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*Photo: NMIS*  
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## Marcos sees palay output rise keeping supply of rice ample until end of year

**PRESIDENT** Ferdinand R. Marcos, Jr., said that the 3% increase in palay production in the first half will ensure adequate stocks of rice until the end of the year.

In a statement released by the Presidential Communications Office (PCO), Mr. Marcos, who is also the Secretary of Agriculture, made his remarks after hearing a presentation at a meeting with the Economic Development Group.

Citing the production report issued by the Philippine Statistics Authority, Agriculture Undersecretary Domingo F. Panganiban said produc-

tion of palay, or unmilled rice, was 9 million metric tons (MT) during the period, up from 8.7 million MT a year earlier.

The first-half total exceeded the initial estimate of 8.7 million MT released by the Philippine Rice Information System.

Agriculture Undersecretary Leocadio S. Sebastian said that the palay volume translates to about 5.9 million MT in milled rice, which exceeds the initial projection of 5.7 million MT.

"With the 3% production growth in the first semester, we can expect that, barring the occurrence of de-

structive typhoons, the production for 2023 could surpass 20 million MT," Mr. Sebastian said.

He expected the rice production to be encouraged by strong palay prices. Farmers are also benefiting from seed, fertilizer, biofertilizer, soil treatments, and farm machinery supplied by the Department of Agriculture.

Meanwhile, the PCO said private rice traders expect about 300,000 MT of rice to arrive this month.

About 2.05 million MT has been landed as of the first week of August, the PCO said. — **Sheldeen Joy Talavera**





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## Marcos welcomes 3% increase in rice output

By JEL SANTOS

**P**resident Marcos on Tuesday, Aug. 15, welcomed the three-percent rice production growth of the country from January to June this year, calling it an "excellent news."

The chief executive, who is Agriculture secretary in concurrent capacity, was referring to the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) report stating that rice output from January to June 2023 went up to nine million metric tons (MT), from 8.7 million MT produced for the same period last year and in 2021.

Marcos learned about this from Department of Agriculture (DA) Undersecretary Domingo Panganiban during his recent meeting with the Economic Development Group.

According to Marcos, the figure is even higher than what the DA had earlier projected.

The higher production figure, he said, is a big boost to the country's

rice supply which is sufficient until the end of the year even with the impact of super typhoon Egay.

As such, it is worth noting that the PSA report is also greater than the PRISM (Philippine Rice Information System) estimate of 8.7 MMT (300,000 MT more) which the DA had earlier utilized in its rice supply outlook.

For his part, DA Undersecretary for Rice Industry Development Leocadio Sebastian said the nine million MT "palay" is equivalent to 5.9 million MT milled rice (200,000 MT more than the PRISM estimate of 5.7 million MT).

He noted that the nine million MT "palay" production for the first half of 2023 is also higher than the production levels for the first half output of 2022 and 2021.

"With the three percent production growth in the 1st Semester, we can expect that, barring the occurrence of destructive typhoons, the production for 2023 could surpass 20

MMT," said Sebastian. "The country's rice production will continue to grow considering the good palay price in the previous cropping and provision of various interventions by the DA (e.g., seeds, fertilizers, biofertilizers, soil ameliorants, and farm machinery extension support)."

The DA official said the recent production reports affirm that the country's current supply outlook for rice (carryover, production, imports) negates speculations of rice supply shortage.

Recently, the private sector reported to Marcos that more imported rice is arriving this month and in September.

The private sector rice stakeholders also informed the President that 300,000 metric tons of rice are coming in August during a special meeting.

It was noted that from January this year until the first week of August, 2.05 million MT of imported rice have already arrived in the country.





# Agriculture as linchpin of PHL economic growth

**A**GRICULTURE continued to be a laggard among the major economic sectors, based on the **National Income Accounts (NIA)** of the Philippines for the second quarter. According to the Philippine Statistics Authority, which publishes the NIA, Agriculture, forestry, fishing (AFF) grew by a measly 0.2 percent in April to June, lower than the 2.1 percent of Industry and the 6 percent of Services. Minus forestry, agriculture and fisheries output even contracted by 1.3 percent during the period. (See, *"Agri-fisheries output falls by 1.3 percent in Q2-PSA," in the BUSINESSMIRROR, August 10, 2023*).

The contraction in the value of agri-fisheries output during the period was driven by the fisheries subsector, which recorded a 14-percent decline. All other subsectors—crops, livestock and poultry—recorded increments in value at constant 2018 prices. Crop prices increased by an average of 1.2 percent, livestock by 0.7 percent and poultry by 1.5 percent.

In terms of volume, the production of almost all marine species registered declines during the second quarter, based on PSA data. Of the marine species monitored by the PSA in the second quarter, only tiger prawn (sugpo) and roundscale (galunggong) posted increases of 0.9 percent and 30.1 percent, respectively. The output of tilapia and milkfish or bangus, which are some of the most popular fish species consumed by Filipinos, contracted by 4.6 percent and 19.1 percent, respectively.

Also, the output of corn, sugarcane and popular vegetables like cabbage, eggplant, and mongo were lower, based on PSA data. Among the crops monitored, sugarcane recorded the steepest decline at 11.3 percent while corn—the second most important crop—contracted by 0.8 percent. The production of chicken eggs, the cheapest source of protein, fell by 2.1 percent, while hog output grew by only 1 percent.

Because of the dismal performance of agri-fisheries, AFF contributed a measly 0.01 percentage point to the country's production of goods and services in the second quarter. This contribution, just like the 4.3 percent GDP posted during the period, disappointed not only experts and economists, but also government officials. (See, *"Imee, economist see full-year growth still possible, but much work must be done," in the BUSINESSMIRROR, August 11, 2023*)

Unfortunately, agriculture has been a laggard among major economic sectors for years. The immediate reversal of this trend should be of paramount importance to economic managers if they want to temper spikes in food prices, which have been largely responsible for the jump in inflation rates in the second half of 2022. Certain food items like pork and onions almost became inaccessible to the poor, especially during the holidays.

The Marcos administration has set aside more funds for the agri-fisheries sector next year, and programs that seek to increase productivity have been rolled out. Mechanisms such as the Rice Competitiveness Enhancement Fund as well as the trust fund for the coconut sector are in place to assist farmers. The state has the necessary resources at its disposal to enable the agriculture sector to produce more food and contribute significantly to the country's GDP.

