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Marcos orders review of proposals for solar-powered irrigation program

By **BELLA CARIASO**

President Marcos has ordered a review of proposals from an alliance of farmers for a nationwide solar-powered irrigation program, and for the establishment of a farm-to-market digital integrated backbone as well as of an electronic commodity exchange system to enable farmers to sell their products directly to buyers in urban areas.

In an interview with **The STAR**, Federation of Free Farmers (FFF) board chairman and former agriculture secretary Leonardo Montemayor said the President made the promise on Wednesday during the group's 70th anniversary celebration, which he attended.

Montemayor said they relayed the recommendations to Marcos through a memorandum delivered a week before Marcos graced the event.

"There is still no specific decision from the President as it is too soon as the memorandum was only sent last week, although he did promise to order its review. He thinks it's reasonable," Montemayor said.

He added the FFF would be ready to provide details of at least seven of the proposals if asked by

Malacañang.

"We can give the proper justification should they be asked from us," the FFF official said.

Montemayor said that the proposed solar-powered irrigation program intends to cover at least 200,000 underserved service areas of the National Irrigation Administration.

"In this regard, give priority consideration to the fertigation (irrigation cum fertilization) proposal of Oscar Violago, the principal architect and developer of the successful Casecnan multi-purpose irrigation and power project and the Wawa Dam water supply system for Metro Manila," Montemayor added.

Also included in their memo is their voicing of support for the memorandum of understanding between the Panay Railways Inc., Department of Science and Technology and Philtrak Inc. for the establishment of a farm-to-market digital logistics integrated backbone system.

"This project will help farmers and fisherfolk to mass transport their produce directly to urban markets, thus increasing their incomes and making food more affordable to consumers. It will optimize the use of the same

physical space of the 38-year de-commissioned Panay Railways by also including food production, postharvest facilities, public markets, mass housing and other service facilities," he said.

"There will be real time posting of selling bids, online purchasing, payments and delivery arrangements. It will cut down on cost and will improve earnings of the farmers through the cooperatives. Consumers will also benefit," he said, referring to FFF's proposal for a nationwide electronic commodity exchange system. The program involves using idle warehouses of the National Food Authority as delivery and storage areas for farm products.

Other proposals of FFF are the return of the Philippine Crop Insurance Corp. to the Department of Agriculture, issuance of an executive order creating an office for agricultural cooperatives within the DA, a review of the agricultural guarantee program of the Philippine Guarantee Corp., and strengthening of farmers' and other stakeholders' representation in the DA, particularly in the management of the Rice Competitiveness Enhancement Fund and the Agricultural Competitiveness Enhancement Fund.



Marcos vows neglected agro-fishery sector revival

PRESIDENT Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. vowed on Wednesday to revive the agricultural reforms initiated by his father, the late President Ferdinand E. Marcos Sr., as he called for a whole-of-nation approach to address the challenges in the agri-fishery sector.

Speaking at the commemoration of the 70th anniversary of Federation of Free Farmers (FFF) in Quezon City, the President said that his administration is

facing a monumental task of developing and modernizing the Philippine agri-fishery sector, which has been left behind for decades.

"Kaya po ito po ay napakalaking trabaho. Kaya't kailangan po natin, hindi kaya ng pamahalaan na nag-iisa na gawin lahat ito, kaya't kailangan po natin ang tulong ninyo. Kailangan namin ang sipag ninyo, kailangan namin ang advice ninyo dahil kayo ang

nakaharapsa mga problema ng agrikultura na dinadaan natin ngayon," said the President.

"Kaya po ay asahan po ninyo ang ating pamahalaan, ang inyong gobyerno, ay nandito po upang gawin ang lahat upang tulungan ang ating mga magsasaka na makapag-produce ng magandang ani, na makapangisda nang sapat para sa ating mga kababayan, at maipagbili naman ito sa presyo

na abot-kaya ng ating mga mamamayan. At kasabay din diyan ay kailangan naman ay may magandang hanapbuhay ang ating mga magsasaka at ang ating mga fisherfolk," the President added.

"You have my assurance that the government is striving to implement efficient mechanization strategies to reduce post-harvest losses and to ensure the optimal yield at an affordable cost." PCO



RCEP conditionalities in limbo

COMMENTARY

ERNESTO M. ORDOÑEZ

Six key agriculture conditionalities identified in the February 21 Senate ratification document of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) have not been met. In the eight months since the ratification, very little has been done to address the issues.

The RCEP document states that if the executive branch does not enforce the provisions: "The Senate of the Philippines may recommend to the President the withdrawal from the agreement."

While many argue that the trade deal is beneficial to the industry and service sectors, this is not the case for agriculture.

Last April, 141 organizations wrote the Senate identifying the dangers RCEP posed to agriculture. Responding to this valid concern, Senator Loren Legarda said that she would

resign as RCEP sponsor unless conditionalities were specified in the ratification document.

The six conditionalities listed here were approved by the international trade committee of the legislated public-private Philippine Council of Agriculture and Fisheries on March 11, 2022. These were actually proposed much earlier on Jan. 5 by the AgriFisheries Alliance, which is composed of the three main sectors of farmers and fisherfolk (represented by Alyansa Agrikultura), agribusiness (Philippine Chamber of Agriculture and Food, Inc.) and science and academe (Coalition for Agriculture Modernization in the Philippines).

Here is the status of each conditionality:

1. Restore the public-private antismuggling committee. A smuggling indicator by the United Nation's Comtrade showed the discrepancy between the amounts reported by countries exporting to the Philippines and our own Bureau of Customs has more than doubled to P1.3 trillion in 2021 from P500 billion in 2019. In the two instances when the interagency committee (which reported to the president) was operational, smuggling rate was down by 25 percent and 31 percent.

Status: There is a small development because the Department of Agriculture (DA) has created a low-level committee. But for more than one year, the request by this committee to meet with the Customs Commissioner has not been fulfilled.

2. Restore the private sec-

tor monitoring of the DA budget. The Commission on Audit reported unliquidated and unexplained expenses of P21 billion to P23 billion each for the years 2020, 2021 and 2022. The amount is already one-third of the DA budget of less than P70 billion.

Status: This has not been done. Up until now, the complete list of DA-funded projects has not been given to the private sector-led Regional Agriculture and Fisheries Councils to activate their legally mandated budget monitoring task.

3. Set up the Market Information System and Network. This is also mandated in the 1997 Agriculture and Fisheries Modernization Act. The shocking fact is that we have not implemented this for the last 26 years.

Status: The DA proposed a measly P10 million for this in the 2023 budget, and a similarly measly P67 million for

2024. The latter was even reduced by half in the official submission to Congress.

4. Formulate and implement a farm consolidation and cluster plan. With farms averaging less than two hectares with no economies of scale, we cannot be globally competitive.

Status: For the first time, there was a small P155-million budget in 2023. Surprisingly, this was decreased to P145 million for 2024.

5. Identify key RCEP threats and corresponding measures. Countries like Vietnam identified similar threats and succeeded when they joined the World Trade Organization (WTO). We did not, and so we consequently suffered. We must not let this happen again.

Status: We have not identified these and we also have not come up with the appropriate measures to respond to these.

6. Formulate and implement an RCEP action plan with a corresponding budget. Learning from our history, we must do this immediately so we do not repeat our deplorable experience with the WTO.

Status: This plan has not been submitted. Potential RCEP threats will occur and once again, agriculture will suffer more than ever.

The Senate has done a commendable job in identifying the key agriculture conditionalities. Unfortunately, these are largely unfulfilled.

The Senate must now take the next step in motivating the Executive to fulfill these prerequisites. To highlight: the RCEP ratification document states that the Senate "may recommend withdrawal from the Agreement."

Our agriculture industry is tired of always being left behind. **INQ**



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Natl Fibercrops Summit up next month

THE Philippine Fiber Industry Development Authority (PhilFIDA) will organize this year's National Fibercrops Summit, aimed at addressing the multifaceted implementation challenges facing the fiber crop industry.

Presidential Communications Secretary Cheloy Garafil said the summit will be on November 14 at the DA-Bureau of Soils and Water Management Convention Hall in Diliman, Quezon City.

PhilFIDA is an attached agency under the Department of Agriculture (DA), which is currently headed by President Ferdinand Marcos Jr.

"PhilFIDA's commitment to driving innovation, growth, and

prosperity within the fibercrop sector is encapsulated by this year's theme, "Hibla Bida!!!!" the agency said in a statement.

Garafil said the summit will highlight priority fiber crops, including abaca, cotton, piña, salago and silk.

Aside from critical discussion on issues in the industry such as fiber quality, market demand and trade regulations, the summit will also serve as a platform to exhibit a diverse array of products derived from priority fiber crops, Garafil said.

Another key highlight of the summit is a Fashion Show, featuring Filipino designer Maria Fernandina Sandico, who is renowned for her use of abaca, cotton and nipa as

materials for creating exquisite pieces of clothing, Garafil added.

