

CLIPPINGS FOR FRIDAY, AUGUST 18, 2023

A. SEC. PBBM QUOTED

THE PHILIPPINE STAR

Editorial: Let them eat Kamote?

How to manage prices

Marcos backs review of Rice Tariffication Law

ABANTE TONITE

DTI bantay-presyo sa bigas inutos ni PBBM

B. DA FAMILY

BUSINESS MIRROR

DBP Oks P500-M loan for rice farms

MANILA BULLETIN

DA's rice import plan a contingency measure – solon

DBP digitalize rice farming via P500-M fund

Rice, rice, rice

THE MANILA TIMES

Fish supply shortfall expected in Q4 – BFAR

Digital agriculture

MALAYA BUSINESS INSIGHT

Fish shortfall seen in H2

PHILIPPINE DAILY INQUIRER

Monitor the DA budget now

BUSINESS WORLD

Gov't told to ensure rice supply

Fish supply deficit seen in 4TH quarter

THE PHILIPPINE STAR

BFAR defends fish importation

PEOPLE'S JOURNAL

Editorial: Disaster food banks

C. AGRI-RELATED STORY

MANILA BULLETIN

This flower in Lucban will not only let you take selfies with the booms, but...

THE MANILA TIMES

Villar: More funds for agri modernization needed

Govt inaction blamed for rice price hike

MALAYA BUSINESS INSIGHT

LandBank to use data analytics in agri financing tack

THE PHILIPPINE STAR

Negros lawmakers oppose sugar import liberalization

ABANTE

'Kadiwa on wheels'muling iikot sa San Juan

D. FOREIGN STORY

MALAYA BUSINESS INSIGHT

Soybean gains, corn down

India consider wheat imports from Russia



EDITORIAL

Let them eat *kamote*?

Exploring various options amid rising prices of rice, Trade and Industry Secretary Alfredo Pascual has raised the idea of Filipinos considering alternatives to the staple. Pascual stressed that he was not proposing the diet adjustment at this time. But he said that when he was president of the University of the Philippines, a study was conducted on mixing white corn with rice as an alternative to 100 percent rice.

Although Pascual clarified that he was not proposing the dietary adjustment, the story drew mixed reactions. The Federation of Free Farmers supported it, saying it was better than more rice importation, and it would provide a market for farmers' other crops. Pascual had said sweet potato or *kamote* can also be a rice substitute.

On the other hand, rice watchdog group Bantay Bigas branded Pascual's statement as "anti-poor and insensitive." Rice accounts for much of the ordinary's Filipino's daily food intake, from breakfast to dinner. It is said that Filipinos can get by with a meal of rice and a bit of salt. Rice fills the belly for a long time and provides the energy needed by farmers in the fields.

There's logic in the idea that if certain segments of the population would reduce their rice consumption, or at least switch their source of carbohydrates from rice to products

such as bread, sweet potato and white corn, the easing of supply pressure would bring down rice prices.

Sweet potato and white corn, however, are more expensive than the most affordable rice. There are varieties of imported sweet potato that retail for P130 to P150 a kilo. Still, if enough of the segment of the population that can afford those items switch their carb preferences, it could still mean less demand for rice.

Pascual stressed that the focus of the government continues to be raising farm productivity and farmers' income while ensuring rice supply and price stability. Meanwhile, **President Marcos** reportedly supports a review of Republic Act 11203, the Rice Tariffication Law, to give the National Food Authority leeway in market intervention during emergencies. RA 11203 barred the NFA from importing rice, limiting the agency to the purchase of rice harvested domestically.

With rice retail prices surging past P50 a kilo in recent days, there's again talk about a cartel manipulating supply and prices. Consumers are still waiting for criminal charges to be brought against supposed cartel members, whether in connection with rice, sugar, onions and meats. All that the public wants is to see stable food supply at reasonable prices.



COMMONSENSE

MARICHU A. VILLANUEVA

How to manage prices

As the head of the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), Secretary Alfredo Pascual is a key member of the Economic Development Group (EDG) of advisers of President Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr. (PBBM). The EDG was organized in May this year "to harmonize, coordinate, complement, and synergize government efforts, with particular focus on mitigating inflation and fostering inclusive and sustained growth."



Prior to his Cabinet post, Pascual was the president of the Management Association of the Philippines (MAP) while he was an independent director of publicly listed companies, such as SM Investment, Concepcion Industrial, and Megaworld Construction. Pascual previously served at the University of the Philippines (UP) System as president and co-chairman from 2011 to 2017 and as Alumni Regent in 2009 and 2010. He also worked with the Asian Development Bank (ADB) for 19 years (1989-2008) and once taught at the Asian Institute of Management (AIM) as a finance professor.

Obviously, the 75-year old Pascual is not just into academic discussion of how to run business but was once actively engaged in managing businesses.

"Our country has always been a tale of hope. Every time we go through typhoons and other natural disasters, we're able to rise up. In economic crisis when businesses go down, we're able to rise up and always optimistic. Eventually, we are recovering and our hope has always been there," Pascual cited in his opening spiel during our *Kapitan sa Manila Bay* news forum last Wednesday.

As DTI Secretary, he vows to turn some of the "hopeful things" that all Filipinos want to achieve – affordable prices of rice and other basic goods on the table.

Pascual hopes to strike a balance on the competing needs of the big businesses, manufacturers and producers with that of the traders and the middlemen, on the other hand, and the consumers in particular. The DTI also attends to the micro, small and medium enterprises or MSMEs to survive competition, he added.

Pascual injects these hopes in his discussions with his fellow Cabinet officials at the EDG that is co-chaired by Finance Secretary Benjamin Diokno and National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA) Secretary Arsenio M. Balisacan. Among others, the EDG was tasked to provide recommendations and policy advice to PBBM on government programs, projects, and policies on pressing economic issues and problems.

On the short-term measures, the EDG seeks to mitigate food inflation. In the medium-term, the EDG set the goal to boost the productivity and resiliency of the agriculture sector by promoting private investment in facilities, transport, and logistics systems to bring safe and nutritious food closer to consumers.

"For now, we're monitoring the movements of the oil prices and all other important inputs," the DTI Secretary disclosed.

Pascual sought to underscore that the primary mandate of the DTI, among other functions, is to implement the "Price Act" in which the agency must ensure strict compliance to the Suggested Retail Prices (SRP) of basic goods and commodities. The SRP, he clarified, is not "price control" but only serves as guide. It requires sellers and retailers to not sell by more than 10 percent of the cost of manufactured good or processed food product. More than that allowable increase can be considered "profiteering" already, he warned, and can be penalized in fines up to imprisonment.

Aside from profiteers, the DTI is empowered to go after hoarders, cartel operators, and other price manipulators.

To go on all out anti-competitive activities, Pascual announced the DTI would soon tie up with the Philippine Competition Commission to strengthen the government's hands.

Reiterating the role of DTI in price monitoring, Pascual declined, however, to go into specific measures to curb the rising prices of agriculture crops from rice and onions in the public markets. It was in deference, of course, to PBBM who is concurrently the Secretary of the Department of Agriculture (DA).

Pascual, however sought to highlight the "relentless efforts" to increase the productivity of farms, improving the logistics and value chain through the DA under the helm of the President.

In a press statement Malacañang Palace issued also on Wednesday, PBBM ordered the DA and the DTI to crackdown on rice hoarding and price manipulation and a close monitoring of rice prices over reports the price of staple hitting as high as P56 per kilo in the public markets.