Amid global headwinds and a growing protectionist stance by some food exporting countries, it would do well for the Marcos administration to boost agricultural production to strengthen the country's food security. These programs in place can potentially make agriculture the linchpin of the country's economic growth.



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## Rice farmers' group cautions DA on warehouse inspections

**T**HE Federation of Free Farmers on Tuesday cautioned the Department of Agriculture (DA) against "frightening" legitimate rice traders in its bid to control rice hoarding and eliminate market price manipulation through warehouse inspections.

"It is very difficult to detect hoarding and price manipulation. Traders normally buy a lot of palay during harvest time, then gradually mill and dispose of their rice inventory during the off season," FFF national manager Raul Montemayor told the BUSINESSMIRROR on Tuesday.

"So it is only normal that they have stocks in their warehouses. As for manipulation, they can say they are just following price trends," he added.

Montemayor cited a recent DA statement that the agency will tap its Inspectorate and Enforcement Group, headed by DA Assistant Secretary James Layug, to inspect warehouses amid persistent reports of manipulation of stocks to justify another spike in retail prices of rice.

DA Assistant Secretary and deputy spokesman Rex Estoperez said that while the Rice Tariffication Law or Republic Act (RA) 11203 removed the regulatory powers of the National Food Authority (NFA) to inspect warehouses, the DA is still empowered to visit rice storage facilities.

"We cannot compel the rice warehouses as the regulatory function of the NFA was removed but on the part of DA, we can, through our Inspectorate and Enforcement, we can also request them to visit the warehouses of rice," he said.

Montemayor, however, said that some monitoring and inspection could help and discourage too much profiteering.

"But the basic problem still remains—there is limited and tightening supply because of the slow inflow of imports. But they also have to be careful so as not to frighten the legitimate traders," the federation official added.

Estoperez noted that the retail price of the staple food increased as the palay harvest would start in the latter part of September or early October.

He also defended the decision of the DA to use the humanitarian issue in its negotiation with India to allow the Philippines to import rice despite its export ban.

"We were hit by a typhoon and so far, based on our negotiation with India, we asked that we should be exempt from the

export ban as a humanitarian consideration," Estoperez added.

Earlier, Agriculture Senior Undersecretary Domingo Panganiban announced that the country is eyeing the importation of 300,000 to 500,000 metric tons from India and Vietnam to ensure that there will be enough rice stocks in the country.

For his part, Jayson Cainglet, executive director of Samahang Industriya ng Agrikultura said that DA is "acting too late and too little" to assure the public that there is ample stocks of rice.

"By visiting warehouses, it sends the wrong signal that there is an ongoing hoarding or shortage of rice," he said.

Cainglet added that "the President [Ferdinand Marcos Jr.] has assured us of enough stocks until the end of El Niño. What we do not have is the buffer stock in government's possession."

"The NFA has a P7-billion budget to buy rice. The price is P25/kilo farm gate, they can buy 5.6 million bags of rice," he said.

Meanwhile, Cainglet said that instead of resorting to imports that will only benefit importers and favored traders, the DA, through the NFA, should start buying palay from local rice farmers.

"They asked for additional budget to buy rice. The mindset is always importation, we don't have a shortage of supply. What is missing is the holding stocks of NFA," he added.

Cainglet said that importation as a solution has all been discarded by countries in the era of extreme weather situations as the new norm.

"Countries with surplus production have been limiting their allocation for export as a way of increasing their local stocks. Nations across the globe are all protecting their local agriculture and building capacities for self



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reliance," he said.

Cainglet added "the last two cropping seasons have been very positive to our rice farmers because of the extended help of the private sector [buying palay from P21/kilo and up] and the increased fuel and fertilizer subsidies from the government."

Meanwhile, farm-gate prices have increased and the cost of producing palay has been reduced because of these interventions.

These developments are encouraging farmers to plant and more institutional support from the DA would further encourage the local rice industry.

## No rice price manipulation?

RICE traders in Intercity Industrial Estate and Golden City Business Park, two of the country's major rice trading centers, denied allegations hurled by certain quarters that they are involved in rice price manipulations on Tuesday.

Rice stakeholders claimed that the Bureau of Internal Revenue (BIR) have started conducting revenue inspection on rice traders in the two major rice trading centers at a time when rice and palay stocks are currently thin and business is on a slump.

Malou Tolentino, Bulacan coordinator of the Philippine Rice Industry Stakeholders Movement, confided that many wholesale rice traders in Bulacan are thinking of temporarily shutting down their operations due to the high cost of palay that translates to the rising prices of rice.

Meanwhile, for his part, Tony Santos, a rice trader, said that the country is now currently at the peak of the "rice lean months" wherein stocks of the grain staple are thinly spread throughout the country.

He cited that rice prices usually increase during these times as palay traders and rice

traders have thin volume stocks of the staple grain and its prices follow the law of supply and demand.

Santos explained that the law of supply and demand states that prices are determined on the volume and supply of a product wherein if the supply of a good or service outstrips the demand for it, prices will fall. If demand exceeds supply, prices will rise.

Citing reports from certain quarters that rice traders manipulated the spike in rice prices, Santos urged these sectors to first assess the meaning of rice lean months; assess if the National Food Authority (NFA) or what government agency has enough rice buffer stocks for the country's rice lean months; the effect in the increase of fuel prices and the rising dollar-peso exchange rate.

"What actually happened was that the price of rice increased in the world market," Santos explained.

Recently, Kilusang Magbubukid ng Pilipinas national chairman Danilo Ramos and Bantay Bigas spokesperson Cathy Estavillo accused rice traders of being involved in price manipulation to justify the spike in retail prices of grains.

"It is not true that the high retail price of rice was caused by the high farm-gate price of palay as farmers have yet to harvest. The spike was caused by the rice cartel," Ramos said.

"The stocks are already in the warehouses. The retail prices of rice have increased because of the rice cartel," he added.

Estavillo noted that the farm-gate price of palay in Mindoro, Iloilo and Isabela was only at P21 per kilo.

"The P34 [per kilo] farm-gate price of palay mentioned by traders was only part of efforts to condition the minds of the public that the retail prices of rice could reach as high as P60 per kilo," Estavillo said. **Raadee S. Sausa**





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# FFF: Rice import plan won't stabilize prices

BY JANINE ALEXIS MIGUEL

**T**HE government's plan to import around 500,000 metric tons (MT) of rice does not ensure prices will go down, the Federation of Free Farmers (FFF) said.

FFF National Manager Raul Montemayor said the country's supply of rice would still be tight despite the volume, as the 30-day import requirement is around 1.1 million MT.

"It (price) could go lower, but the supply is still not enough, and the current prices may not even change," Montemayor said.

On Friday, the palace announced that the **Department of Agriculture (DA)** was now in talks with Vietnam and India for additional rice imports for this year of around 300,000 to 500,000 MT.

"This will help lower the prices of rice as it will further beef up our national inventory," Agriculture Senior

Undersecretary Domingo Panganiban said.

Montemayor said the volume was only about half of what the country needed and was "still not enough."

He added that the next harvest of palay (unmilled rice) was expected to arrive by late September or October.

"If they start negotiating now, by the time the rice comes in, maybe it's too late because it's already harvest season. Their action is too late," said Montemayor.

He added that the volume expected to be harvested for the October-November season was about 60 to 65 percent of the annual harvest as it included rain-fed areas.

Based on the data from the Philippine Rice Research

Institute (PhilRice) and the Philippine Rice Information System (PRISM), the country produced 8.153 million MT of palay in 2022.

Meanwhile, Montemayor said that the tight supply of rice could cause an increase in the market price of the commodity, adding that this would be felt not only in Metro Manila but also in the provinces.

"That would be a concern, especially this September; we can see that it is a very critical period. It (prices) increase further," he said.

On Monday, farmer advocacy group Kilusang Magbubukid ng Pilipinas (KMP) said that prices of domestic rice could go up as high as P65 and urged the government to impose price control.

Sought for comments, ING Bank Manila senior economist Nicholas Antonio Mapa said that rice inflation was currently at 4.2 percent, above the inflation target of

the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas (BSP) of 2 to 4 percent.

"The uptick in rice inflation can be tied to developments on the local and global scene. Domestically, crop damage and the onset of the El Nino weather phenomenon may be resulting in lower crop production," said Mapa.

He added that the global price for rough rice was also "trending higher" due to poor crop production in exporting countries on top of an export ban for non-basmati rice by India.

The economist added that the possible increase in rice prices might affect overall inflation, which might force headline inflation to decrease but at a slower pace for the rest of the year.

"High inflation could prompt the BSP to retain rates at high levels to stem the buildup in price pressures and also to help ensure that inflation expectations remain anchored," said Mapa.





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## Rice Tariffication Law: Quick fix from a servile, clueless Congress

### MIDWEEK COMMENTS

MARLEN V.  
RONQUILLO



**D**URING the brief window given to farming groups in early 2019 to explain their opposition to the draft Rice Tariffication Law (RTL), one compelling position came from then Butil party-list Rep. Cecilia Chavez, and it was premised on many "what ifs," including the following grave concerns:

- What if Vietnam and Thailand, the traditional suppliers, decide to cut down their level of rice imports?
- What if the major rice exporters outside of our Asean suppliers decide likewise?
- What will be our buffer, our protective cover, should one major climatic disturbance wipe out the stocks the traditional rice exporters regularly dedicate to the global export market?
- What if we decide in favor of sanity and fund a massive rice production program?

Nothing is permanent in this world, Chavez argued, and you cannot legislate the global dynamics of rice supply and demand. Everything is fragile and temporary. In lieu of the RTL, why not take the extraordinary step of funding a rice production program that will bridge the gap between what we need and what we produce in the medium term? To at least trim down import needs to a minimum.

Blindly following the tortured formulation from the executive branch that importation was better economically and cost-wise than funding domestic production (see the unwavering world view of one Benjamin Diokno, the architect of anti-agriculture policies of the previous government), the two chambers of Congress — servile and

clueless both — passed the RTL with indecent haste in early 2019, in effect dismissing the valid and compelling reasons that funding domestic rice production was a better option than unfettered rice importation.

In 2019, after the RTL's passage, the Philippines was to make history with a record-high 3.1 million metric tons of rice imports, with 2.7 million of that total from Vietnam. It was also on record that we imported the most rice that year, bigger than China's rice imports. And from 2019 to 2022, the Philippines has been either the top or the second biggest rice importer in the world, and this is a country with a proud rice-growing tradition.

And this year, the prescience of Chavez's dire warnings about relying on others to supply our rice needs is now haunting the polity. India, our top off-quota rice supplier — this simply means suppliers outside of the Asean member countries — has announced it will stop all rice exports. India happens to be the top global exporter of rice with a 40 percent share of the market, and that announcement sent shock waves to the rice-importing segments of the world.

The Philippines was still recovering from that shock decision from India when Vietnam, which supplies 70 percent to 80 percent of our yearly rice imports, announced another shocker: by

2030, Vietnam would cut down its rice exports to 4 million metric tons a year. Its 2022 export volume was a little over 7 million metric tons, a third of which was imported by the Philippines.

The reaction of the market to these shock announcements was predictable: a pricing surge. These are now essentially the prevailing rice prices at retail.

Rice barely fit for human consumption is P42 per kilogram, if you can still find that fast-disappearing subpar rice at retail outlets. Well-milled rice starts at P46 per kg, and, again, if you can still find that fast-disappearing P46-per-kg rice in retail outlets, The dominant entry price level for well-milled rice is P48 per kg, and quality rice starts at P55 per kg.

The P37 per kg of rice that we in the low-income brackets used to buy is history. Same with the P32 per kg of rice that the big poultry and piggery operators in my area used to buy for their guard dogs.

Rice traders said that next month is entirely an "unpredictable period" for rice prices, which simply means rice prices will go up some more.

The reaction of the Department of Agriculture (DA) to the rice price surge and the shock announcements from India and Vietnam was the usual quick fix: negotiate with Vietnam and the other suppliers for lower prices. The volume that would come under these discounted imports, we all know this, will not be enough to bring down the current high prices and influence the market. And the discounts would cover short-term supply agreements.

The solution offered is just a band-aid to cure a fourth-stage cancer. Over the past several years, the DA has morphed into the Department of Importation, and its ability to respond to major crises in the sector is zero. It covers up its ineptness with lies, obfuscation and propaganda. Over the past several years, the DA has poured more resources into its press release factory than its food production mandate.