PhilFIDA is the result of the consolidation of the Fiber Industry Development Authority (FIDA) and the Cotton Development Administration (CODA) which is mandated to promote the growth and development of the natural fiber industry through research and development; production support; extension support, education and training services; fiber processing and utilization; and standards implementation and trade regulation.

On Oct. 4, 2004, then president Gloria Macapagal Arroyo approved Executive Order (EO) 366, for a strategic

review of "the operations and organizations of the Executive branch and providing options and incentives for government employees who may be affected by the rationalization of the functions and agencies of the Executive.

The FIDA, which was created by EO 709 dated July 27, 1981, was mandated to promote the growth and development of the Philippine natural fibers, except cotton.

The CODA, which was created under Republic Act 8486, signed on Feb. 11, 1998, was mandated to undertake initiative that would spur the growth of the local cotton industry.

CATHERINE S. VALENTE



PFDA opens new Davao Oriental fish port

THE Philippine Fisheries Development Authority (PFDA) and the city government of Mati has inaugurated Monday the newly constructed Mati City Fish Port in Barangay Centro, Davao Oriental.

PFDA said the facility aims to provide the city with an adequate post-harvest facility for the handling and distribution of fish and fishery products as well as to effectively ensure food security and sustain the incomes of fishery-based households and enterprises in the area.

"Mati City is a very strategic location to build a fish port because it is located along the eastern seaboard and is a tuna highway. With this, there is a big potential for Mati City Fish Port to be a bigger fish port," said Glen Pangapalan, PFDA acting general manager, in a statement.

Pangapalan also invited local fishing operators to support and utilize the new Mati City Fish Port to improve economic trade and activity as well as to boost tourism in the city.

Local fish producers, fish buyers including wholesalers, retailers and viajeros, as well as constituents of Mati City are expected to benefit from the project as the facility has a market hall, harbor area, fish landing and other necessary components of a post-harvest facility, PFDA added.

At present, PFDA also manages regional fishing ports in Bulan, Sorsogon; Sual, Pangasinan; General Santos; Davao; Zamboanga; Lucena, Quezon; Iloilo; and Navotas. - *Jed Macapagal*



PCCI urges gov't focus on food security, streamlining permits

By Justine Irish D. Tabile
Reporter

THE Marcos administration needs a long-term plan to achieve food security and make doing business easier, the Philippine Chamber of Commerce and Industry (PCCI) said.

These agenda items were contained in a wish list the PCCI was set to submit to President Ferdinand R. Marcos, Jr. The wish list was released on Thursday, the second day of the 49th Philippine Business Conference & Expo (PBC&E).

The resolutions also address power, the environment and climate change, human resources development, industry and trade, infrastructure, digitalization, taxation and tourism.

The PCCI said food security will require infrastructure support, technology transfer, product diversification, an export expansion, economies of scale, and improving the value chains.

It said that the Agrarian Reform Law should be amended to increase the land retention limit from five to 24 hectares to encourage scale in farm production.

It added that the government should implement the Agriculture and Fisheries Modernization Act, Agri-Agra Reform Act of 2009, the National Livestock Program, the Digital Agricultural Land Mapping Program and the Coconut Industry Development Plan.

In terms of government export, the PCCI said the **Departments of Agriculture** and Trade should continue to negotiate free trade agreements to obtain zero tariffs for more agricultural exports and to form a committee overseeing the improvement of the export performance of farm goods.

The PCCI also urged the President to change the tax rules to make it easier for registered business enterprises (RBEs) to access incentives and tax refunds.

“(We are) urging the National Government to provide a stable and predictable business en-

vironment by ensuring clear, consistent, and transparent regulations, streamlining and simplifying bureaucratic processes, reducing unnecessary red tape, and eliminating barriers that hinder business growth and development,” it said.

It said value-added tax (VAT) zero-rating and the application of the cross-border doctrine to economic zones will help the Philippines “remain competitive in attracting capital and foreign direct investment that are urgently needed to finance large-scale government projects, create more and better jobs, and boost economic growth.”

It said that the Departments of Finance and Trade, alongside the Bureau of Internal Revenue (BIR) should immediately review the implementing rules and regulations of the Corporate Recovery and Tax Incentives for Enterprises (CREATE) Act.

It said amendments to Revenue Regulations 21-2021 and Revenue Memorandum Circular 24-2022 are in line with the origi-

nal intent of the CREATE Act and will result in the retention of tax incentives for existing registered export enterprises.

“The BIR (should) consider that the CREATE Act does not limit the VAT zero-rating to RBEs to the exclusion of other types of PEZA-registered enterprises,” it added.

The PCCI also urged the government to make use of modern technology and renewable energy to make power adequate and affordable.

It said that the BIR, the Department of Energy (DoE), and the Energy Regulatory Commission (ERC) should be consistent in the application of zero-VAT rating on the sale of generated power through all stages of sale in the supply chain for power.

“The DoE (must) ensure the transmission plans declared over the years to connect all three Philippine island groups to one National Grid be finally delivered and fully electrified and that new plans for capacity expansion and RE technologies be accommodated,” it added.



Seaweed put forward as animal feed alternative

THE Department of Agriculture (DA) said it may encourage the use of processed seaweed as an alternative to corn-based animal feed, as a means of lowering the cost of meat and poultry.

"This will relieve our animal raisers from the high cost of commercial feed," Undersecretary Deogracias Victor B. Savellano said in a statement.

Mr. Savellano added that the DA will seek assistance from the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) to develop seaweed as an animal feed.

"We are tapping the expertise of (FAO Country Representative) Lionil Henri Valentin Dabbadie to explore the processing of seaweed as commercial feed for farm animals," he added.

He said seaweed can save on feed costs and is abundant along Philippine coastal areas.

During the second quarter, seaweed was the leading item by volume of all fisheries products, according to the Philippine Statistics Authority.

Output was 365,775 metric tons for the period, accounting for 33.9% of fisheries production.

Other efforts to raise the supply of feed include the proposed conversion of sugarland in Batangas to corn, following the recent closure of the province's sugar central.

"Sugarcane farmers can take on a new livelihood and help supply the requirement for animal feed for livestock and poultry," he said.

In 2022, Central Azucarera Don Pedro, Inc. in Nasugbu, Batangas announced its closure due to the challenging operating environment in the province, citing the lack of cane to support a milling operation. — **Adrian H. Halili**



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PCCI TO GOVT: ENSURE FOOD SECURITY, CUT POWER COST

By ANDREA E. SAN JUAN
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THE Philippine Chamber of Commerce and Industry (PCCI) has called on the national government to put in place the necessary measures that would ensure the country's food security and make power affordable.

PCCI forwarded a set of resolutions to the national government which also pushed for the grant of financial access to small merchants and to enhance the production capacity of Filipinos to reduce the country's reliance on imports.

During the 49th Philippine Business Conference and Expo (PBC&E), the annual business conference organized by the top business group in the country, PCCI presented on October 26

the 49-page copy which contains resolutions in the areas of Agriculture; Energy and Power, Environment and Climate Change; Education and Human Resources Development; Industry and Trade; Ease of Doing Business and Stability of Rules and Regulations; Infrastructure, Transport, and Logistics; Innovation and Digitalization; Taxation, and Tourism.

Under the agriculture pillar, the business group is urging the National Government to "develop a long-term plan to attain food security through infrastructure support, technology transfer, product diversification, export enhancement, economies of scale, and adhering to the improvement of value chains and supply chains."

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PCCI...

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In providing infrastructure support for the agriculture sector, PCCI said the government should improve the agriculture supply chain system through efficient logistics and transportation. Among the actions needed to be done, it noted, is to "ensure and prioritize provision

for post-harvest facilities across all sectors to increase supply chain efficiencies."

The PCCI also urged the government to implement Section 13 of the Agriculture and Fisheries Modernization Act (AFMA) which mandated the set up of a national information network to establish a market information system for the Department of Agriculture.

In providing access to finance, the business group pointed out the need to "formulate and

implement a strategy to compel the banks to adhere to their mandate under Agri-Agra Reform Credit Act of 2009" to lend to smallholders and fisherfolks.

"This includes the development strategies and programs for the farmers whose loans were condoned," the business group said.

To intensify the country's exports, PCCI urged the DA and the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) to negotiate free trade agree-

ments with the aim of zero tariff for all the country's agricultural exports.

Stable power supply

In terms of ensuring "adequate and affordable" power supply throughout the country, the business group is urging the government to harness renewable energy resources that meet criteria of reliability and affordability.

"For the [Department of Energy] DOE to ensure the Transmission Plans declared over the years to connect all three Philippine Islands to one National Grid be finally delivered and fully electrified and that new plans for capacity expansion and Renewable Energy (RE) technologies be accommodated to address power needs and audited to confirm adequate planning, resources, and performance has been done to ensure timely delivery, without delays," the PCCI said.

PCCI is also urging the government to provide industries and enterprises with the "necessary" tools, resources, and support programs to enhance their competitiveness, both in the domestic and international markets, contribute to economic growth, and promote innovation in the Philippines's industrial and trade sectors.

In supporting local businesses, PCCI said the government should zero in on allocating additional financial resources.

Meanwhile, the group said the government should also support local small merchants by streamlining bureaucratic processes and reducing regulatory burdens.

For regulated goods, PCCI called on the Bureau of Customs (BOC) to reduce delays, streamline processes, and address the backlog in issuing Importer Clearance Certificates (ICCs).

Under the education pillar, PCCI urged the national government to propel the Philippine education system to "world-class" status by harnessing new technologies, fostering innovation, and implementing comprehensive reforms that will prepare students for success in the digital age and the globalized world of work.

Ease of doing business

PCCI asked the government to provide a "stable and predictable" business environment.

In particular, the business group urged the Bureau of Internal Revenue (BIR) to review its policies on the "frequency of audits and documentary requirements of audits (LOAs) for business closures and to provide amnesty for long-time open cases.

"Resolve to further urge the BIR to have a regular dialogue between the local/regional BIR offices and the PCCI Local Chambers," the resolution read.

Logistics master plan

PCCI said the national government should implement a "comprehensive" national infrastructure, transportation and logistics master plan that outlines a long-term vision for connectivity and countrywide development. The group said there is a need to rationalize port fees.

The group prodded Congress to enact the International Maritime Trade Competitiveness Act "to strengthen government oversight over local charges imposed by international shipping lines."

The top business group in the country asked the government to focus on "underserved" regional and provincial container terminal hubs closest to growing domestic trade markets to address logistics bottlenecks and ensure "further containerization and the attraction of direct international business."



Occidental Mindoro being positioned as PH's 'salt capital'

CALAPAN CITY, Occidental Mindoro – The Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) in Mimaropa Region is working to up-skill small-scale salt processors, also called "salt farmers," in this province with the goal of enhancing their productivity and entrepreneurial knowhow.

In an interview on Wednesday, Jason Advincula, a post-harvest technical staff member at BFAR-Mimaropa, said his office targets to position Occidental Mindoro as the "Salt Capital of the Philippines."

Advincula said it is BFAR's intention to teach salt farmers about the modern processes for gathering and processing salt from the sea, enabling them to significantly grow their production capabilities.

BFAR-Mimaropa announced on Wednesday that it just concluded a six-day training program for some 180 salt farmers from the towns of San Jose and Magsaysay.

The seminar titled "Capability Training on Salt Industry Project Development" was conducted by the bureau's Fisheries Production and Support Services Division (FPSSD)-Fisheries Post Harvest and Marketing Services Section (FPHMS).

"There were speakers on various subject matters related to salt processing... but also about the business aspect of salt production. Representa-

tives of some large cooperatives of salt farmers shared their marketing insights with their small-scale counterparts," Advincula said in Filipino.

He said salt farmers from six barangays across the two municipalities took part in the seminar, which delved into topics such as solar salt production and salt production management.

BFAR-Mimaropa's higher objective is for salt farmers in San Jose and Magsaysay to spread their newfound knowledge to counterparts across the region, eventually expanding the local salt-processing industry.

It was explained that by increasing local salt production, the Philippines can reduce its dependence on salt imports, which can have a positive economic and self-sufficiency impact.

According to the Department of Science and Technology, Occidental Mindoro is one of the biggest salt-producing provinces in the country, owing to the fact that it is surrounded by saltwater.

At the height of its production in the 1990s, it boasted of producing and supplying about 18 percent of the country's annual salt requirement.

Presently, the province still supplies salt to its neighboring areas in Southern Luzon, as well as Visayas and Mindanao, but only accounts for almost 75,000 metric tons (MT) or 12 percent of the national salt requirement of 590,000 MT. PNA

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Red tide alert itinaas ng BFAR sa bahagi ng Samar, Cebu

"Wag kumain ng mga lamang-dagat na kinuha mula sa ilang dalampasigan sa Samar at Cebu dahil sa red tide phenomenon".

Ito ang naging babala ng Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) sa publiko sa local advisory na inilabas nitong Martes.

Sinabi ng BFAR na nagpositibo sa Pyrodinium bahamense, isang toxic microorganism na nagdudulot ng paralytic shellfish poisoning (PSP), ang tubig mula sa Cambatutay Bay.

Huling naitala ang red tide sa Cambatutay Bay dalawang taon na ang nakakaraan.

Ligtas namang kainin ang mga isda, pusit, alimango at hipon na nakuha

mula sa nabanggit na lugar.

Samantala, nagbabala rin ang BFAR na iwasan din ang paghuli at pagkain ng shellfish mula sa munisipalidad ng Madridejos, sa Cebu matapos na magpositibo rin ito sa red tide.

Nauna nang itinaas ng BFAR ang red tide warn-

ing sa San Pedro Bay sa Basey, coastal waters ng Calbayog City, at Irong-Irong Bay sa Catbalogan City, lahat ay nasa Samar.

Kabilang din dito ang Matarinao Bay sa mga bayan ng General MacArthur, Quinapondan, Hernani, at Salcedo sa Eastern Samar.



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Much ado about rice

Rice is life, and this has never been more true than for Filipinos. Around 80 percent of the Philippine population spend a fourth of their income on this grain, amounting to about 33,000 tons per day, nationwide. According to the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI), the Philippines is the sixth highest consumer of rice in the world.

And yet, like many objects of desire, getting rice onto one's plate has historically been fraught with challenge. Prices are volatile and can (often adversely) affect the base price of other consumer items as well.

The Philippines has been called the biggest rice importer in the world, yet according to an article titled "Analyzing The Rice Crisis in the Philippines," by the Academics, Research and Development Department of Ateneo Economics Association in the Ateneo Economics Association (AEA)

Blog, the country only imports 15 percent of its supply. Adding to this, according to the Department of Agriculture, the Philippines is the eight top rice producer in the world.

Why, then, do stocks always seem to be running out?

There are many reasons, some of them having to do with the way rice is produced and the process it undergoes to get to one's plate. This includes inadequate water supply due to a lack of irrigation facilities, scattered agricultural lands that make it difficult to bank on economies of scale, unpredictable weather, increases in gas and fertilizer, the conversion of land into malls and subdivisions, systemic neglect and corruption, food waste, and so on. In short, a



AVANT GARDENER
YVETTE TAN

lack of support for local farmers on so many levels that has been going on for so many years, nobody can blame farmers for telling their children not to go into the family business, because small farming in the Philippines is usually a losing prospect.

One factor that affects rice prices, however, that the rice-buying public may be unknowingly complicit in, is generating artificial shortage. This happens when supply is taken out of rotation and put into storage, as with hoarding, when rice stocks are stored in warehouses instead of being made available in the market. But what does the rice-eating public have to do with this?

According to the AEA article, an exaggerated response, whether because of misinformation or a lack of comprehension about the real state of production, can cause suppliers to withhold stock even as consumers increase their purchases out of fear. In short, panic buying may encourage suppliers to hoard stocks to sell at a higher price at a later date. This means there's more demand than supply, which can lead to an artificial shortage and a corresponding increase in prices. There may be no real shortage at all, just the public perception of it.

Economists suggest that importing rice will lower prices by making up for the unavailable

stock in the market, but this only increases the country's dependence on imports while basically letting hoarders get away scot-free. In the end, it's the farmers and consumers who pay while hoarders enrich themselves off the blood and sweat of their fellowmen.

Along with the many things the government must do to lower the cost of production while also raising farmers' profits (enough to entice young people to pursue a long term career in agriculture), it must also clamp down on hoarding, not just of rice, but of other similarly volatile crops like onions and garlic as well.

The country continues to lumber towards food insecurity, a massive machine losing cogs and spokes too small for it to notice until almost everything has fallen away. There has been constant clamor to shore up our ability to feed ourselves going back decades, but this continues to be ignored because the general public doesn't think farming is glamorous (nor should it be made to be), much to the delight of the folks who profit unscrupulously from it.

But you know what's even less glamorous than farming? Going hungry.

Famine chic isn't a good look on anybody.

Cluster farming at franchise show

GOLDMINE Farm to Market is now giving an opportunity for overseas Filipino workers and seafarers to become business owners and profitable entrepreneurs through a potentially successful partnership in a novel rice trading venture.

This bit of good news was learned by various stakeholders on Oct. 4, 2023, from Orlando "Orly" Manuntag, CEO of Goldmine Farm to Market and spokesman for the Grains Retailers Confederation of the Philippines (Grecon), along with Secretary Lorenzo "Larry" Gadon, chairman of the the National Anti-Poverty Commission, and Danilo Yang, chairman of Juan Novo Ecijano sa Kaunlarang Pambansa Inc. (JNEKP) and also a former commissioner of the Presidential Anti-Corruption Commission, who introduced the innovative strategy known as collective and cluster farming.

