

CLIPPINGS FOR SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 25, 2022

A. SEC. FTL Jr. QUOTED

THE MANILA TIMES

Rice prices up slightly at start of Nov.

B. DA FAMILY

THE PHILIPPINE STAR

Retail price of chicken soars to P210/ kilo

Visayas, Bicol record rains: Agri damage hits P147.3 M

THE MANILA TIMES

Agriculture damage reaches P147M

PEOPLE'S JOURNAL

Salt industry law addresses sector's employment woe- Lawmaker

C. AGRI-RELATED STORY

THE PHILIPPINE STAR

Food for thought: The need to grow

BUSINESS MIRROR

House bill creating pension fund for elderly farmers filed

D. FOREIGN STORY

No stories



Rice prices up slightly at start of Nov.

RICE prices increased in November as government called on the private sector to speed up the importation of the staple.

Latest data from the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) showed that the average retail price of well-milled rice hit P52.36 per kilogram (kg) from Nov. 1 to 5, 2023.

This was higher by 1.5 percent compared with its average retail price of P51.67 per kg posted in October 15 to 17.

Likewise, an increment of 2.1 percent was observed in the price of well-milled rice from its average retail price of P51.25 per kg posted

in the first phase of October or from October 1 to 5.

The PSA said the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) reported the highest average retail price of well-milled rice at P58.79 per kg.

The average price of regular milled rice, meanwhile, stood at P46.96 per kg during the first phase of November, higher by 2.5 percent from the P45.78 per kg logged in the second phase of the previous month.

The figure was likewise 3.7 percent higher compared to the P45.27 per kg posted in the same period of October.

The highest average retail price of

regular milled rice was reported in BARMM at P54.09 per kg.

To ensure sufficient supply and affordable prices of the staple, Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel said that he ordered importers to quickly use their import permits to buy an additional one million tons of rice from abroad.

"I said if they do not import [rice] within 30 days, I will cancel it all because I don't want to be held hostage by permits that were issued to them upon their request," Laurel said.

The DA said it could better manage the supply of rice and avoid price surges by assuring import permits

are used quickly.

As of October 1, PSA reported the country's total rice stock inventory was estimated at 2.04 million metric tons (MT), or 1.9 percent lower than the 2.08 million MT of the same period last year.

However, the PSA noted that the volume was 32.1 percent higher from the previous month's inventory level of 1.55 million MT.

Of the total rice inventory, 52.9 percent were from the commercial sector, 44.9 percent were from households, and 2.2 percent were from the National Food Authority (NFA) depositories. **JANINE ALEXIS**



Retail price of chicken soars to P210/kilo

By BELLA CARIASO

The retail price of chicken went up to P210 per kilo amid the drop in local production as poultry raisers suffered losses amid the flooding of imported frozen products, according to the poultry raisers' group United Broiler Raisers Association (UBRA).

In an interview with **The STAR**, UBRA and Philippine Egg Board chairman Gregorio San Diego said the farmgate price of chicken started to go up on Nov. 16 as many poultry raisers decided to halt their operations after suffering huge losses due to slump in live weight cost.

In an earlier interview, San Diego reported that the farmgate price of chicken has reached as low as P68 per kilo.

"Many (poultry raisers) were forced to suspend raising chicks as no less than the Department of Agriculture (DA) said that there is a surplus (in the supply) 115 days after the imported chicken as of October (2023) reached 32 million kilos," San Diego said.

According to San Diego, based on data from the National Meat Inspection Service (NMIS), there was a 10 percent increase in the total frozen chicken importation from January to October 2023, with 359,340,308 kilos compared to 327,680,597 kilos in the same period of 2022.

"Traditionally, poultry raisers prepare for the holiday season and buy chicks. Normally, during this time, chicks are no longer available but until now, you can still buy," San Diego said.

San Diego added that the retail price of P210 per kilo of chicken in the markets is still high.

"The highest farmgate price is P114 (per kilo). If you deliver that in the market and you incur additional cost, it will be around P165 (per kilo), so the P210 (per kilo) is still high," he said.

He said that consumers still prefer fresh chicken over imported frozen products which have been kept in cold storage facilities for a long time.

At the same time, San Diego said the arrival of frozen imported chicken continues.

"We are preparing a draft (letter) and we hope the Senate will finally investigate this (over importation) even after December," San Diego said, referring to the Senate committee on agriculture and food chaired by Sen. Cynthia Villar.

San Diego said importers take advantage of the expected increase in the demand for chicken this Christmas, as frozen products will continue to flood the markets.

He criticized the DA for its failure to limit the issuance of import permits and Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. should finally address the issue of over importation of chicken.

Import ban

Laurel has issued Memorandum Order 69 banning the importation of domestic and wild birds and their products including poultry meat, day-old chicks, eggs, semen products from Minnesota and South Dakota in the US amid the outbreak of avian influenza virus in the two states.