The surging rice prices are a direct offshoot of the fragile complacency that a servile and clueless Congress placed on the RTL. We all knew that major rice exporters have unpredictable export policies. One day, they are moving 7 million metric tons into the global market, and they can decide to cut that in half the next day. Or, they can decide on a total export ban, just like India did. A major natural calamity can wipe out half of the rice yield of a major rice producer. Or China, with its huge pile of foreign currency reserves, can just decide to offer improbable tenders to corner the bulk of the rice in the open market.

In 2019, a clueless Congress that outsourced its policymaking to the Executive placed its faith in a supposed inexhaustible, cheap, global rice market. In lieu of a productivity option, that should have been the true anchor of our food security policies.

Now, we are reaping the brutal wages of the enactment of the RTL, which built rice sufficiency on the illusion of forever imports. The paddies are now atrophying, rice farmers are now dead men walking, and consumers are now at the receiving end of a terrible whiplash.





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## Delayed initial disbursement blamed for low RCEF usage

PHILIPPINE Center for Postharvest Development and Mechanization (PhilMech) said that the low utilization levels for the Rice Competitiveness Enhancement Fund (RCEF) were caused by delayed initial disbursements.

PhilMech Senior Science Research Specialist Elijah Z. Davalos said that the low utilization for the first three years of the program is due to the "late downloading of funds" during its first year of implementation in 2019.

"It created a domino effect as another P5 billion for 2020 was added without the first allocation (having been spent)," Mr. Davalos was quoted as saying in a statement issued by the Department of Agriculture (DA).

Republic Act No. 11203 or the Rice Tariffication Law allocates P10 billion from rice import tariffs a year for six years to RCEF.

From this, PhilMech gets a P5-billion annual allocation to fund the farm mechanization component of RCEF. PhilMech is tasked with distributing farm equipment to qualified rice farmers, as well an additional P100 million for farm extension activities.

"Likewise, the pandemic largely restricted immediate machine distribution and rapid disbursement of funds during the first half of project implementation," the DA said.

He said the backlog of unutilized funds from previous years is now "fully spent and accounted for."

Mr. Davalos said that the Bids and Awards Committee has conducted bidding for fourth quarter spending items to fast-track fund disbursement.

PhilMech is constructing an assembly line in its Agricultural Mechanization Design and Prototyping Center, which is due to start operations by the fourth quarter, he said. —

**Sheldeen Joy Talavera**



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## DA urged to boost rice stocks

THE SAMAHANG Industriya ng Agrikultura on Tuesday urged the Department of Agriculture (DA) to start buying *palay* or unmilled rice from local farmers to ensure ample stocks amid the El Niño threat.

"Instead of resorting to imports that will only benefit importers and favored traders, the DA, through the [National Food Authority] should start buying *palay* from our rice farmers," group Executive Director Jayson H. Cainglet said in a Viber message.

He said the NFA's P7-billion budget could buy about 5.6 million bags of *palay* with a farmgate price of P25 a kilo.

The Rice Tariffication Law stripped the NFA of its power to import rice and has been reduced to maintaining an emergency inventory from local farmers.

Earlier, some industry groups urged DA to visit warehouses as they accused rice traders of price manipulation to justify the increase in retail prices.

"Visiting warehouses sends the wrong signal that there is an ongoing hoarding or shortage of rice," Mr. Cainglet said. "No less than the President has assured us of enough stocks until the end of El Niño," Mr. Cainglet said. — **Sheldeen Joy Talavera**





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## 'Unqualified corn farmers got fuel discount cards' — COA

By CZARINA NICOLE ONG KI

There were 25,163 corn farmers who received fuel discount cards from the Department of Budget and Management (DBM), but were unqualified to do so since they are not included in the master list of the Bureau of Agricultural and Fisheries Engineering (BAFE).

In its 2022 audit report on the Department of Agriculture (DA),

COA said the names of the unqualified farmers were not included in the Agricultural and Biosystems Engineering Management Information System (ABEMIS) maintained by BAFE.

It pointed out that under DA Memorandum Circular No. 29 issued in 2022, farmer organizations including farmers with farm machinery in the corn clustered areas should be enrolled as program beneficiaries for

fuel discount cards, and they should be included in the ABEMIS master list.

It said the coverage of the fuel discount has been expanded to include all agricultural commodities, and it covers all farm machinery with attached engines that are being used for crop production as well as motorized banca.

DA's regional field offices (RFOs) are responsible for submitting the master list of recipients and their corresponding machinery to BAFE, which

will then update the ABEMIS, COA said.

But since there were thousands of corn farmer-beneficiaries who were not included in the master list of ABEMIS, COA questioned the credibility of the list.

"The inclusion of the 25,163 corn farmers in the master list submitted to DBM for the issuance of fuel discount cards but not found in the ABEMIS file maintained by the BAFE casts doubt on the accuracy of the master list and

whether said farmer-beneficiaries own farm machinery with attached engine that is being used for crop production," it said.

Thus, COA asked DA's RFOs to strictly enforce the provisions of their circular to avoid the inclusion of unqualified beneficiaries.

It said that DA's central office asserted that some of the names in the master list from the RFOs were included even without the corresponding ABEMIS number in order to expedite the process of providing fuel assistance to corn farmers.



# Rice prices surge to P56 per kilo

The Department of Agriculture (DA) said it is probing manipulation or hoarding that has jacked up rice prices that have reached P56 per kilo in the market.

DA deputy spokesman Rex Estoperez said the government is monitoring and taking steps to stabilize rice prices.

"If rice prices right now are reaching P56 (per kilo), that's not right. We will import if needed. This is what we do to stabilize (prices)," Estoperez

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## Rice From Page 1

said in Filipino.

He said the DA can task its Inspectorate and Enforcement Office to conduct monitoring even if the National Food Authority (NFA) has lost its regulatory powers.

"Someone is saying there is stockpiling of palay and rice; that will be our focus. Even if the NFA has lost its regulatory function, we will ask the Inspectorate and Enforcement Office to grant visiting powers to see if someone really is manipulating (prices) or hoarding," Estoperez said in an interview on radio *dwPM*.

He said they are verifying reports that boatloads of rice were imported into the country, and that some traders were overpricing their stocks.

Still, Estoperez noted that rice prices have been affected, as the harvest season is over and won't begin again until October.

Prices of imported rice have also increased, particularly in Vietnam, that has also led to price increases.

Estoperez said some traders are playing with the prices, offering as low as P38 per kilo for very limited quantities, and that is affecting the price structure.

"It's ruining the price structure. They're selling in low quantities and raising prices. People are panic buying," he added.

The DA official said the department is willing to help out private traders and retail-

ers if they need assistance in logistics.

Estoperez also called for the review of the Rice Tarification Law, but noted that they are still awaiting data from the private sector in terms of buffer stocks to ensure that the country has enough rice.

He noted that the NFA only has nine days of buffer stock, while the rest of the 81 days should be shouldered by the private sector.

"If it's less than 81 days with the private sector, there will be trouble and our national inventory will be lacking. That's what we need to address," he said.

## No manipulation

Rice traders in the Intercity Industrial Estate and Golden City Business Park – two of the country's major rice trading centers – have denied allegations by some quarters that they are involved in rice price manipulations.

Rice stakeholders claimed that the Bureau of Internal Revenue has started conducting revenue inspections on rice traders in the two major rice trading centers, but wondered why the inspections are being conducted when rice and palay stocks are currently thin and business is on a slump.

A text message in Filipino forwarded to **The STAR** states, "They (BIR) said issued receipts must have the buyer's address... the penalty would be P5k per receipt."

On the other hand, Malou Tolentino, Bulacan coordinator of the Philippine Rice Industry Stakeholders

Movement, confided that many wholesale rice traders in Bulacan are thinking of temporarily shutting down their business due to the high cost of palay that translates to the rising prices of rice.

Meanwhile, rice trader Tony Santos said that the country is now currently at the peak of the "rice lean months" wherein stocks of the grain are thinly spread throughout the country.

He cited that rice prices usually increase during these times, as palay traders and rice traders have thin volume stocks of the staple grains, and prices follow the law of supply and demand.

Santos explained that the law of supply and demand states that prices are determined on the volume and supply of a product, wherein if the supply of a good or service outstrips the demand for it, prices will fall. If demand exceeds supply, prices will rise.

Citing reports from some quarters that rice traders manipulated the spike in rice prices, Santos urged these sectors to first assess the meaning of rice lean months; assess if the NFA or what government agency has enough rice buffer stocks for the country's rice lean months; the effect in the increase of fuel prices and the rising dollar-peso exchange rate.

"What really happened is that rice prices in the world market increased," Santos said in Filipino.

On the other hand, Rosendo So, president of the Samahang Industriya ng Agrikultura

(SINAG), in a telephone interview, denied there is a rice cartel.

Just like Santos, So said the country is at the peak of the rice lean months and the DA can conduct inspections on rice/palay warehouses.

The inspections can only show thinly stocked volumes of rice/palay, he said.

So added that based on their monitoring, rice farmers engaged in a three-cycle crop season are currently harvesting their rice crops like in Pangasinan.

Farmgate price of fresh palay is pegged at P25 per kilo and farmgate price of clean and dry palay at P30 per kilo, he said.

However, So noted the bulk of the country's rice harvests is expected to take place in October, and farmgate prices of fresh palay is expected to go down to P23 per kilo and clean and dry palay to P28 per kilo.

At these price ranges, production cost of rice would translate to P2,146 per 50-kilo sack or P42.93 per kilo. Plus, the mark-up price of retailers will cost less than P50 per kilo.

Currently, imported Vietnam rice is being sold in the local market at P2,500 per 50-kilo sack or P50 per kilo, while imported Thailand rice is being sold in the local market at P2,600 per 50-kilo sack or P52 per kilo.

That's why rice importers have only orders until October, since these will have stiff competition from locally produced rice that is cheaper compared to imported rice. – **Romina Cabrera, Ramon Efren Lazaro**



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EDITOR: TERESA

A vendor checks the latest prices of rice at the Carbon Market in Cebu City yesterday. The Department of Agriculture said it would inspect warehouses amid reports of manipulation of rice stocks to justify the spike in retail prices.

THE FREEMAN



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**National Meat Inspection Service personnel inspect meat products stored in a house in Payatas, Quezon City yesterday. Authorities said the house was converted into a meat storage facility without a business license and NMIS approval.**

MICHAEL VARGAS





## Sugar and the food processing industry

In November last year, I had occasion to discuss the sugar industry. At the time, the industry was a hot topic.

After one year and emerging from the high drama of Senate hearings of the problems of the sugar industry, it appears that business as usual reigns supreme in the industry again.

In government, lack of discussion means the policies in place continue.

**Current state of the sugar industry.** My two November essays on the sugar industry highlighted studies and recommendations being made to reform and liberalize trade and production regarding the sugar industry.

### CROSSROADS Toward Philippine Economic and Social Progress



GERARDO P. SICAT

The sugar industry is a shadow of its past history. Today, it serves mainly the Philippine domestic market. The sugar produced is almost entirely for domestic use. In our American colonial times and in the first decades of political independence, sugar was the driving force in the economy, the major source of dollar earnings.

Today, the sugar industry still earns some export, but this is very small. In 2022, sugar exports were a meager \$64 million, less than one percent of exports totaling \$74 billion.

Despite the reduced profile of the industry in foreign trade, the sugar industry as a whole – as a system of activities creating value within the Philippine economy – is still a significant industry. The industry continues to be significant to the economies of West Visayas, and also parts of Luzon and in Mindanao. The industry contributes sizably to the regional economy.

The problems of the sugar industry appear to be along the value-chain of the industry. These problems are serious at every stage of that value chain, from agricultural production to milling, and to industrial processing through to retail sales.

**Productivity of sugar farms and mills.** Philippine sugar planting productivity at 5.1 tons per hectare is low compared to major leading exporters like Australia and Brazil where their comparative farm yields are far higher. In both cases, their yields are twice as much. Thailand, by comparison, has a yield that is one-fifths higher than that observed in the Philippines.

Another aspect of productivity relates to the poor recovery experienced by the sugar mills in the Philippines compared to those countries that are more efficient sugar growers. The per ton recovery of sugar for mills in Brazil is 58 percent higher; that for Australia, 45 percent; that for China, 36 percent; and for Thailand, 15 percent.

These data cited were from the Food and Fertilizer Technology Center (FFTC) for Asia and the Pacific Region.