In the press statement, PBBM was quoted citing the country's rice supply is sufficient but prices are "very variable."

The same statement claimed the government has been closely working with the private sector to rationalize the prices and make available affordable rice in the market and in Kadiwa stores that were revived by PBBM. Kadiwa is a program started by the administration of his namesake father, the late President Ferdinand Marcos Sr.

Meanwhile, adjustments in the SRPs of basic necessities and prime commodities are currently on hold, according to the DTI chief. Pascual confirmed there are pending requests for price increases from manufacturers of sardines, and other manufactured food products.

"For now, we're monitoring the movements of the oil prices and all other important inputs," Pascual disclosed.

Earlier this month, the DTI reported 13 manufacturers of food products have pending price increase requests covering a total of 43 shelf keeping units (SKUs). They are seeking for a one-percent to five-percent price increase or from P0.10 to P7.27 in various products such as canned sardines, evaporated milk, powdered milk, coffee, instant noodles, bottled water and canned meat, among others.

In contrast, non-food item manufacturers are requesting a six-percent to 10-percent price increase or from P1.50 to P9.75. These manufacturers claimed having incurred heavy losses due to high raw material costs, especially those being imported.

Unfortunately, he rued, the Philippines remains dependent on imported goods despite the country's being rich in natural processes.

In a bid "to manage the prices," Pascual conceded on the need to embark on "concerted" actions of all government agencies, not just the DA and the DTI.

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Pub. 18, 2023
Page: 124



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Marcos backs review of Rice Tariffication Law

By BELLA CARIASO

President Marcos backs the review of the Rice Tariffication Law (RTL) or Republic Act 11203 to return the powers of the National Food Authority (NFA) amid the issue on rice supply and spike in prices, a ranking official of the Department of Agriculture (DA) said yesterday.

In an interview with *The STAR*, Agriculture Assistant Secretary and deputy spokesman Rex Estoperez said that Marcos first mentioned his support for review of the RTL during the meeting with stakeholders at Malacañang organized by the Philippine Council for Agriculture and Fisheries (PCAF).

"President Marcos said, 'review what needs to be reviewed necessary to empower the NFA.' Its (previous functions) should be returned. You cannot totally remove its powers," Estoperez said.

The RTL removes the various regulatory powers of the NFA, from import licensing to warehouse inspection.

"During the dialogue with PCAF, the President cited the

Turn to Page 4

need to review (the RTL) and look again at the functions of the NFA. If there is a need to amend its mandate like for example if you cannot buy at P19 (per kilo of palay) what should be done? Will it increase the buying price, will the government provide subsidies?" Estoperez said.

Estoperez added that Agriculture Senior Undersecretary Domingo Panganiban would also recommend to Marcos to prioritize the amendments of the RTL.

"The rice was not included in the priority measures despite being a staple food and it is a political commodity," Estoperez said.

According to Estoperez, prior to the implementation of the RTL, the required inventory of rice was at 90 days – 60 days for the private sector and 30 days inventory for the NFA. Under the RTL, the private sector needs at least 81 days inventory and nine days stocks for NFA.

The current remaining stock of the NFA is only pegged at 46,000 metric tons, good for at least 1.3 days.

At the same time, Estoperez said that based on the dialogue with the rice importers, they want to include in the amendment of the RTL the sanction of exporters who will not

He said the recommendation of the importers will be submitted to Panganiban, who will then submit the feedback to Malacañang.

On the other hand, Estoperez said importers committed to sell 100,000 five-kilo sacks of rice at P38 per kilo in depressed areas like Baseco to help the poor amid the spike in retail prices of the staple food.

Based on monitoring of the DA, the retail price of local regular milled rice is sold as high as P50 per kilo; local well-milled rice, P52 per kilo; local premium rice, P56 per kilo; and local special rice, P60 per kilo while imported rice is sold as high as P65 per kilo.

P500 M farmer's loan

State-run Development Bank of the Philippines (DBP) has approved a P500-million loan to boost rice production in Albay and contribute to the country's food security.

DBP has extended the credit assistance to farmer cooperatives in Albay to advance sustainable and efficient farming practices in the province.

The financing will support the Digital Rice Clustered Farming (DCRF) project under the bank's Expanded Rice Credit Assistance



Enhancement Fund.

The project combines advanced automation, precision farming techniques, and data analytics to optimize resource utilization and increase small farmers' annual yield by up to 30 percent.

DBP president and CEO Michael de Jesus noted that innovative farming initiatives could elevate the local agriculture sector while empowering Filipino farmers amid an ever-changing agricultural landscape.

The DCRF will consolidate individual farm holdings into larger farms, which would result in lower production costs and improve farmer's income by leveraging economies of scale. It would also utilize digital platforms like satellite imagery, machine learning and artificial intelligence.

These are seen to boost price production by 28,000 metric tons annually with 2,000 hectares of land, with upside production by up to 70,000 MT for a cluster farm size of 5,000 hectares. The project will be piloted in Albay with an initial five farmer cooperatives to participate in the cluster farm project.

Anti-poor, insensitive

Rice watchdog group Bantay Bigas on Thursday slammed the idea raised by Trade Secretary Alfredo Pascual to consider other food like potatoes,

corn and sweet potatoes, as an alternative to rice.

"It (was proposed) for the sake of commenting. There was no study even done. Potatoes and sweet potatoes are more expensive as alternatives to rice," Bantay Bigas spokesperson Cathy Estavillo said. "The proposal of Secretary Pascual is anti-poor and insensitive."

Pascual had stressed that he was not proposing the dietary shift.

Estavillo said that aside from the retail prices of rice, other basic commodities are also increasing, adding that farmers are not spared as despite the spike in price of palay, they always suffer losses.

According to Estavillo, the government should instead impose price control to stop the increase in retail prices of the grains. She added that the DA should instead provide subsidies to the farmers to strengthen local production.

Government procurement

By raising the palay procurement price of the NFA from P19 to P22, farmers can be persuaded to sell to the government instead of local palay traders, Samahang Industriya ng Agrikultura president Rosendo So told **The STAR**.

"Definitely, farmers would sell their produce to the higher buying

price of commercial palay traders rather than to much lower buying price of the NFA that translated to a lower volume of stockpiled unhusked rice of the government," So pointed out.

During a congressional meeting on July 16, So said that Agriculture Undersecretary Merceditas Sombillo has already agreed to raise the P19 per kilo government-support price of the NFA to P22 per kilo.

Raising the buying price of NFA to P22 per kilo with an incentive of up to P3 per kilo would encourage farmers to sell their produce to the grains agency, So said. At P25 per kilo of palay, this would translate to a P42-P44 per kilo of rice in the market.

Federation of Free Farmers national manager Raul Montemayor said that while farmers cannot immediately provide the needed supply of corn, potatoes and sweet potatoes, it would encourage them to plant crops.

"Well, it is not immediate as we are a rice-eating country. The market for these crops is still limited but once the demand increases, I am sure a lot of farmers will plant to supply the needed demand," Montemayor added.

"These are very good options for farmers. Instead, our focus is the importation of rice. We should look for other crops as substitute for rice."

— **With Louise Maureen Simeon, Ramon Efren Lazaro**



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DTI bantay-presyo sa bigas inutos ni PBBM

Isasama na ng Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) ang bigas sa kanilang monitoring sa presyo ng mga pangunahing bilihan sa bansa.

Sabi ni DTI Secretary Alfredo Pascual, inutos ni **Pangulong Ferdinand Marcos Jr.** sa kanila gayundin sa Department of Agriculture (DA) na bantayan ang presyo ng bigas.

Si Pangulong Marcos ang umuupong kalihim ng DA na nagsasagawa na ng sarili nitong price monitoring ng bigas at iba pang bilihan bago pa siya naging punong ehekutibo ng gobyerno.

Sabi ni Pascual, "Naglabas ng order

ang Presidente sa DTI at sa Department of Agriculture na i-monitor ang presyo ng bigas. Noong natanggap ko ito, nagbigay na rin ako ng order sa Consumer Protection Group dito sa Metro Manila na bantayan at i-monitor ang prices. Binigyan ko rin ng order ang Regional Operations Group na siyang namamahala sa mga opisina natin sa mga probinsya na i-monitor ang presyo," ayon kay Pascual.

Inutos na rin umano ni Pascual sa mga regional office ng DTI na bantayan ang presyo ng mga school supply bago magpasukan. **(Eileen Mencias)**

Date: Aug. 18, 2023 Page: B3



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DBP OKs P500-M loan for rice farms

By JASPER EMMANUEL Y. ARCALAS

[@jearcalas](#)

THE Development Bank of the Philippines (DBP) announced last Thursday it approved a P500-million loan for a digitalized rice farming project in Albay that seeks to boost palay output in the province by at least 28,000 metric tons.

The DBP said it granted the funding support to various farmer cooperatives in Albay who will be the beneficiary of the "digital rice clustered farming" (DCRF) project.

According to the state-run lender, the project would combine advanced automation, precision farming techniques and data analytics to increase the annual yield of rice farmers by up to 30 percent.

"[The] DBP recognizes the immense potential of this innovative farming initiative to elevate Philippine agriculture to greater heights," DBP president and CEO Michael O. Jesus said. "Through this project, [the] DBP is able to bring forward a revolutionary farming technology to the market and empower farmers to thrive in an ever-changing agricultural landscape."

The DCRF project was funded by the bank's "Expanded Rice Credit Assistance" program as part of the Rice Competitiveness Enhancement Fund (RCEF).

De Jesus explained that the DCRF project would be piloted in Albay through the joint efforts of the Provincial Government of Albay, the Department of Agriculture, the Philippine Center for Postharvest Development and Mechanization, the National Food Authority, and the Philippine Crop Insurance Corporation.

He added that the DCRF would consolidate individual rice farm holdings to achieve economies of scale. The project has already identified five farmer cooperatives that would participate in the clustering project, according to the DBP.

"The technology-enhanced farming solution would be utilizing a 'digital transformation platform,' which includes the use of satellite imagery, machine learning, and artificial intelligence seen to significantly boost rice production by 28,000 metric tons annually with 2,000 hectares of land with upside production by up to 70,000 MT covering a cluster farm size of 5,000 hectares," de Jesus said.

The DBP is the co-implementer of the P1 billion annual credit budget under the RCEF. From 2019, the DBP receives P500 million to provide credit assistance to small palay farmers.

Created through Republic Act 11203, the RCEF is expected "to improve the competitiveness of rice farmers and increase their income" as Manila liberalized the Philippine rice trade policy. Last year, the Department of Budget and Management (DBM) has allocated P10 billion for the RCEF.



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DA's rice import plan a contingency measure – solon

The Department of Agriculture's (DA) plan to import 500,000 metric tons (MT) of rice is just part of the agency's worst-case scenario for the local rice supply, Quezon 1st District Rep. Wilfrido Mark Enverga said.

In a chance interview Wednesday afternoon, Aug. 17, Enverga, the House Committee on Agriculture and Food chairman, said the DA was actually doing the "right thing".

"The DA is doing the right thing, assuming that their data is right. It's right that they are ensuring we have alternatives which is the Vietnam option in particular," ►6

DA's rice import plan a contingency measure – solon 1◀

Enverga said.

Earlier Wednesday, the agriculture and food panel hosted a briefing on the rice supply situation in the country amid reported increase in the retail price of rice. The DA assured Enverga during the briefing that the country has enough supply of its staple grain.

At the same time, the DA bared that it has recommended the importation of 500,000 MT of rice between Nov. 15, 2023 and Jan. 21, 2024. Enverga said he didn't see any inconsistencies with this.

"There are no inconsistencies. They clarified earlier that they are establishing channels in the worst-case scenario. Given the supply data that they presented, even Sinag agreed there is enough supply," Enverga said. "In fact, Sinag is also appealing,

don't import anymore because we have enough supply. And next month, we start the harvest [period]. This is to ensure that our farmers won't be placed at a disadvantage."

Based on conventional knowledge, too much importation ends up hurting local farmers as these imports compete with their products.

"Of course, the supply is there. Our worry, which I also told them, is the price should be managed. So, we have to watch out for it since the situation is very ripe for abuse," Enverga said. "So, I am thankful that [President Marcos] has put to task DA, together with DTI (Department of Trade and Industry), to make sure the supply is not being hoarded," he added. (Ellson Quismorio)



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DBP digitalizes rice farming via ₱500-M fund

By EMMIE V. ABADILLA

The Development Bank of the Philippines (DBP) has granted ₱500-million funding to various farmer cooperatives in Albay to digitalize their practices.

The coops' "Digital Rice Clustered Farming (DCRF) Project" combines advanced automation, precision farming techniques, and data analytics to optimize resource use and increase small farmers' annual yield by up to 30 percent, according to DBP President and Chief Executive Officer Michael O.

de Jesus.

"We recognize the immense potential of this innovative farming initiative," he added.

"Through this project, DBP brings forward a revolutionary farming technology to the market and empower farmers in an ever-changing agricultural landscape," he also said.

The DCRF Project is funded under the DBP's Expanded Rice Credit Assistance under the Rice Competitiveness Enhancement Fund (ERCA-RCEF) which aims to promote inclusive growth and build a stronger rice sector.

The cluster farm project will be piloted in the Province of Albay, with five farmer cooperatives as initial participants.

The initiative consolidates individual rice farm holdings into larger farms to lower production costs.

The move is also expected to boost farmers' income by leveraging on economies of scale.

The technology-enhanced farming solution uses a Digital Transformation Plat-

form which employs satellite imagery, machine learning and artificial intelligence.

Digitalizing processes can significantly boost rice production by 28,000 metric tons (MT) annually with 2,000 hectares of land.

Upside production can be enhanced up to 70,000 MT, covering a cluster farm size of 5,000 hectares.

For this reason, the Department of Agriculture (DA) recognizes farm clustering and consolidation techniques as key strategies to scale up the Philippine agricultural sector.

Indeed, "the cluster farm system can become the epicenter of rice production in Albay," de Jesus acknowledged.

The program will be implemented through joint efforts with the Provincial Government of Albay, the Department of Agriculture, the Philippine Center for Postharvest Development and Mechanization, the National Food Authority, and the Philippine Crop Insurance Corporation.

The agencies will collaborate in the areas of planning and coordination, technical assistance and capacity building, infrastructure development, development financing, and value chain development.



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Rice, rice, rice

Rice is not just a very sensitive issue in the Philippines, but also an emotional one.

As a daughter of a rice farmer and living in a community of farmers as a child, the ricefield played an important part of my childhood.