Basically an agricultural approach where farmers work in groups or clusters, this endeavor is also participated in by Rowena del Rosario-Sadicon, founder and lead convenor of the Philippine Rice Industry Stakeholders Movement (Prism) and also president and CEO of Victor del Rosario Rice Mill Corp., based in San Leonardo, Nueva Ecija.

The Victor del Rosario Rice Mill has sponsored 100 hectares as a pilot area for cluster farming where hybrid seeds are planted in Rizal town also in the province that are expected to be harvested this October.

This innovation obtained the support of local and national agriculture officials and cooperative groups.

During a recent meeting organized by the JNEKP, 42 farmer associations and cooperatives composing the organization of Novo Ecijanos sorted out problems on rice production in the country and recommended promising sustainable solutions.

Meanwhile, Yang elaborated on advantages of collective and cluster farming, underscoring the benefits it offers to both the government and Filipino farmers.

Goldmine Farm to Market itself aims to subsidize 100 hectares of farmland in Nueva Ecija this cropping season.

This assistance includes the provision of seeds, fertilizers and pesticides, and its post-harvest

facilities.

By doing so, Manuntag said, Goldmine intends to show tangible benefits of collective and cluster farming to the wider community.

With farmers working hard to ensure a steady supply of essential crops like rice, corn and various vegetables, Nueva Ecija in Region 3 (Central Luzon), he pointed out, has been a cornerstone of Philippine agriculture for generations.

In recent years, he noted, traditional agricultural methods had evolved into more sustainable and collaborative approaches such as collective and cluster farming.

For the initial 100 hectares it intends to subsidize, Manuntag said, Goldmine "will provide the farmers everything, from seeds until palay (unhusked rice) is harvested. That way, we would be able to help keep the value chain stable."

"So, we just don't simply engage in rice selling but in helping our farmers produce more for all," he added.

Manuntag described Goldmine as more than just a business venture but "a visionary project with the power to transform the lives of Filipino farmers as we know it."

"It is an integrated trading company of agricultural products that will give farmers, franchisees and consumers a better life and an endless goldmine for them," he said.

Goldmine will be one of 2,000 participants at an international exposition of the Philippine Franchise Association (PFA). The Franchise Asia Philippines (FAPHL) 2023 International Expo will be held at the SMX Convention Center Manila from Oct. 27 to 29, 2023.

During the franchise show, Goldmine will offer different varieties of high-standard rice produced using high-end advance glass sorter machines that mill, polish and enhance the quality of grains in their modern facilities in neighboring Balagtas, Bulacan province.

The company has been in the rice industry since 1998, providing free scholarships in 42 elementary schools and colleges under Doña Thelma Guangua Foundation, including Three Angels Institutes in Dasmariñas in Indang, Cavite province as part of their corporate social responsibility (CSR).

On Jan. 12, 2023, it officially opened itself for franchising in Las Piñas City, Rizal, and other areas.

CELSO M. CAJUCOM



IN THE BAG Orlando "Orly" Manuntag (right, in maroon shirt), Goldmine Farm to Market CEO, hands over various items to farmers in Guimba town in Nueva Ecija as part of its contract agreement in cluster farming, as well as providing seeds, fertilizers and pesticides. The company will also offer its post-harvest facilities, logistics and milling, which cover end-to-end the supply and value chain. Goldmine Rice Mill's advance glass sorter machines polish to enhance the quality of grains. **CELSO CAJUCOM**



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Feed millers warn of higher meat, egg, fish prices

FEED MILLERS said the price of meat, eggs, and fish may rise further due to issues regarding the supply and quality of domestically grown corn used in animal feed.

The Philippine Association of Feed Millers, Inc. (PAFMI) said in a statement that domestic corn is inadequate to meet rising industry demand.

"As it plays a role in many industries, ensuring the access to affordable and good-quality corn is an issue that not only affects the livelihood of farmers but also has broader implications for food security and economic stability for the rest of the community," PAFMI President Edwin C. Mapanao said.

Mr. Mapanao added that the majority of animal feed formulations involve yellow corn, which also has human-food and bioethanol applications.

"Corn is a staple crop in the Philippines as it serves as a vital food, feed, and industrial raw material," he said.

PAFMI declared its support for the extension of the lowered 5% tariff on corn imports, first imposed by Executive Order (EO) 10.