**Phl tariff policy for sugar.** At the time when the ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (AFTA) was negotiated, the con-

tracting parties dealt with the protection of very sensitive industries by permitting continued protection. Through later agreements, the inclusion of sensitive industries within the fold of AFTA's zero tariff could be negotiated.

For the Philippines, two industries that it placed in the sensitive list were sugar and rice. Thus, the Philippines became a founding member of AFTA in 1994 while holding on to high protection rates for its sensitive industries.

By 2010, the Philippines agreed to liberalize its tariffs for sugar through the ASEAN Trade in Goods Agreement (ATIGA). It committed to gradually drop its 38 percent tariffs on sugar over five years so that by 2015, the final tariff would be at 5 percent.

Because of the drastic drop in tariff protection within the ASEAN, it is now possible to import sugar from low-cost sources. Even then, however, the domestic price of sugar has remained quite high compared to the world market price of sugar. The high profit premium from importing low cost sugar ought to be shared by price reduction in the market and by access of imported sugar to industrial food processors.

**Penalizing the local food processing industry.** Continued scarcity of domestic sugar and its high price has penalized consumers and also, as importantly, the local food processing industries because sugar is a major raw material in their production activities.

Do we wonder why many of our local food industry processors cannot grow out of the domestic market? Their products are at a cost disadvantage at retail compared to ASEAN processors that have access to low-cost inputs that includes cheaper raw-sugar.

The regulatory powers of the **Sugar Regulatory Administration** are in many ways similar to the sugar quota system of the 1930s. That old regulatory framework was designed to capture the gains of access to the US market for the insiders in the industry – the millers and planters that were designated to participate in the export trade.

In the current context, the SRA controls the exclusive power to import and to export as well as the allocation of domestic sugar among processors. Its exclusive power to declare imports and to allocate its use makes it very powerful in guiding who among the sugar industry insiders secure the benefits of low cost imports allocations.

Local food processors have high domestic costs because they have high input costs – labor, energy, and logistics. They are essentially outsiders to the sugar industry. Big food companies take care of themselves by buying into the sugar milling industry, as some domestic companies have.

Small and medium food processors are at the mercy of the SRA's allocation system for their use. Large domestic food processors can improve their market position if they also owned sugar mills. That could mean not only cost savings through the integration of their operations. If said sugar mills also engaged in trading, their market power is further enhanced.

Do we wonder why big foreign food processors located in the country are only selling their output in the Philippines and not producing these in the country?

Do we wonder why many big multinational food and other sugar-using companies locate their production facilities in other ASEAN countries even as they look at us as target market for the sale of their products?

For archives of previous Crossroads essays, go to: <https://www.philstar.com/authors/1336383/gerardo-p-sicat>. Visit this site for more information, feedback and commentary: <http://econ.upd.edu.ph/gpsicat/>





## MAP pitches tariff reforms for agri-food value chains

**T**HE Management Association of the Philippines (MAP) wants the government to reform the tariff structure of the Philippines in a way that strengthens sustainable agri-food value chains, especially domestic agricultural value-adding enterprises including processing, storage, and logistics, among others.

In particular, the business group advocated a rational tariff structure where tariff rates on inputs do not exceed those on finished products.

In a position paper dated August 3, 2023 but distributed to reporters on August 15, MAP said the government should review and reform the tariff structure of the Philippines amid the ongoing move by the Tariff Commission (TC) and the National Economic and Development Authority (Neda).

Among its recommendations: come up with a tariff structure that supports food security for Filipinos, especially accessibility and affordability of competitively-priced food, via low tariffs on food products.

MAP said the country's tariff structures should be "neutral" across industries and avoid distortions and unwarranted protection arising

from tariff peaks, currently seen primarily in agricultural products.

The business group also underscored the importance of reducing incentives and opportunities for corruption and smuggling by "unifying" Minimum Access Volume (MAV) and non-MAV tariff rates, and keeping tariffs relatively low and uniform across all goods (with a maximum 10 to 15 percent) to keep food prices affordable, especially to the poor.

In the position paper signed by MAP President Benedicta Du-Baladad and MAP Cluster on Resilience and Recovery Governor-in-Charge (GIC) Cielito F. Habito, MAP stressed that Trade enhances food security.

"It improves access to food, lowers food costs, mitigates supply shocks, reduces inflationary pressures, and ultimately strengthens

economic and social prosperity," MAP said. High tariffs, it noted, have long been shown to be "counterproductive, and lead to reduced investment, low or stagnant wages, and higher rates of malnutrition."

Moreover, using protective trade policy to help farmers causes "unwanted collateral damage" to the much wider mass of consumers, especially the poor who suffer the long-term consequences of high-priced food, MAP said.

Moving forward, MAP said the positive economic gains to greater trade must be accompanied by "effective implementation" of focused adjustment and assistance measures carefully aimed at adversely affected sectors, especially small farmers.

"Government must refocus its support and assistance to farmers from high levels of trade protection to effective improvement of productivity and competitiveness," MAP said.

"In sum, removal of existing peaks and achieving low uniform rates in a tariff structure that provides equal incentives across domestic industries will encourage more and wider agricultural processing and value-adding, help control inflation, and enhance the country's food security. We urge the TC and Neda to move the Philippine economy in this direction," it added. **Andrea E. San Juan**



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## Japan to donate over 300 metric tons of rice

JAPAN, through its embassy in the Philippines, will donate over 300 metric tons (MT) of rice to the families affected by the eruption of Mt. Mayon.

The turnover of the rice donation will be held on Thursday, August 17, in Camalig, Albay, to be led by Nihei Daisuke, the embassy's economic affairs minister.

The embassy on Tuesday said that the donation will be made possible under the framework of the Asean Plus Three Emergency Rice Reserve (Apterr).

The National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council said as of August 10, 9,876 families, or about 38,961 individuals, from 26 villages were seriously affected

by the eruption.

"Japan, as the biggest contributor of Apterr rice in the Philippines, has always been ready to lend a helping hand during trying times," the embassy said in a statement.

Apterr is a regional cooperation started in 2012 that aims to strengthen food security, poverty alleviation and malnourishment

eradication among its member countries.

The embassy said that to accomplish their common goal, the Apterr parties have agreed to establish rice stocks to assist member countries in times of large-scale natural disasters.