Rice farming is backbreaking. One of the songs I learned during my elementary years from my music teacher essays the hardship of a rice farmer. The lyric goes, "Planting rice is never fun. Bent from morn till the set of sun, cannot stand and cannot sit, cannot rest for a little bit." The lyrics may be a bit exaggerated, but it is essentially true.

From the land preparation to planting, growing, harvesting, and drying, not to mention the scorching direct heat from the sun. It's a continuous hard labor for four months.

The most difficult part, which I don't like to recall because it is agonizingly painful, is the "giok," the rest are easier to remember and even fun.

During those days, once the rice stalks have been harvested, farmers

have to literally grind the stalks using their bare feet to separate the palay from the stalks. It's called "giok." Good thing, the thresher came up saving the farmers from the grueling "giok."

A common joke among farmers is that ghosts will spare you once you've already cooked and eaten the newly harvested rice.

But before a rice farmer can eat from his new harvest, he is already deep in debt for fertilizer, seeds, and payment to farm hands. A rice farmer ends up buying rice by the kilo at a store than eating his own produce. And this cycle of a sad story never ends.

But real rice farmers, like my father, would never abandon their ricefields, no matter how small that parcel may be. They love what they do, the hard labor becomes an entertainment for them year-in and year-out.

My parents disdained the thought of a store-bought rice. The notion is if you have rice in your "bandi" (a rice storage inside your house usually

made of rattan or wood) that can sustain you until the next harvest, you are "okay."

This is actually a misguided measure of one's status in the community.

"Okay" here means you have stable staple food supply for that specific period only. "Okay" does not mean you can send your kids to college or buy viand to accompany your rice at mealtime. It is okay because you have rice. Sustenance is guaranteed and life is fine as long as you have rice on the table. Rice is everything. Rice is life.

Thus, even if it was difficult already for my father to go to the farm, he would force himself to stand on the roadside and watch the ricefield moving in a wavelike fashion as the wind hits its surface and him relishing in sheer delight, a joy that



EDITORS DESK

BERNIE CAHILES-MAGKILAT

emanates from a farmer's sense of accomplishment.

A week after my father passed on, the buying price of palay was at its highest ₱23 per kilo. He would have been so happy.

But palay prices fluctuate. As of May this year, the Philippine Statistics Authority data showed that farmgate price of palay stood at ₱19.06 from ₱18.79 in April.

The Department of Agriculture, however, said the Philippines has enough rice to meet the daily needs of Filipinos for the third quarter this year.

In a statement, the DA said there was a six percent increase in production from January to June, based on the Philippine Rice Information System.

This means palay production would thus reach 8.605 million metric tons (MT) this year, equivalent to 5.6 million MT of milled rice, higher than the 8.153 million MT in 2022.

That's why, it baffled me to think why rice prices are rising. Imported rice should even be cheaper. The ₱20 per kilo rice narrative is baloney. As they say, tell it to the marines!

Retail prices for both imported and locally-produced rice in the Philippines rose further by between four percent

to 14 percent this month as global and domestic farmgate prices soared, adding pressure on food inflation.

DA said it expects rice prices to stabilize. When?

The steady rise in prices of the country's staple food pushed local rice inflation to 4.2 percent in July, the fastest pace since 2019, indicating growing pressure on the government to rapidly increase its stockpile.

Adding to supply risks, the Philippines is bracing for the impact on harvests of dry weather brought by the El Niño phenomenon.

If only farmers are faithfully incentivized, like giving them free or subsidized fertilizer and palay price support, proper water irrigation, it would alleviate their plight.

If only we could put an end to graft and corruption and put this huge money into our farms, life in the farm would be bearable.

It is not yet too late to make agriculture a battleground against corruption because what we need now is an agriculture agenda if we have to help our farmers and ensure food security.

(Bernie Cahiles-Magkilat is the Business Editor of Manila Bulletin)



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Fish supply shortfall expected in Q4 – BFAR

A FISH supply shortfall should be expected during the fourth quarter with the implementation of a closed fishing season in parts of the country, the **Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR)** said.

The October-December deficit is estimated to total 57,839 metric tons (MT), the agency said in a report on Thursday, with the likely output for the period of 769,446 MT lower than the forecast demand of 827,285 MT.

The supply lack will be due to the closed fishing season, taking effect in northern Palawan, Ilocos, Negros Occidental, Capiz and Cebu.

BFAR spokesman Nazario Briguera said importations would help ease price pressures but did not provide more details.

"That is why we are monitoring to avoid the gap or shortage on the supply of fish in wet markets,

especially in Metro Manila," he said.

Prices of commonly sold fish as of August 16, based on Department of Agriculture (DA) data, were from P150 to P240 per kilo for bangus or milkfish, from P220 to P280/kilo for round scad or galunggong, from P120 to P160/kilo for tilapia, and from P300 to P320/kilo for mackerel.

Briguera said prices could go down by P40 per kilo once imports arrive.

He noted that prices had also gone up due to recent price increases and that the DA was implementing a subsidy program to help fishermen.

"Operations, even in the municipal fishing, are fuel-dependent... all boats are motorized, even the small ones," he said.

The DA-BFAR fuel subsidy program, amounting to P489 million, is expected to benefit around

➤ **BFAR B2**

■ **BFAR FROM B1**

Fish

84,072 fishermen.

Reclamation projects, particularly those in fishing grounds like Manila Bay, are adding to the challenges faced by local fishermen, Briguera continued.

"If the body of water will be compromised then it could affect the habitats of fishes, which would actually affect fisheries production," he said.

The projects should have undergone environmental impact assessments to ensure the safety of the bay and the marine species that live there, Briguera added.

"By doing so, we can protect fisheries production," he said.

JANINE ALEXIS MIGUEL



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Digital agriculture

THE potentials of digital agriculture in raising overall farm productivity, improving product quality, and reducing logistics costs and the prices of food products have so excited many agricultural scientists, policymakers and agricultural managers.

Digital agriculture, also referred to as "smart farming" or "e-agriculture," is a tool to "digitally collect, store, analyze and share electronic data and/or information in agriculture, extending to the entire food system."

But with the current status and capability of the Department of Agriculture (DA), will it be able to reap the tremendous benefits potentially offered by digital agriculture? I am afraid that the answer to this is a disappointing "no."

For one, its Information Communication Technology Services (ICTS) unit does not have enough highly competent people because government compensation for IT (information technology) experts is uncompetitive to those offered by the private sector. It also does not have the budget to regularly upgrade its hardware and software to keep up with the advances in digital technology.

In addition, there is no real,



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serious appreciation on the part of the Department of Agriculture (DA) bureaucracy for the benefits of digital technology. In fact, many are afraid of its broad application in the DA's business operations because it can possibly lead to layoffs of redundant personnel.

To drive home my point, let me cite three actual examples I experienced while in DA serving as one of its senior officials.

A good starting point is the Registry System for the Basic Sector in Agriculture (RSBSA), or the Farmers and Fishers Registry. This project started in 2012 and, 10 years later, has not been completed.

There are two main reasons for this. The first is that Congress never provides a lump sum amount to complete the project, which is around P1.7 billion. It allocates the budget on a staggered or installment basis spread over the years. By the time the next tranche is released, the data will already be

➤ **Finer B2**

■ **FINER FROM B1**

Digital agriculture

obsolescent because of additional registrants.

The second is that the DA Field Operations Service's (FOS) staff refused to subcontract the services of registering farmers and fisherfolk to a third-party specialist, preferring instead to do it because of the additional perks that could be enjoyed and the employees who could be hired.

We cited the "Listahanan" of the Department of Social Welfare and Development as a good example wherein a third-party contractor was engaged to facilitate the registration process of the "Pantawid Pamilya" beneficiaries and resist pressure from local government officials to include their political supporters in the list, regardless of whether they qualify or not.

Unfortunately, the DA bureaucracy resisted this recommendation.

The Farmers and Fishers Registry's completion is critical in moving forward a number of reforms in the delivery of assistance to the tillers and fisherfolk. Besides being confident that they are qualified beneficiaries, any cash assistance to the farmers/fisherfolk can be directly deposited into their ATM account. This will prevent leakages in the cash to be provided.

To avoid the messy procurement process in the government, an equivalent amount can be given in lieu of in-kind assistance (e.g., fertilizer, seeds, pesticides, farm machinery). Having received the cash, the farmer can choose for himself what brand of agricultural input is most suited to his field instead of having the government choose it for him. This arrangement will ensure that farmers no longer blame the government for bad inputs they receive.

Another is with regards to the use of satellite technology in monitoring progress made on the farms. There is one lodged at the FOS, which is mainly used for estimating damages wrought by destructive typhoons, and another being used by the Philippine Rice Research Institute under the PRISM (Philippine Rice Information System) project for palay (unhusked rice) monitoring.

The problem is that the two systems have not been realigned with each other to provide a better data set for the entire agricultural sector. Moreover, since the software is free of charge, its magnification leaves much to be desired.

For instance, the PRISM project cannot detect whether the area is planted with cogon grass or palay. On the other hand, damage

estimates provided by the satellite technology under FOS are inaccurate and late because of poor magnification capacity.

The obvious solution is to subscribe to a service provider that can provide real-time data on what is happening on the field. But hiring one will surely make the services of the staff in FOS and PRISM redundant. Also, one cannot ensure that the best service provider will be chosen because of the complicated government procurement process.

But imagine the benefits of using more precise satellite technology. We will know in real-time what is happening on our farms. Armed with this fairly accurate information, it will be easy for the Land Bank of the Philippines to extend credit to the farmers because of the knowledge that the area is actually planted, the crop planted (including density), the estimate of harvest, and damages wrought by destructive typhoons.

The same data can be used by the Philippine Crop Insurance Corp. to extend insurance assistance to farmers. Such technology also opens the possibility of encouraging private companies to extend insurance to the agricultural sector because of the availability of fairly accurate information on what is happening on the farms applying for insurance.

A third example is the use of drone technology. It seems attractive to use it, but wait till one discovers the bureaucratic impediments in its application to farming.

One has to first get a permit from the Civil Aeronautics Board to fly the drone, which will require a licensed operator to legally fly it. This is to prevent the use of the drone by terrorist groups.

If the drone is going to be used to spray pesticide, despite the same pesticide already being sprayed manually, the user will have to secure a special permit from the Fertilizer Pesticide Authority due to environmental reasons. They claim that the drone can spread hazardous pesticides over a larger area, endangering adjacent communities, particularly if strong winds are present.

Steve Jobs once remarked, "Innovation is the ability to see change as an opportunity — not a threat!" Unfortunately, our bureaucracy sees it in the latter manner.

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Today's Finex column will be carried online due to space constraints.



Fish shortfall seen in H2

BY JED MACAPAGAL

THE recent typhoons and the closed fishing season in Palawan by November would lead to a shortage of fish in the second half of the year.

Data from the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) showed a shortfall of 3,000 metric tons (MT) in fish is expected in the

third quarter when supply is seen at 822,000 MT against demand of 825,000 MT.

A bigger shortfall of 58,000 MT is seen by the fourth quarter when supply hits 769,000 MT against demand of 827,000 MT.

BFAR said this was the basis of the Department of Agricul-

ture (DA) in issuing a memorandum circular (MC) on the guidelines on the certificate of necessity to import 35,000 MT of round scad, big eye scad, mackerel, bonito and moonfish for wet markets from October to December.

The imports will support local fish supply during the annual

closed fishing season in northern Palawan from November 1 to January 31.

Based on DA's latest monitoring of public markets in the National Capital Region as of Wednesday, prevailing retail price of local galunggong ranges from P220 to 280 per kg while imported galunggong is at P200 per kg.



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Monitor the DA budget now

The private sector must monitor the Department of Agriculture (DA) to turn the agriculture industry's failure into success. This was a key conditionality in the Senate ratification of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) last Feb. 21. The Senate asked the executive branch for compliance by May 21. Alas, it has yet to come to fruition.

Why do I keep harping on this? Last Jan. 3, a total of 131 organizations signed a document warning that RCEP, without the proper government preparations, would severely damage agriculture. This happened after our 1995 accession to the World Trade Organization. Unlike Vietnam which prepared and succeeded, we did not move and so we failed.

To compete effectively in RCEP, the industry must be competitive. Our agriculture industry is not. Sen. Loren Legarda, the RCEP committee chair and who successfully sought approval for the conditionalities, argued that for our competitiveness to be achieved, the DA budget must be properly used—and thus, properly monitored.

And yet here we are, still waiting for things to happen.

Budget and performance

The agriculture industries of Vietnam and Thailand previously trailed us, but are now significantly outperforming us. In 2022, their agriculture's share to their national budget were 6.5 percent and 3.6 per-

COMMENTARY

ERNESTO M. ORDOÑEZ

cent, respectively. Ours was only 1.7 percent.

Budget impacts agriculture performance. Last year, agriculture exports were as follows: Vietnam, \$23.6 billion; Thailand, \$35.6 billion; Philippines, \$6.8 billion.

If only we used effectively our budget like Thailand, our agriculture exports would have been equal to, and could have replaced, our overseas remittances. There would have been no need for our workers to find jobs abroad.

What's worse is that the DA budget, small as it is, is being lost to corruption and waste. The Commission on Audit had reported in 2020 unliquidated and unexplained expenses in the DA budget worth P22 billion, followed by P23 billion more in 2021. No action has been taken thus far to look deeper into the anomaly.

Damaging delay

While we wait for the Senate blue ribbon and agriculture committees to act on Alyansa Agrikultura's request for an investigation, private sector monitoring must be implemented immediately to help prevent further corruption and waste.

If we assume the same one-third of this year's DA

budget continues to be lost to corruption and waste, the six-month delay in implementing the conditionality mentioned has already resulted in the loss of approximately P15 billion, or P2.5 billion a month. Must the delays continue?

The practice before was that regional directors give a complete list of DA-funded projects in their respective regions to the private sector-led provincial and municipal agriculture and fisheries councils.

Today, with access to just a partial list, the private sector was still able to discover major discrepancies. In one region, a corn sheller worth P200,000 was reported as P1 million. They were told it was only a typographical error, but the private sector found out the same thing concerning several locations.

There were also nonexistent projects. They were told a different barangay had a certain project, but that this barangay was not identified. This happened a few months ago, and as usual, no action has been undertaken to look into the irregularities.

Our agriculture is in trouble, and I dare say this will continue with our RCEP accession. Our senators have vowed that if the conditionalities are not implemented, they would recommend termination of the trade deal.

Implement the crucial private monitoring now. We can still stop the sector's continued hemorrhaging and regain our leadership status in the region. **INQ**



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BRIEFS

Gov't told to ensure rice supply

THE COUNTRY needs a backup plan to ensure rice sufficiency ahead of the expected bad weather and El Niño dry spell in the coming months, Senator Sherwin T. Gatchalian said on Wednesday.

During a Development Budget Coordination Committee (DBCC) briefing on the proposed 2024 budget before the Senate finance committee, the senator said rising prices could worsen inflation.

"Submit to us a contingency plan," he told DBCC officials. "I'm really worried that this export ban from other countries will affect us not only in terms of supply but also in terms of prices."

Global rice prices have jumped by about 20% to 15-year highs since India, which accounts for 40% of world supplies, banned non-basmati white rice exports last month, Reuters reported.

The Department of Agriculture had recommended that the private sector import an additional 500,000 metric tons (MT) of rice because El Niño-induced dry spells could affect crop production later this year.

"I would like to urge the government to seriously look into the situation because it's not only going to affect inflation but more importantly food on the table for our own constituents," Mr. Gatchalian said. — **John Victor D. Ordoñez**



Fish supply deficit seen in 4th quarter

THE BUREAU of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) expects the fish supply deficit to reach 57,830 metric tons (MT) in the fourth quarter.

Based on its supply and demand outlook, the BFAR said there will be an estimated fish supply of 769,446 MT in the fourth quarter, which will not be enough to cover the demand of 827,285 MT. The deficit is equivalent to six days' supply of fish.

BFAR spokesperson Nazario C. Briguera on Thursday defended the government's approval of a plan to import fish in the fourth quarter, saying imports are needed to augment the supply during the closed fishing season in parts of the country.

The Agriculture department earlier this week approved the plan to import 35,000 MT of fish for wet markets for the fourth quarter. This includes frozen round scad or *galunggong*, big-eye scad, mackerel, bonito, and moonfish.

"Of course, if we have enough supply, we expect prices to go down. We are also closely monitoring to ensure there will be no gap or deficit in the supply of fish in wet markets, especially in Metro Manila," Mr. Briguera told reporters in mixed Filipino and English.

Closed fishing season is implemented in northern Palawan province, Ilocos, Negros Occiden-

tal, Capiz, and Cebu during the fourth quarter. This would allow fish to spawn and repopulate over the period.

Sardine fishing is not allowed in northern Palawan from Nov. 1 to Jan. 31, while the closed fishing season for herring and mackerel in the Visayan Sea runs from Nov. 15 to Feb. 15.

Asis G. Perez, former BFAR director and co-convenor of advocacy group Tugon Kabuhayan, said in a Viber message that the industry is aware of the drop in production during closed fishing season.

"Generally, we are in agreement that the fourth quarter is the time when production is the lowest, particularly in fisheries as this is the time when our three major closed seasons happened and also the time for strong *amihan* (north-east monsoon)," he said.

Mr. Perez said that the government should focus on measures that will increase production in aquaculture to boost the overall fisheries production and build more cold storage facilities.

"As this is an annual event, the fisheries sector has responded by increasing aquaculture output. Many of our aquaculture producers time their production schedule to meet these demands," he added.

The import plan comes on the heels of an 11% decline in fish production during the second quarter. — SJT

Date: 18 AUG 2023

Page: 124



LIBRARY
DEPT. OF AGRICULTURE

BFAR *defends fish importation*

The Department of Agriculture (DA)'s decision to import at least 35,000 metric tons of fish is necessary to prevent supply shortage during the three-month closed fishing season from October to December, an official of the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) said yesterday.

Turn to Page 4

BFAR From Page 1

In a text message to **The STAR**, BFAR spokesperson Nazario Briguera said that the volume of fish imported this year is 29 percent more compared to the 25,000 metric tons allowed by the DA in 2022 amid the expected drop in fisheries production this year.

"Well, the primary reason is the implementation of a closed fishing season under FAO (Fisheries Administrative Order) No. 259. We also factored in the occurrence of calamities which could affect fish production and usually happen during the third and fourth quarters," Briguera said.

"The premise while we are importing fish is to ensure enough supply of fish in the markets and following the law of supply and demand, if you have enough supply of fish in the market, the retail prices will not also increase," Briguera said in a separate radio interview.

Agriculture Senior Agriculture Undersecretary Domingo Panganiban signed Memorandum Circular No. 36 allowing the importation of 35,000 MT

of fish on Aug. 15.

Under the memorandum, importers are allowed to bring in frozen round scad, big eye scad, mackerel, bonito and moonfish from Oct. 1 to Dec. 31.

Briguera said that the volume of fish to be secured outside was based on the study of historical data. "Every year, we allow importation to address the gap (in supply) during the closed fishing season," he said. "This (imported fish) should go straight to the wet markets and not the industrial users."

The approved volume of imported frozen small pelagic fishes is expected to start coming into the country by the end of October to early November and will come in two tranches, Briguera said.

The agriculture department said the sanitary and phytosanitary clearances under the CNI (certificate of necessity to import) volume will be issued in two tranches.

The first tranche composed of 50 percent of MIV (maximum importable volume) will be issued from Oct. 1 to 30, while the second tranche is from Nov. 6 to 30. — **Bella Cariaso, Catherine Talavera**



EDITORIAL

Disaster food banks

AS one of the favorite "sparring partners" of destructive typhoons and storms, the Philippines needs to ensure the speedy and efficient distribution of relief goods to disaster victims.

Every year, an average of 20 typhoons and storms batter the country, killing and injuring people and destroying billions of pesos worth of property, agricultural crops and infrastructure.

In some places, government authorities really find it difficult to reach disaster victims because many roads and bridges are destroyed by rampaging and murky floodwaters.

Aware of this, the House of Representatives has approved on third and final reading a proposed legislation seeking the establishment of "disaster food banks" across this impoverished nation.

The bill is a consolidation of three related measures authored by party-list Reps.

Michael Morden and Ivan Howard Guinto and Congressman Alan Ecleo of Dinagat Island.

Under House Bill (HB) No. 8463, a "Disaster Food Bank and Stockpile" will serve as the central repository of food, water, medicines, vaccines, clothing, tents and communication devices.

The setting up of "food banks" will be an inter-agency efforts involving the National Disaster Risk Reduction Management Council, Department of Social Welfare and Development, Department of Trade and Industry, Department of Agriculture, Department of Science and Technology, and Department of the Interior and Local Government.

Like other Filipinos, we agree with House Speaker Ferdinand Martin G. Romualdez of Leyte that there's that urgent need to prepare for typhoons, storms and similar calamities.

Certainly, nobody will argue with Speaker Romualdez when he said that "we have to have a more efficient and a more effective system of responding to disasters."

By approving HB No. 8463 on third and final reading, the House of Representatives is showing that our congressmen - district and sectoral - are sensitive to public opinion.



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This flower farm in Lucban will not only let you take selfies with the blooms, but eat them, too



AVANT GARDENER

YVETTE TAN

I visited Bukid Amara in Lucban, Quezon, a popular vegetable and flower farm among tourists and farmers.

The 2.5-hectare farm is a sight to behold. The first thing that catches the eye is a field of different types of flowers that stretch out from the farm entrance toward a man-made pond filled with tilapia, with the mystical Mt. Banahaw peeking out from its cloud cover just beyond.

The flowers grown are annuals, and can be changed according to the season, so for example, couples who visit during Valentine's Day will be greeted by a sea of red. The only blooms that remain constant are the sunflowers, which are the crowd favorite.

Bukid Amara is a tourist hotspot for locals as well as for folks in surrounding provinces, some coming as far as Metro Manila, which is three hours away without accounting for traffic. A ₱150 entrance fee (₱120 for students, PWDs, and seniors) allows visitors access to the farm, which includes the flower field, pond, and in-house restaurant. Farm activities include cut-and-pay flowers and fish-and-pay (and paluto). The farm also allows for small events to be held there, and is constructing a holding area so bigger celebrations can be held.

The flowers aren't only beautiful to look at — they're edible, too! Guests can experience

this when they dine in the cafe, which serves food decorated with the edible blooms. We had the salad and the pancit hab-hab, the latter a Lucban specialty which gets its name from the way it's eaten — placed on a banana leaf which is lifted to the mouth with one's hands. Both were just as delicious as they were eye-catching. The vegetables in the salad are picked on-site, and the flowers add color and vibrancy to the dishes, resulting in a weird, but welcome sort of joy during the meal. It feels like every meal at Bukid Amara would feel like a fiesta.

The farm isn't just well known for its blooms. The farm is owned and run by horticulturist Michael Caballes, a well-known name in the farming industry. A former executive for a seed company, Caballes is known for his business acumen, enterprising spirit, and interest in experimentation.

Behind the flower field are several domed net greenhouses that house different things — hydroponic setups, vegetable seedlings, flower nursery, and a Japanese melon grow house. Bukid Amara is the only farm in the Philippines that has successfully grown Japanese melons, the type that can go for as high as \$1,000 per piece in auctions in Japan. It's known for its crisp sweetness and its uniform, blemish-free

exterior. The melons are hard to grow and demand a lot of care and attention, hence their high price. While Bukid Amara's melons aren't as expensive as the ones sold in Japanese auctions, they are priced higher than usual in the Philippine market, and with good reason. They are grown in a hydroponic setup, the fruit covered in newspaper to prevent overexposure and accidental bruising. It's one melon to one vine, with everything, from the nutrient solution down to the number of leaves on the vine accounted for.

The farm also holds training sessions for beginner and experienced farmers, as well as agriculture students. Caballes is very interested in experimentation, so many of the greenhouses are set aside to test things, which include prototypes of agricultural machinery. He also uses his acquired knowledge to help fellow farmers both increase their yield and fortify their businesses, often for free. For example, he is a consultant for the Korea Program on International Agriculture (KOPIA), which aims to bring the Korean agricultural mindset and technology to developing countries.

So whether you're the type to smell flowers, grow flowers, or eat flowers, if you're in Lucban, it would be worth your while to drop by Bukid Amara.



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Villar: More funds for agri modernization needed

SEN. Cynthia Villar on Wednesday urged government economic managers to ramp up funding for the modernization of agriculture, arguing that the country is behind its neighbors, particularly in farm mechanization.

At the continuation of the Committee on Finance meeting with the Development Budget Coordination Committee (DBCC), Villar, chairman of the Senate agriculture and food committee, stressed the importance of mechanization in helping farmers produce crops more efficiently.

She said the government could also encourage the local machine industry to be part of the effort in order to increase the country's economic growth.

"Because that's the idea of mechanization; we have to modernize," Villar pointed out. "Our country started late in mechanization efforts compared to our Asian neighbors. We need to do a lot of catching up."

She exhorted all stakeholders in the agricultural sector to work together to achieve farm mechanization targets.

She also emphasized collaboration and concerted efforts as a response to the mandate of the Agricultural and Fisheries Mechanization Law (AFMech Law), which is vital if the country wants to pull ahead of the competition.

The AFMech Law helps promote the development and adoption of modern, appropriate, cost-effective, and environmentally safe agricultural and fisheries machinery and equipment to enhance farm productivity and efficiency and achieve food security.

Citing studies, she said that two of the barriers confronting farmers, fisherfolk and agricultural workers are the lack of mechanization and technical expertise.

With various government departments, agencies and groups, including all stakeholders,

Villar said they have been working together to break down these barriers.

Agricultural and fisheries mechanization refers to the development, adoption, assembly, manufacture, and application of appropriate, location-specific, and cost-effective agricultural and fisheries machinery.

It uses human, animal, mechanical, electrical, renewable and other non-conventional sources of energy for agricultural production and post-harvest or postproduction operations consistent with agronomic conditions and for efficient and economic farm and fishery management.

Aside from addressing mechanization, Villar said the training regulations for the agro-fisheries mechanization sector will truly equip the industry players, particularly farmers and fisherfolk, with the valuable skills and know-how, or technical expertise, that will give them a competitive edge.

JAVIER JOE ISMAEL



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GOVT INACTION BLAMED FOR RICE PRICE HIKE

RICE prices keep skyrocketing because the government has not made any drastic move to lower them, a farmers group said.

In a recorded video interview with *The Manila Times*, Bantay Bigas spokesman and Amihan Secretary-General Cathy Estavillo said the price of rice went up to nearly P50 per kilogram in the markets they are monitoring.

"The prices of rice really skyrocketed, to the point that what was just P38 per kilo, there's now a P10 increase, and the lowest price is now at P48 per kilo," she said.

"According to who we interviewed, when there's no more stock, they'll increase the price. When we go to the markets, the cheapest retail price is almost P50 per kilo," Estavillo said.

"This happens because there is no

drastic change or effort from the government to lower the prices or to freeze the price of rice, and with what they've been releasing is that they would import rice to lower the price, it means prices will remain high because importing does not lower the prices."

"Who holds the importation? The private businessmen, ever since Republic Act (RA) 11203, they're the ones dictating the price of rice in the market because the government has done nothing. The simple buffer stocking has not been done," she said.

RA 11203, or "An Act Liberalizing the Importation, Exportation and Trading of Rice, Lifting for the Purpose of the Quantitative Import Restriction on Rice, and For Other Purposes," was enacted in 2018.

➤ **InactionA8**

■ **INACTION FROM A1**

GOVT INACTION BLAMED FOR RICE

In a previous interview by *The Times*, former Agriculture secretary and Federation of Free Farmers (FFF) chairman Leonardo Montemayor said market prices for rice range from P45 to P50 per kilo nationwide and could reach P60 to P65 per kilo.

Estavillo said those instances could trigger price manipulation.

"In Bantay Bigas, if there are those prices circulating, farmers would not sell [them]; it [has been] in the hands of traders of the palay ever since the amihan, because 95 percent of our local production goes to the traders and millers buying the palay of our

farmers," she said.

Estavillo said the soaring rice prices were also the effects of price manipulation and price speculation.

She compared the situation to the oil sector, where prices would rise whenever the world market price went up.

However, she pointed out that there is already a rice crisis on the world market.

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the price of rice increased to 129.7 points in July from 126.2 in June.

ARIC JOHN SY CUA



Landbank to use data analytics in agri financing tack

BY JED MACAPAGAL

THE Land Bank of the Philippines said it will be working with the Philippine Space Agency (PhilSA) and the Department of Science and Technology-Advanced Science and Technology Institute (DOST-ASTI) on the integration of space data and analytics to its financing strategies in the agriculture sector.

The collaboration, signed by the three parties last week, covers

the development and utilization of space-related technologies for financial applications, conduct of joint research and exchange of relevant data for research undertaking, organization of training symposia or similar activities and sharing of technological resources.

"Our collaboration with PhilSA and DOST-ASTI is a welcome opportunity to further strengthen Landbank's agribusiness value chain financing strategies through

cutting-edge data. We will continue to explore innovative opportunities to firm up our support for modernizing and growing the agriculture sector," said Lynette Ortiz, Landbank president and chief executive officer, in a statement.

Ortiz added the partnership is expected to provide the bank with key insights that will strengthen its capabilities in rolling out more effective lending strategies for the agribusiness value chain, including accurate

assessment of multiple risks, monitoring on a near-real-time and site-specific basis and understanding of the performance and prospects of various agricultural commodity systems.

Landbank said this will further help in supporting all players in the agribusiness value chain.

The state-run bank reported its outstanding loans to agriculture and rural development reached P713.8 billion as of the first half of the year.



Negros lawmakers oppose sugar import liberalization

By **GILBERT BAYORAN**

BACOLOD CITY – Congressional representatives of Negros Island are strongly against sugar import liberalization, as proposed by Finance Secretary Benjamin Diokno, which will allow food and beverage manufacturers to directly import sugar.

In House Resolution 1199, Reps. Jose Francisco Benitez, Joseph Stephen Paduano, Greg Gasataya, Gerardo Valmayor Jr., Alfredo Maraño III, Juliet Marie Ferrer, Emilio Bernardino Yulo, Mercedes Alvarez, Michael Gorriceta, Jocelyn Limkaichong and Manuel Sagarbarria – who represent 11 congressional districts in Oriental and Occidental Negros – said the liberalization of sugar importation would have a negative impact on the domestic sugar industry.

Diokno earlier said his proposition forms part of the finance department proposal to increase the tax rate of sugar sweetened beverages in the country.

Republic Act 10963, known as the Tax Reform for Acceleration and Inclusion (TRAIN) law, imposed a tax of P6 per liter of sweetened beverages using purely caloric or non caloric sweeteners, or a combination of these, and P12 per liter of sweetened beverages using high fructose corn syrup.

It mandates that, for the first five years of effectivity, programs under RA 10659 or the Sugarcane Industry Development

Act will be among the social welfare programs to be funded by 30 percent of TRAIN revenues.

However, the Negros lawmakers said only P3.92 billion had been allocated between 2018 and 2023 for SIDA programs, despite revenues from tax on sweetened beverages comprising 52 percent of the P336.1 billion total revenues, from excises taxes under the TRAIN law in the same period.

"Instead of assuring us of ploughing back revenues from tax on sweetened beverages to strengthen the sugar industry, Secretary Diokno is offering liberalization of sugar importation," Benitez said.

Benitez fears that liberalizing sugar importation, without adequate support for local sugarcane farmers, will weaken the domestic sugar industry.

"Sugar production this year is projected to decrease due to El Niño and our limited milling capacity. But instead of helping our sugar producers, flooding our market with imported sugar will kill our domestic sugar industry," he pointed out.

He cited a study commissioned by the National Economic and Development Authority in 2021, which cautioned against sugar trade liberalization, stating that liberalization "would favor the rich more than the poor, and will be at a clear cost to the sugar industry stakeholders."



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'Kadiwa on Wheels' muling iikot sa San Juan

ASAHAN na makakabili ng mga murang produktong bigas, sariwang gulay, mga prutas at iba pa sa pagbabalik ng 'Kadiwa on Wheels' sa San Juan ngayong umaga.

Lalapag ito sa Barangay Onse mula alas-otso nang umiaga hanggang alas-12:00 nang tanghali habang nakabantay sina Kapitan Obet Alba at iba pang opisyal ng barangay

para sa pagdagsa ng mga residenteng sasamantahin ang murang halaga na mga produkto ng mga magsasaka.

Ayon kay San Juan Mayor Francis Zamora, marami pang iikot na 'Kadiwa on Wheels' sa lungsod para sa mga sariwa at murang mga produkto na makatutulong na rin sa mga magsasaka. (Vick Aquino)

Malaya Business Insight

Date: 18 AUG 2023 Page: A6



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DEPT. OF AGRICULTURE

Soybean gains, corn down

CHICAGO soybeans climbed during Asian trading on Thursday, extending gains from the previous session, as uncertainty about the size of the upcoming US harvest and concerns over tight domestic supplies supported prices.

Corn and wheat were slightly lower ahead of the US weekly export sales report to be released later in the day.

The most-active soybean contract on the Chicago Board Of Trade (CBOT) was up 0.5 percent at \$13.29-3/4 a bushel.

Expected dry weather conditions early in the growing season would mean smaller soybean har-

vests this fall, according to the US government.

"From the data point of view, the supply of US soybeans in the new season has returned to a tense situation," Huatai Futures analysts in China said in a note.

"In late August, the US soybean-producing areas may experience high temperature and less rain again."

Traders are awaiting the US Department of Agriculture' (USDA) weekly export sales data, with analysts expecting sales of zero to 400,000 metric tons for 2022-23 and 550,000 to 1.3 million metric tons for 2023-24. - Reuters



India considers wheat imports from Russia

NEW DELHI/MUMBAI- India is in talks with Russia to import wheat at a discount to surging global prices in a rare move to boost supplies and curb food inflation ahead of state and national elections next year, according to four sources.

The imports would allow New Delhi to intervene more effectively in the market to drive down wheat prices that stoked inflation to a 15-month high in July.

"The government is exploring the possibility of imports through private trade and government-to-government deals. The decision will be made cautiously," one of the sources told Reuters, when asked about wheat imports from Russia.

India has not imported wheat through diplomatic deals in years. The last time India imported a significant amount of wheat was in 2017, when private traders shipped in 5.3 million metric tons.

The government's plan to import Russian wheat is one of the supply-side measures being considered to bring down prices of key commodities like fuel, cereals and pulse along with an extension of rural schemes to ease the impact of inflation on the poor, two of the sources with knowledge of the matter said.

Sources did not want to be named as the discussions are private and the final decision might be weeks away. India's finance, trade and government spokespersons did not reply to emails and messages seeking comment.

Last month, Sanjeev Chopra, the most senior civil servant at the



A farmer drinking water in a wheat field near Jaipur. (Reuters Photo)

federal food ministry, said there was no proposal to import wheat from Russia.

Although India needs only 3 million to 4 million metric tons of wheat to plug the shortfall, New Delhi might consider importing 8 million to 9 million tons of wheat from Russia to have a far bigger impact on prices, another source said.

Since the war in Ukraine last year, Russia has become India's second biggest seller of goods mainly on account of discounted oil purchases by New Delhi.

"Russia has indicated its willingness to offer a discount on prevailing market prices. There are no restrictions on the export of food commodities from Russia," one official said.

India is also importing sunflower oil from Russia and settling payments in US dollars and is planning to use the same approach, the official added.

"India can easily secure a discount of \$25 to \$40 per ton from Russia. This will ensure that the landed cost of wheat remains significantly below local prices," said

a dealer based in Mumbai with a global trade house.

Wholesale wheat prices in India surged around 10 percent over two months to a seven-month high in August on limited supplies.

Wheat stocks at government warehouses were at 28.3 million tons on Aug. 1, 20 percent below the 10-year average.

Last year, India banned wheat exports due to lower output, and this year's crop is also expected to be at least 10 percent lower than the government's estimate. **Reuters**