"With corn-reliant sectors developing and demand increasing, keeping tariffs low is an urgent but temporary measure," it said.

PAFMI added that further corn imports could address supply issues

and "ultimately aid in sustaining local production of quality meat, eggs, and fish while keeping prices affordable."

EO 10, signed by President Ferdinand R. Marcos, Jr. last year, extended the lower tariffs on rice, corn, and pork until Dec. 31, 2023. The Tariff Commission has since heard arguments for or against their extension, and is due to submit its recommendation to the Palace in about a month.

Corn tariffs are currently set at 5% for imports within the minimum access volume quota and 15% for those exceeding the quota.

PAFMI had called for a standard 5% tariff on corn imports, regardless of volume. — **Adrian H. Halili**



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Bird flu kills over 500 marine mammals in Brazil

BRASÍLIA: At least 522 seals and sea lions have been found dead along the coast of southern Brazil, authorities said on Wednesday, blaming the die-off on the avian influenza.

Brazil declared an animal health emergency over the illness in May after confirming multiple cases in wild birds, and reported its first outbreak of the disease among marine mammals last month in the state of Rio Grande do Sul.

The South American country, the world's biggest chicken exporter, has not reported any cases of domesticated birds or commercial poultry operations.

The Rio Grande do Sul Agriculture Department said the dead seals and sea lions had been found at various points along its coast.

Several of the animals were found near Brazil's border with Uruguay, which also recently reported hundreds of seals and sea lions killed by avian flu.

Peru, Chile and Argentina have also reported cases in marine animals.

Brazil remains classified as free of avian flu, as no cases have been detected in commercial poultry operations, the government said.

The country supplies around 35 percent of all poultry on the international market.

"The notifications do not change the health situation in the state or the country, and there is no risk from consuming poultry or eggs," the Rio Grande do Sul Agriculture Department said in a statement.

There is no treatment for bird flu, which is often deadly in animals.

Avian influenza viruses do not typically infect humans, although there have been rare cases.

AFP



Indonesia considers extending rice handout program to March

JAKARTA- Indonesia may extend its rice handout program further to March 2024 amid concerns over supply disruptions as drought linked to the El Nino weather pattern hit harvests, the country's food procurement agency Bulog said.

Bulog has been giving 10 kilograms of rice to 21.3 million lower-income households every month in Indonesia to help them cope with rising prices of the staple, in a program originally set to run from September to November.

The government has recently extended the handout to December, and is now mulling a second extension.

Bulog said that its rice stock will be sufficient for the program as it has received a mandate to import an additional 1.5 million metric tons of rice, on top of 2.3 million-ton import quota issued earlier this year, the agency's chief Budi Waseso said in a statement late on Wednesday.

Its rice stock now stood at 1.48 million tons, he said.

"Bulog has been assigned to import 1.5 million tons more, and we have contracted 700,000 tons



A farmer collecting paddy during harvest day at a rice field in Candipuro district, Lumajang, East Java province. (Reuters Photo)

for this year," he added.

The extension of the rice handout program to December is part of President Joko Widodo's 13.4 trillion rupiah (\$842.24 million) policy package launched this week to support growth in Southeast

Asia's largest economy.

Other measures in the policy package include a tax incentive for homebuyers and cash handouts for poor families.

Indonesia's 2023 rice output is expected to fall 2 percent to

30.90 million tons, according to its statistics bureau's estimate.

Authorities have warned that there could be a delay in the upcoming rice planting season as El Nino delays the start of the rainy season. -Reuters



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Wheat, corn drops

SINGAPORE- Chicago wheat futures lost more ground on Thursday, with prices sliding to their lowest in almost two weeks, on pressure from beneficial rains in Argentina and ample supplies in Russia.

Corn also extended its losses, while soybeans were largely flat.

The most-active wheat contract on the Chicago Board of Trade (CBOT) was down 0.7 percent at \$5.64-1/4 a bushel, having dropped to \$5.63-1/4 a bushel, the lowest since Oct. 12.

Soybeans added quarter of a

cent to \$13.09 a bushel and corn lost 0.2 percent to \$4.79-1/4 a bushel.

"There have been beneficial rains in Argentina, which are beneficial for the wheat crop," said a grains trader in Sydney. "In Australia, some late rains have improved the crop conditions on the east coast."

Russia's grain harvest in 2023 is seen at 140 million tons, Russian Agriculture Minister Dmitry Patrushev said during a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin on Thursday. - *Reuters*