In the Philippines, several thousand tons of stockpiled rice from Japan under Apterr were distributed

to victims during Typhoon "Yolanda" in 2013, Typhoon "Ineng" in 2015, Typhoon "Jenny" in 2019 and Typhoon "Odette" in 2022.

In 2020, Japan also provided 425 MT of rice to households affected by the Taal Volcano eruption; in 2021, pre-cooked rice was distributed to families affected by Covid-19 in several cities. **BERNADETTEE TAMAYO**





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## Farm-to-market road opens in Isabela town

**TUGUEGARAO CITY, Cagayan:** A new farm-to-market road (FMR) project has been completed and inaugurated in the town of Angadanan in Isabela that would benefit the residents of Barangay Rancho Bassit.

The project was funded from the town's incentive for claiming the Seal of Good Local Governance (SGLG) of the Department of the Interior and Local Government (DILG) in 2022.

DILG regional director Agnes de Leon, who led the inauguration, praised the leadership of Angadanan

Mayor Joelle Mathea Panganiban for using the incentive fund to build a concrete road from Barangay Rancho Bassit to the town proper.

She said that the project is a primary need of the villages' residents.

"With its completion, the transport of agricultural products from the barangay to the town center will now be faster and easier," de Leon said.

Meanwhile, Rancho Bassit barangay captain Eduardo Baracao Sr. expressed gratitude to the local government officials of Angadanan

for prioritizing their barangay.

He said that the road will also be essential for the prompt evacuation of villagers to safer places during calamity.

The Rancho Bassit FMR is the second SGLGIF-funded project to be completed in the region.

DILG Isabela provincial director Engr. Corazon Toribio assured that her office will continue to support local government officials in Angadanan to achieve their goal of being an SGLG passer again for 2023.

**JÉRICO JOSHUA KAHULUGAN**





## 10-15% tariff on agri pushed

THE Management Association of the Philippines (MAP) is calling for the reduction in the tariff of agriculture commodities like sugar, meat, fish, rice as well as inputs to the manufacture of food to keep prices low.

MAP in a position paper on the comprehensive review of the most-favored nation (MFN) tariff structure said these commodities are crucial in family food consumption, food security, and general inflation.

"Removal of existing peaks and achieving low uniform rates in a tariff structure that provides equal incentives across domestic industries will encourage more

and wider agricultural processing and value-adding, help control inflation, and enhance the country's food security," said Benedicta Du-Baladad, MAP president in the position paper addressed to the National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA) and the Tariff Commission (TC) which are spearheading the review.

MAP asked NEDA and TC to consider among others coming up with a structure that is neutral across industries; one that avoids distortions and unwarranted protection arising from tariff peaks, currently seen primarily in agricultural products.

The group said NEDA and

TC should also consider reducing incentives and opportunities for corruption and smuggling by unifying minimum access volume (MAV) and non-MAV tariff rates, and keeping tariffs relatively low and uniform across all goods.

A maximum range of 10 to 15 percent will keep food prices affordable, especially to the poor, MAP said.

"Agricultural tariffs have remained high because these have been generally excluded from tariff adjustments over the past decades, with agricultural products deemed 'sensitive' levied the highest statutory rates of up to 65 percent," the MAP said. - *Irma Isip*





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## Business seeks food security agenda in tariff review

By BERNIE CAHILES-MAGKILAT

Businessmen are strongly urging the government to ensure that the ongoing comprehensive tariff review and reform by the Tariff Commission (TC) should result in reduced corruption in the agriculture sector and accessibility of products at cheaper prices to ensure food security in the country.

The Management Association of the Philippines (MAP) on Tuesday, Aug. 15, issued a statement signed by its president Benedicta Du-Baladad, in light of the ongoing move by the TC

to review and reform the tariff structure of the Philippines. The review seeks to adjust all products/tariff lines falling under Chapters 1-97 of Section 1611 of the Customs Modernization and Tariff Act for tariff schedule of most-favored nation (MFN) 2024 to 2028. MFN refers largely to imports from countries where the Philippines has no free trade agreement.

Foremost, MAP urged the government to "move towards achieving a tariff structure that supports food security for Filipinos, especially

accessibility and affordability of competitively priced food, via low tariffs on food products."

The business group also said that the review should be able to strengthen sustainable agri-food value chains, especially domestic agricultural value-adding enterprises including processing, storage and logistics, through a rational tariff structure where tariff rates on inputs do not exceed those on finished products.

In addition, MAP said the tariff review should be neutral across industries and avoids distortions and

unwarranted protection arising from tariff peaks, currently seen primarily in agricultural products.

Removal of existing peaks and achieving low uniform rates in a tariff structure that provides equal incentives across domestic industries will encourage more and wider agricultural processing and value-adding, help control inflation, and enhance the country's food security, the group stated.

Notably, MAP said the review should result in reduced incentives and opportu-

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## Business seeks food... B-1 ◀

nities for corruption and smuggling.

This can be done by unifying Minimum Access Volume (MAV) and non-MAV tariff rates, and keeping tariffs relatively low and uniform across all goods (with a maximum 10-15 percent) to keep food prices affordable, especially to the poor, MAP said.

In calling for lower tariffs in agri products, MAP noted that the Philippine tariffs on agricultural and food commodities are higher than those applied to goods in general.

It cited TC reports, which showed that the simple average of tariffs applied on agricultural products is 12 percent while the average for all products is eight percent. Trade-weighted averages also show the same pattern, with nine percent for agriculture, nearly double that for all goods at

five percent.

MAP blamed the high agricultural tariffs to the policy that generally excluded these products from tariff adjustments over the past decades, with agricultural products deemed "sensitive" levied the highest statutory rates of up to 65 percent. In 2015, two-thirds or 66 percent of Philippine agricultural output by value was shielded from foreign competition by MFN tariffs of 40 percent or more.

The 2018 Philippines Trade Policy Review, jointly undertaken by the Philippine government and the World Trade Organization, showed that majority of commodities have MFN tariffs ranging from zero to 20 percent. However, about six percent of lines have tariffs significantly above 20 percent, reaching up to 65 percent.

The Trade Policy Review also observed that the tariff peaks translate into reduced incentive for domestic value adding. For example, high tariffs on corn at 40% dampen incentives to manufacture livestock and aquaculture feeds within the country, which are vital in the meat and fishery industries that provide the protein needs of Filipinos.