He cited the official report submitted by the department administrator and chief veterinary officer of the US Department of Agriculture to the World Organization for Animal Health and USDA Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service that there were several outbreaks of H5N1 high pathogenicity avian in-

fluenza in Minnesota and South Dakota affecting domestic birds as confirmed by the National Veterinary Services Laboratories.

"The rapid spread of H5N1 highly pathogenic avian influenza in the United States in a short period of time since its first laboratory detection necessitates a wider coverage of

trade restriction to prevent the entry of HPAI virus and protect the health of the local poultry population," Laurel said.

"All shipments coming from the mentioned areas of the United States of America that are in transit before the official communication of this order to the American authorities shall be allowed, provided

that the products were slaughtered 14 days before the first outbreak in the particular locality," Laurel added.

The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said bird flu spreads among wild aquatic birds worldwide and can infect domestic poultry and other bird and animal species.

Visayas, Bicol record rains; Agri damage hits P147.3 M

By BELLA CARIASO

Damage to agriculture due to record-breaking rains in Eastern Visayas, Western Visayas and Bicol early this week has reached P147.3 million.

The Department of Agriculture said initial assessment of DA offices in the three regions showed that 6,486 farmers were affected, with production loss of 4,980 metric tons.

At least 7,415 hectares of agricultural land were damaged.

"Affected commodities include rice, corn, high-value crops and livestock. Damage was also incurred in irrigation facilities," the DA said.

Losses in palay production were estimated at P145.7 million, with 7,373 hectares of rice fields affected.

Damage to high-value crops was estimated at P697,500; livestock and poultry, P629,400; infrastructure and irrigation facilities, P200,000; corn, P124,500, and cassava, P49,100.

The DA said rice, corn and assorted vegetable seeds worth P29.3 million and native chicken worth P211,500 were distributed to affected farmers.

It said assessment of losses in the fishery sector is ongoing.

The DA said P50 million was allocated under the survival and recovery loan program of

the Agricultural Credit Policy Council. Affected farmers can avail themselves of P25,000 in loans payable in three years.

The DA said the Quick Response Fund would also be tapped for the rehabilitation of affected areas.

State seismologists said the hardest-hit areas in Eastern Visayas experienced 618 millimeters of rain, which is more than a month's record in two days.

The Northern Samar Provincial Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Office said the average monthly rainfall in the province is only 458 mm.

Northern Samar, which was hit by landslides and massive flooding, was placed under a state of calamity. — With Miriam Desacada



DUE TO SHEAR LINE

Agriculture damage reaches P147M

BY JANINE ALEXIS MIGUEL

AGRICULTURAL damage due to flooding caused by the shear line that affected the country in the past week has reached P147 million as of November 24, the Department of Agriculture (DA) said on Friday.

DA Assistant Secretary and spokesman Amel de Mesa said that to date, 6,486 farmers have been affected by the flooding.

"It is our rice fields that were mostly affected with an estimated damage of P145 million," de Mesa said during a public briefing.

Among the affected provinces, the biggest damage was reported in the province of Capiz with an estimated loss of about P80 million and North-

ern Samar with P45 million.

De Mesa added that other provinces affected by the shear line include Albay, Masbate, Sorsogon, and the province of Samar with an affected area of about 7,415 hectares.

According to the official, the department's regional field office has readied interventions for the affected farmers.

"Buffer stocks for our seeds are ready, this is more than 2,100 bags

which cost more than P3 million and corn seeds worth almost P2 million," said de Mesa.

He noted that there is about more than P10 million worth of interventions that are available which also includes assorted seeds of vegetables, livestock, and for alternative livelihood.

The Agricultural Credit Policy Council (ACPC), meanwhile, is open to provide a survival and recovery

loan program to the affected farmers. The loan is worth P25,000, payable for three years without interest.

As the flooding coincides with the planting season this month of November, de Mesa assured that farmers will still be able to harvest in time by April to March next year.

The official also said that equipment will be provided to ensure quick recovery of the damaged farm lands and affected farmers.



Salt industry law addresses sector's employment woe – lawmaker

By Jester Manalastas

AGRI Party-list Rep. Wilbert T. Lee, one of the principal authors of the Philippine Salt Industry Development Act, assured Filipinos that this measure will address the employment issue in the coastlines of the country.

Lee made the assurance as he expressed elation over the approval of a final version of the measure in the Bicameral conference committee.

According to Lee the impending passage of the Philippine Salt Industry Development Act is a significant step to address the need for employment and high-growth industries that will contribute to the country's economic growth, and urged



the government to properly implement its provisions so it achieves its objectives.

"Babantayan natin ito para masigurado na matupad ang layuning batas. