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Editorial

Agri smuggling, hamon sa bagong DA Secretary

ISANG taon at limang buwan na hinawakan ni President Ferdinand Marcos ang Department of Agriculture (DA). Maraming nag-akala na hindi na bibitawan ng Presidente ang DA sapagkat sa mismong bibig nito nanggaling na maraming dapat isaayos sa nasabing departamento. Napabayaang umano ito kaya nararapat niyang hawakan muna. Ang DA ang isa sa pinakamahalagang tanggapan sapagkat sumasakop ito sa pagkain na kailangan ng bansa. Kapag hindi naging maayos ang pamamahala sa DA, ang buong bansa ay nasa panganib na magutom.

Sa mahigit isang taon na pinamahalaan ni Marcos ang DA, wala namang ipinagbago at tumaas pa ang presyo ng bigas. Pinangako ni Marcos noong nangangampanya na ibaba sa P20 per kilo ng bigas. Hindi ito natupad. Kailangan pa niyang mag-isyu ng Executive Order para maibaba sa P40-45 ang kilo ng bigas. Ang pagkakaroon ng rice ceiling ay nakaapekto naman sa mga magbibigag dahil mataas ang puhunan nila. Maski ang Presidente, hindi alam kung bakit tumaas ang presyo ng bigas.

Habang nagbabanta ang Presidente na hahabulin ang smugglers/hoarders ng bigas, patuloy naman ang pagdagsa ng smuggled rice mula China, Vietnam at Thailand. Ang mga smuggled rice ay iniimbak sa mga bodega sa maraming lugar sa bansa. Hanggang ngayon wala pang "malalaking isda" na nakakasuhan at ikinukulong dahil sa pag-smuggle ng agri products. May isang nahatulan pero "maliit na isda" lang. Nakilala ang smuggler na si Divina Bisco Aguilar na napatunayang nagpuslit ng carrots mula sa Singapore noong 2020. Hinatulan si Aguilar ng apat na taong pagkabilanggo.

Sinabi naman ng Bureau of Customs (BOC) mayroon na silang sinampahan ng kaso dahil sa rice smuggling. Tatlong rice smugglers daw sa Balagtas, Bulacan na sinalakay noong Agosto 30 ang kanilang kinasuhan. Tatlong malalaking bodega ang kanilang ni-raid na naglalaman ng 202,000 sako ng bigas na nagkakahalaga ng P505 milyon.

Ngayong ipinapasa na ni Marcos ang responsibilidad sa bagong Agriculture Sec. Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr., maraming umaasa at nananalangin na magkakaroon na ng pagbabago sa departamento. Itinalaga ni Marcos si Laurel noong Biyernes. Sinabi ni Marcos na malaki ang maitutulong ni Laurel sapagkat marami na itong karanasan. Si Laurel ang may-ari ng Frabelle Fishing Corporation. Bahagi rin siya ng Private Sector Advisory Council na tumutulong sa pamahalaan para sa seguridad ng pagkain.

Naniniwala kami na magagampanan ni Laurel ang tungkulin sa DA at sa pamamagitan niya, darami ang pagkain sa hapag ng Pilipino at matitigil na ang smuggling ng agri products. Kalingain din ang mga magsasaka.



LAUREL BABALASAHIN MGA AGRI EXEC

MAGKAKAROON ng balasan sa management ng Department of Agriculture (DA) matapos na mahirang na kalihim si **Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr.**, ayon kay spokesperson at Assistant Secretary Arnel de Mesa.

Sa isang forum nitong Sabado, sinabi ni De Mesa na nais ni Secretary Laurel na mabalasa ang mga opisyal para sa improvement ng management at operasyon ng kagawaran.

Nais umano ng bagong kalihim na mas malakas at matatag ang sektor ng agrikultura.

Binanggit pa ni De Mesa na kahit noong miyembro pa lamang ng Private Sector Advisory Council si Secretary Laurel, madalas na ang kanilang pagpupulong sa Malacañang.

Noong Biyernes lamang inianunsyo ni Pangulong Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr. ang pagtalaga kay Laurel bilang kalihim ng DA kung saan ang pangunahing marching order nito ay kontrolin ang pagsirit ng presyo ng mga produktong agrikultura.

"Well, the obvious one is trying to gain control of the prices of all the agricultural commodities that are going up at tinatamaan tayo ng 'yon na nga, 'yong napag-usapan ko, climate change, alam ninyo na lahat 'yong swine flu, alam ninyo na lahat 'yong avian flu na tumatama sa atin," paliwanag pa ng Pangulo.

Nangako naman si Laurel na ipagpapatuloy niya ang mga hangarin at programa ni Pangulong Marcos sa sektor ng agrikultura.

Noong nakaraang buwan pa iniulat ng **Bilyonaryo.com** na si Laurel, presidente ng Frabelle Fishing Corporation, ang napipisil ni Marcos na umupong kalihim ng DA.

Isa siya sa matalik na kaibigan ni Marcos at naging top donor (P30 milyon) noong 2022 presidential elections. Nauna rito ay nagsilbi rin si Laurel bilang miyembro ng Private Sector Advisory Council (PSAC) ni Marcos, isang grupo na pinamumunuan ni business tycoon Sabin Aboitiz.



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LAUREL SWORN IN AS AGRICULTURE
SECRETARY, PLEDGES TO WORK WITH
FARMERS, FISHERS

FRANCISCO T. LAUREL JR.



EDITORIAL

New DA chief

PRESIDENT Marcos has appointed a new secretary of the Department of Agriculture (DA), ending more than one year of holding the vital post in concurrent capacity.

In announcing the appointment of Francisco T. Laurel Jr. as the new agriculture secretary, President Marcos said the appointee understands very well the problems confronting the sector.

The Chief Executive said "Secretary Kiko and I are confident that we have a fair understanding, a good understanding of what it is that needs to be done, what are the problems."

We, like other well-meaning people, share the view of Marcos that he held the top agriculture post for some time because "there are many things that only a President could do."

Laurel has been the president of Frabelle Fishing Corp. since 1985 and director of the firm since 2010. He also trained in refrigeration, net manufacturing, engine overhauling and food manufacturing.

President Marcos' first marching order to his boyhood friend Secretary Laurel is to bring down the prices of goods, particularly food and other essential commodities.

Admittedly, the skyrocketing prices of rice and other goods in the local market played a key role in the Chief Executive's decision to hold on to the DA portfolio for more than one year.

The President also wants the new agriculture secretary to address the other problems of the country's beleaguered farmers, fishermen and other farm workers and their loved ones.

Appointing a full-time secretary of the DA, in the view of various quarters, is a move in the right direction.

We, thus, call on the public to rally behind Secretary Francisco T. Laurel as he tries to exert his best efforts to improve the quality of life of the farmers, fishers and other farm workers.



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DA launches research facility in Davao

By **DANESSA RIVERA**

The **Department of Agriculture (DA)** has inaugurated a research facility in Davao City aimed at improving upland farming as it sees strong potential to grow upland harvests to achieve sustainable agriculture and food security.

The Bureau of Soils and Water Management (BSWM), through the

National Soil and Water Resources Research Development Center (NSWRRDC), recently launched the Upland Pedo-Ecological Zone (UpPEZ) Research for Development (R4D) Facility in Sitio Marilog District, Davao City.

The facility was funded by the Bureau of Agricultural Research (BAR) Research for Development (R4D).

NSWRRDC-Highland Pedo Eco-

logical Zone (HighPEZ) chief Henry Apolinar said the 50-hectare parcel of land would be utilized for the conduct of research and for scaling up of technology demonstration for the NSWRRDC UpPEZ.

The Marilog District was selected as the target site because the Davao Agricultural Research for Upland is in the area, which is a Upland Research Center of DA-Regional Field

Office XI.

BAR director Junel Soriano emphasized the importance of having an UpPEZ Research Center as the area is considered as the "future of agriculture, taking in consideration that 50 percent of the Philippine lands is upland, and a number of Filipinos live in such.

Meanwhile, DA senior undersecretary Domingo Panganiban said

the research center would hopefully boost the country's upland harvests.

Upland vegetables include carrots, cabbage, white potato, petchay Baguio and habichuelas.

The BSWM said it has been in constant pursuit towards the attainment of its mandate on the sustainable management of soil and water resources for agriculture.



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Enhancing rice farming in Phl

By **DANESSA RIVERA**

The Philippines has the potential to reap significant benefits from adopting the System of Rice Intensification (SRI), a modern approach to rice cultivation.

However, to fully harness these advantages, the government must enhance its financial support, invest in research and development (R&D), and intensify its information campaign.

In the recent SRI Forum facilitated by the Philippine Council for Agriculture and Fisheries (PCAF), stakeholders urged the government to promote SRI adoption.

This could be done through increasing the budget allocation for organic inputs, inclusion in research and development initiatives, and enhanced information campaigns.

SRI is a climate-smart, agro-ecological methodology for

increasing the productivity of rice by changing the management of plants, soil, water, and nutrients.

As conventional rice production practices become increasingly unprofitable, many farmers are turning to SRI as a means to continually enhance and embrace a more efficient and effective approach to rice cultivation.

DA undersecretary for rice industry development Leocadio Sebastian said that while

the country has been left behind by other countries in terms of reaping the benefits of the modern system of rice growing, SRI has a big future in the Philippines.

While there are already various initiatives to implement SRI around the country, Regional Agricultural and Fishery Council (RAFC) Zamboanga Peninsula vice chairperson and SRI practitioner Adelberto Baniqued said financing is what pre-

vents it from being widely practiced.

The DA official said the government is committed to SRI, with a budget of P250 million approved by the House of Representatives for its implementation.

Moreover, he said that a bigger budget would be allocated for SRI in the future.

To allow local farmers to maximize the benefits of SRI, Sebastian said it is critical to

implement farm clustering as this would allow them to negotiate for more premium rice prices, improving their income.

PCAF said the SRI forum was physically and virtually attended by over 130 participants from the private sector, National Sectoral Committees (NSCs), RAFCs, Small Water Irrigation System Associations, and SRI farmer practitioners from various provinces.



EDITORIAL

As relentless as COVID

Like COVID-19, African swine fever has been unstoppable. Latest data from the Bureau of Animal Industry showed that only 11 of the 82 provinces in the country can be classified as "dark green" or with zero cases of ASF. The government will have to ensure that the problem does not lead to a shortage of pork, especially during the Christmas holidays.

Since 2019 when the first ASF case was recorded in the Philippines, the local hog industry has lost P200 billion, according to industry estimates. While the ASF virus does not jump to humans, it is lethal to hogs, and can kill the animals quickly from the onset of infection.

When the first cases in the country were confirmed in 2019, in Rizal and Bulacan, the reaction bordered on panic, with backyard hog raisers dumping their diseased pigs in rivers and consequently allowing the virus to spread further. Agricultural checkpoints were set up and government containment teams wore hazmat suits in affected areas.

As it became evident, however, that the meat of ASF-infected hogs remained edible although less saleable because of the diseased appearance, the panic subsided. Perhaps the initial reaction was better than the complacency that ensued. The complacency was aggravated by the entry of COVID by early 2020. All attention

and resources were poured into COVID responses. Yet SARS-CoV-2 spread relentlessly across the country, killing, debilitating and infecting millions even after COVID vaccines had arrived.

Also spreading relentlessly was the ASF virus. And like COVID, the effort to stop the spread was stymied by the absence of a vaccine. It didn't take long for the swine disease to spread from Luzon to the Visayas and Mindanao.

Even if ASF does not jump to humans and infected meat can be edible, the spread of the virus poses risks to the country's pork supply. Local producers have repeatedly stressed that pork supply and prices are stable, and will not require a significant increase in imports. Authorities will have to address the issue as they balance the needs of consumers.

Hog and pork producers have suffered enough, and need assistance from the government not only to stop ASF but also to revive the domestic industry. To encourage reporting of infected hogs, they want proper indemnification per diseased pig. They also want protocols tightened for the entry of imported pork and pork products. They blame the weakness of monitoring at the ports for the entry of ASF.

These are reasonable proposals that the government can pursue even as it works to procure reliable ASF vaccines as soon as these become available.

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No shortage of agri commodities this holiday season – DA

By **ROMINA CABRERA**

There will be no shortage of agricultural commodities coming into the Christmas holiday season, the **Department of Agriculture (DA)** has assured the public.

Key commodities, including rice, pork, sugar and chicken, will have enough supply until the end of the year, according to Assistant Secretary Arnel de Mesa, DA spokesman, in an

interview on radio *dzRH*.

He noted that for rice, the country is set to hit its highest production of 20 million metric tons, owing to better weather conditions in the past year.

He added that following the harvest season this November and the recent imports, the DA will achieve a 90-day national stock inventory going into 2024.

As for pork and chicken,

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No shortage From Page 1

he noted that local production and some imports will assure that supply can meet the demand, which tends to increase during the holidays.

"We have 395,000 MT of pork produced in the 4th quarter and we

have additional imports in the past months. For chicken, we have more than enough local production," he said.

Meanwhile, De Mesa said that new Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu

Laurel Jr., will give his marching orders to the department tomorrow.

President Marcos had been holding the DA secretary position since he assumed office in June 2022.

Marcos ordered Laurel to control the surge of prices of agricultural products in the country.



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House to intensify 'all-out war' vs agri-hoarders — solon

The House of Representatives is committed in waging an "all-out war" against those involved in agricultural smuggling, hoarding, and price manipulation.

This was disclosed by Quezon 2nd district Rep. David Suarez, referring to House Speaker Martin Romualdez's call to support President Marcos in the effort to crack down on hoarders and price manipulators of agricultural products.

"Buoyed by this development, and upon the instruction of Speaker Martin Romualdez, the House Committee on Agriculture and Food will intensify its investigation on hoarders and price manipulators not only of onions but of other staple food items like rice," Suarez said in a statement.

"Our mission order is clear: there

is no room for smugglers, hoarders, and price manipulators under this administration," added the solon who is a vice chairperson of the panel.

Last year, supposed hoarding and price manipulation of onions pushed retail prices of the commodity to an absurd P700 per kilo.

Suarez welcomed the recent price reduction of onions by P10 per kilo, but he stressed that the House will not stop in its mission to combat price hikes.

"We commend the efforts of the Department of Agriculture (DA) in stabilizing the retail prices of essential commodities, and we welcome as good news its report that the retail price of onions has decreased by P10 per kilo, with the cost of the red bulbs going down to P130 per kilo from the

previous P140 per kilo," he said.

The lawmaker pointed to the collaboration between the House of Representatives and the executive department in effectively reducing the prices of onions and in filing criminal charges against those involved in the artificial shortage of the commodity.

"The continuing reduction in the price of onion is a testament to the effectiveness of our strategies against price manipulation and profiteering," Suarez said.

"However, it does not signify the end of our mission. The Speaker said there will be no let-up in our committee investigation until we break down the cartels responsible for hoarding and artificial shortages of basic commodities," he noted. (Dexter Barro II)



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Elsewhere, ASF containment is the moral equivalent of war



SUNDAY
STORIES

**MARLEN V.
RONQUILLO**

If you track what other countries in Asia have been doing to rein in the African swine fever (ASF) and relegate it to history or make it a minor animal-health nuisance, the mediocrity of the Philippines' response to the disease would be all too apparent and utterly frustrating because the promise of polity is the resurrection of all things agriculture.

China, with its sophisticated agricultural and animal health institutions and research universities specializing in both animal health sciences and agriculture in general, was able to bounce back quickly from its devastating bout with the virus-driven hog illness in 2019 and the loss of tens of billions of dollars the industry incurred. Hog raisers there are confident that the near-collapse that year is over and done with. Now, in an experiment, China is building wondrous multistory hog farms, which will serve as production enclaves protected from the ASF. There are still occasional reports of ASF outbreaks, but these are on small farms in areas near Hong Kong that are not central to China's hog production.

► Ronquillo A5



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■ RONQUILLO FROM A1

Elsewhere, ASF containment is the moral equivalent of war

Another country, Vietnam, has developed two vaccines found effective against the ASF despite a relatively short history of vaccine development. We need not point out that this is a country split into two by brutal colonization and only started building its agricultural and animal health sciences-focused institutions in the late 1970s. The institutional memory of Vietnam has been about fighting wars of liberation, not economic development. But now, it has two vaccines already field-tested and proven effective against the disease. The Philippines has been set to begin importing 2 million doses of one of these vaccines starting in October up to 2024. These strides, whether you like it or not, are related to Vietnam's learning poverty rate of 18 percent; ours is a globally embarrassing 91 percent. Indeed, what kind of inspired animal health science — or any field of science — would grow deep roots and bloom in a nation with a learning poverty rate of 91 percent?