"This exceptional level of protection has dampened the impetus for government and agricultural producers to achieve higher levels of productivity, hence lower costs and prices, to be comparable to and competitive with that of our neighbors. The long-term and lasting solution to attain food security for Filipinos is to implement game-changing reforms for productivity improvement, such as farm consolidation, better water management, and effective extension systems. Maintaining high import tariffs will only remove the

urgency to pursue these," the statement added.

Most of the agriculture commodities with very high tariffs are food products (sugar, meat, fish, rice) or inputs to local manufacturing and value addition (corn, meat, fish, sugar, etc.). "These commodities are prominent and crucial in family food consumption, food security, and general inflation," said Du-Baladad.

"This exceptional level of protection has dampened the impetus for government and agricultural producers to achieve higher levels of productivity, hence lower costs and prices, to be comparable to and competitive with that of our neighbors. The long-term and lasting solution to attain food security for Filipinos is to implement game-changing reforms for productivity improvement, such as farm consolidation, better water management, and effective extension systems. Maintaining high import tariffs will

only remove the urgency to pursue these," Du-Baladad said.

"Filipino families have historically been burdened with higher food prices than consumers in other countries across ASEAN and beyond."

Worse, MAP said that lower-income families are forced to purchase food products of low nutritional value, leading to a worsening vicious cycle of poverty, hunger and poor nutrition, lowered human capacity, hence persistent and further deepening poverty, the group said.

The group further explained that trade enhances food security. It improves access to food, lowers food costs, mitigates supply shocks, reduces inflationary pressures, and ultimately strengthens economic and social prosperity. High tariffs have long been shown to be counter-productive, and lead to reduced investment, low or stagnant wages, and higher rates of malnutrition.





## Protective trade policies causing high food prices - MAP

By CATHERINE TALAVERA

Protective trade policies such as implementing high tariffs in the agriculture sector are causing unwanted collateral damage to consumers as it results in high prices of food, a business group said, as it called for uniform tariffs across domestic industries.

In a position paper on the Tariff Commission (TC) and the National Economic and Development Authority's comprehensive review of the most favored nation tariff structure, the Management Association of the Philippines (MAP) urged for uniform tariffs across all industries.

"High tariffs have long been shown to be counter-productive and lead to reduced investment, low or stagnant wages and higher rates of malnutrition. Using protective trade policy to help farmers causes unwanted collateral damage to the much wider mass of consumers, especially the poor who suffer the long-term consequences of high-priced food," the group said.

Citing the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas, the MAP noted that on the average, food and agricultural items have accounted for 38 percent of inflation since 2017.

"The recent and disheartening episodes of inflation on specific food items such as pork, fish, sugar, garlic and onions, highlight the disproportionate impact of high tariffs that underlie high domestic food prices," the group said.

The MAP stressed that Filipino families have historically been burdened with higher food prices than consumers in other countries across ASEAN and beyond.

The group highlighted that Phil-

ippine tariffs on agricultural and food commodities are higher than those applied to goods in general, citing data from the TC showing that the average tariffs applied on agricultural products is 12 percent while the average for all products is eight percent.

The MAP said that the removal of existing peaks and achieving low uniform rates in a tariff structure that provides equal incentives across domestic industries will encourage more and wider agricultural processing and value-adding, help control inflation and enhance the country's food security.

Citing the 2018 Trade Policy Review by the Philippines and the World Trade Organization, the MAP noted that the tariff peaks translate to reduced incentive for domestic value adding.

As an example, it cited the 40 percent tariffs on corn that dampened incentives to manufacture livestock and aquaculture feeds in the country.

While it is pushing for uniform tariffs, the group also pointed out the need for effective implementation of focused adjustment and assistance measures aimed at adversely affected sectors, especially small farmers.

Overall, the MAP urged the government to move towards a tariff structure that supports food security for Filipinos, especially accessibility and affordability of competitively priced food via low tariffs on food products and strengthen sustainable agri-food value chains, especially domestic agricultural value-adding through a rational tariff structure where tariff rates on inputs do not exceed those on finished products.





**Abante**  
**NEGOSYO**

## Mga hoarder pinataas presyo ng bigas

DAHIL sa mga hoarder, tumaas ang presyo ng bigas sa Pilipinas, ayon sa grupong Bantay Bigas.

Ayon sa grupo, tumaas ng hanggang P10 ang bawat kilo ng bigas, indikasyon na may nagmamani-pula sa presyo nito.

"Pumunta kayo ng palengke, talagang paikot-ikot ang mga nanay naghahanap ng murang bigas, naghahanap ng kahit paano mababa sa P50 per kilo pero wala," wika ni Cathy Estabillo, tagapagsalita ng grupo.

Nangako na si Speaker Ferdinand Martin Romualdez na paalimbestigahan niya ang isyu sa Kamara de Representantes.

"Hinahanap natin kung paano natin ibaba kasi 'yong ibang mga trader o 'yong mga ibang mga nagho-ward, tinatago nila kaya nagkakaroon ng ano, artificial na shortage kaya ginagawa nilang mas mataas ang presyo," wika ni Romualdez matapos magsagawa ng inspeksyon sa isang palengke sa Quezon City noong Lunes.

Matatandaang inimbestigahan din ng House committee on agriculture and hoarding ng sibuyas at iba pang produktong agrikultura kung saan ini-rekomenda nilang kasuhan ang ilang mga trader at government official.



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## Soybeans, corn fall

SINGAPORE- Chicago corn and soybean futures slid on Tuesday after a weekly report from the US government showed better-than-expected conditions for both crops.

Wheat fell for a third consecutive session on increasing estimates for Russia's production and exports.

The most-active soybean contract on the Chicago Board of Trade (CBOT) lost 0.2 percent to \$13.23-3/4 a bushel and corn fell 0.7 percent to \$4.84-1/2 a bushel. Wheat gave up 0.2 percent to \$6.15

a bushel.

Weekly condition ratings for the US soybean and corn crops improved in the past week more than analysts expected, US government data showed on Monday.

The US Department of Agriculture's (USDA) weekly crop progress report rated 59 percent of the corn crop as good to excellent, up from 57 percent a week ago, while 11 analysts surveyed by Reuters on average had expected an improvement of 1 percentage point. - *Reuters*