorological Organization.

The naturally occurring warming of temperatures in the Pacific Ocean typically lasts between nine and 12 months, and is expected to become stronger toward the end of the year.

Scientists have warned the impacts of El Niño — combined with human-induced global warming — will likely stretch beyond the weather.

Disease

Vector-borne diseases, such as malaria and dengue, have been shown to expand their range as temperatures rise.

Scientists warned that El Niño, coming in addition to already dire global warming, could make the situation worse.

"We can see from previous El Niños that we get increases and outbreaks of a wide range of vector-borne and other infectious diseases around the tropics, in the area that we know is most

affected by El Niño," Madeleine Thomson, head of climate impacts at the Wellcome Trust charity, told journalists on Thursday.

The rise stems from two effects of El Niño: unusual rainfall that increases breeding sites for transmitters such as mosquitoes, and higher temperatures that speed up transmission rates of various infectious diseases.

An El Niño in 1998 was linked to a major malaria epidemic in the Kenyan Highlands.

Health

It is difficult to calculate exactly how much El Niño contributes to extreme weather events such as wildfires.

But heat waves themselves pose a significant danger to health.

"It's sometimes named 'the silent killer' because you don't necessarily see it as a threat," said Gregory Wellenius, head of a climate and health center at Boston University.

"But heat waves, in fact, kill

more people than any other type of severe weather event."

More than 61,000 people are estimated to have died due to the heat in Europe alone last summer — when there was no El Niño.

And July 2023 has now been confirmed as the hottest month in recorded history.

Food security

"In an El Niño year, there are countries where the chances of having a bad harvest increase, for example in South and Southeast Asia," said Walter Baethgen of the International Research Institute for Climate and Society.

Last month, India, the largest rice exporter in the world, restricted its exports due to crop damage from irregular monsoon rains.

According to the researchers, such actions have the potential for dire consequences for countries dependent on exports, such as Syria and Indonesia, that could face a "triple challenge" during El Niño.

"The rice harvest in those countries may be lower than normal, the rice trade may be more difficult or less accessible in the international market, and because of that, the price of rice will be high," said Baethgen.

"This combination of factors

pretty rapidly affects the food insecurity problems," he added.

Economic growth

The Panama Canal is central to global trade routes, but last week the passageway announced that low rainfall — which meteorologists said was exacerbated by El Niño — forced operators to restrict traffic, resulting in an expected \$200 million drop in earnings.

The sidelined ships are just one example of how El Niño can hurt the global economy.

A study published in the journal Science in May estimated that past El Niños cost the global economy more than \$4 trillion in the years that followed them.

Impacts from both El Niño and global warming were "projected to cause \$84 trillion in 21st-century economic losses," it said.

However, researchers at Oxford Economics have argued against these projections, calling El Niño a "new risk but not a game changer."

The costs may remain unclear, but the scientists hope the predictability of El Niño will improve preparedness for the challenges ahead posed by a warming world.

"Preparation is much more effective than emergency responses," Wellenius said.

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How El Niño could impact health, food, and the economy

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The first El Niño in years began last month, according to the World Meteorological Organization.

The naturally occurring warming of temperatures in the Pacific Ocean typically lasts between nine to 12 months, and is expected become stronger towards the end of the year.

Scientists have warned the impacts ► **5**



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How El Niño could impact health, food, and the economy 1

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