Even Bhutan has built its effective ASF containment strategy around what it calls the "three Ds": depopulation, dis-

position and disinfection.

Agricultural watchdogs have described the ASF's relentless "pananalasa" (destruction) in local hog farms that started in 2019 as "deadlier, longer and more lethal." From its initial outbreak in Rodriguez, Rizal, in the third quarter of 2019, the ASF has spread into all other regions of the country, except Metro Manila, which no longer issues permits for hog farms and where the small hog farms existing here are those with sow levels of five or less and are operating clandestinely in "bukid" (farm) areas.

The first quarter of 2023 saw ASF outbreaks in Cebu and parts of Leyte, then in hog-raising areas in most of Western Visayas. In September, the disease finally found its way into several villages in Palawan, one of the remaining provinces that had been classified as "ASF-free." In October, ASF hit farms in Oriental Mindoro. We see a pattern here. The ASF virus has entered islands like Palawan and Mindoro.

Where will the ASF strike next in the last two months of 2023? What island province would be in the ASF's devastating line of sight? Or consider this scary question: would the ASF make a deadlier

comeback in Central Luzon farms, which have been slowly and cautiously rebuilding their hog-raising business from near-total wipeout from 2019 to 2022? A farmer-neighbor with three sows who had hopes of building a modest stock from them told me last week that ASF had killed all three after they had been artificially inseminated. It was also in September and October two years ago that ASF wiped out my farm. I did not get any support. Instead, I paid a so-called decommissioning fee of P25,000 when I informed the municipal hall that I already closed my operations.

As if to add insult to the massive injury to the Philippine hog industry, the major step taken by the Philippine government after the ASF dramatically cut down pork supply was to — let this sink in — issue an executive order lowering tariffs on imported pork. In its report on what steps individual countries in Asia took post-ASF, the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization highlighted our tariff cuts. Of all the Asian countries, we were the only one to implement tariff cuts post-ASF infestation and make those cuts, and reckless importation, the anchor of our

pork supply stabilization policy.

We did not try to develop a vaccine ala Operation Warp Speed or like what Vietnam did. We, for God's sake, did not prepare a master plan to make ASF short-lived and less lethal, like what China did. Instead, we imposed a tariff cut with this illusory hope that it would bring down prices and stabilize supply. It's the usual knee-jerk reaction of the lazies, the default policy position of the clueless finance and agricultural apparatchiks.

Agricultural watchdogs have lamented that the first step that should have been undertaken by government after the initial ASF outbreak was to put up border inspections across all ports of entry to make sure imports of pork and other meat products were ASF-free. Up to now, that single, critical step, which is actually easy to take, has not been taken by the authorities.

The frustrated watchdogs should now realize that, while other countries consider the fight against the ASF as the moral equivalent of war, our state mandarins are either too morally flawed to care about hog raisers and the hog industry and, worse, too clueless to even know what to do.



DA: Manok, iba pang bilihin walang taas-presyo sa Pasko

Hindi magkakaroon ng taas-presyo sa mga agricultural product pagsapit ng Pasko, ayon sa isang opisyal ng Department of Agriculture (DA).

Bagama't inaasahan ang pagtaas sa presyo ng mga bilihin tuwing Kapaskuhan hanggang Bagong Taon, tiniyak ni DA Assistant Secretary Arnel de Mesa na matatag ang suplay ng mga agricultural product kaya hindi nila nakikitang magkakaroon ng taas-presyo ng bilihin gaya ng manok at karneng baboy.

Sa kanyang pagsasalita sa isang news forum na ginanap sa Quezon City nitong Sabado, Nobyembre 4, sinabi ni De Mesa na bukod sa mayroong na sapat na suplay ng mga agri product sa loob mismo ng bansa ay tuloy-tuloy din aniya ang pagpasok ng mga imported na produkto.

Wala rin umano silang nakikitang problema sa presyo ng bigas na naging matatag na mula nang alisin ang price cap para sa regular-milled at well-milled rice.



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NEDA okays rice farming early warning system

FOUR agri-tech solution projects in different parts of the country geared towards increasing food productivity were granted funding by the National Innovation Council Executive Technical Board of the National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA) under its 2023 Innovation Grants.

In a statement posted on its official Facebook page on Friday, the NEDA said the four agri-tech solution projects are among the 25 innovation projects approved by the board with funding allotment totaling PhP100 million.

Among the agri-tech solution projects approved were the Alternative Onion Storage System using Controlled Temperature and Automatic Air Flow

Mechanism from the Occidental Mindoro State College and the Project GeoMap: Geospatial Mapping and Information System for Precise Farming and Smart Agriculture from Samar State University.

The 'Alternative Onion Storage System using Controlled Temperature and Automatic Air Flow Mechanism' provides for the construction of a warehouse equipped with an air blow storage system, which offers an alternative method to prolong the life span of onions.

Other agriculture-centered proposal included in the list were the Project GeoMap: Geospatial Mapping and Information System for Precise Farming and Smart Agriculture' by

proponents from the Samar State University; and the TABU: A Mobile Application as an E-Commerce Tool for the Agricultural Industry in Eastern Visayas by proponents from the Eastern Visayas State University.

The proposal of the Philippine Rice Research Institute (Philrice) titled 'Artificial Intelligence for Impact-based forecasting and early warning system for inclusive finance and strengthening of local economic development in Rice-Based Farming Communities' also made it to the list.

The 2023 Innovation Grants project is aligned with the efforts to promote local innovation in national development and sustainable economic growth, as outlined under the Re-

public Act 11293 or the Philippine Innovation Act.

This year's proponents came from government agencies and offices, including State Universities and Colleges (SUCs) and Government-Owned and Controlled Corporations (GOCCs), with projects covering various fields such as from agri-tech solutions and AR/VR education platforms to smart data-driven policies, disaster preparedness, and cultural heritage preservation, showcasing "the creativity of Filipino innovation actors as well as the vibrant and dynamic landscape of innovation across all regions," NEDA said.

A complete list of the approved projects is available on NEDA's official Facebook page. PCO

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Walang taas-presyo sa agri products ngayong holiday season - DA

Naniniwala ang Department of Agriculture (DA) na walang magiging pagtaas sa presyo ng agricultural commodities ngayong holidays season.

Ito ang inihayag ni DA spokesperson Assistant Secretary Arnel de Mesa sa ginanap na News Forum.

"Hindi po. Hindi natin ine-expect 'yan dahil maganda ang supply natin because of the stability of our local production plus tuluy-tuloy ang additional na imports na pumasok na po at papasok," dagdag pa ni de Mesa.

Nakikita rin na

maganda ang produksyon ng karne partikular ang baboy at manok na in-demand ngayong holiday season.

Sa baboy pa lang, karagdagang 300,000 metric tons ang inaasahang mapo-produce sa quarter na ito lamang.

Maging sa karne

ng manok ay nakikitang walang magiging problema dahil sa mataas na local production.

Nananatili naman umanong stable ang presyo ng bigas lalo pa nga at inalis na ang retail price cap well-milled at regular-milled rice.

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Negros town ASF cases contained

BACOLOD CITY – African swine fever (ASF), which has been blamed for hog fatalities in La Castellana, Negros Occidental, is now under control, according to provincial veterinarian Placeda Lemana.

No resurgence of the swine disease has been monitored since cases were detected in September, Lemana said.

Negros Occidental, which has a P6-billion swine industry, has recorded almost 18,000 hog deaths in 20 areas since April. Losses were estimated at around P200 million.

Lemana said surveillance and monitoring of hogs as well as collection of blood samples for laboratory testing are continuing.

ASF cases were recently reported in Kabankalan, Silay, Victorias and Bacolod cities as well as Pulupandan and Hinigaran towns.

Lemana advised hog farmers to coordinate with the provincial veterinary office before raising pigs again.

The provincial government is eyeing swine repopulation next year.

Lemana gave assurance that there is no shortage of pork in Negros Occidental, noting that more than 2,000 heads had been sold outside the province last month.

She said pork is sold for P300 to P315 per kilo in EB Magalona, Talisay and Bacolod and P230 per kilo in Sipalay.

Lemana said affected hog raisers would receive P2,000 in financial assistance from the Provincial Social Welfare and Development Office.

– Gilbert Bayoran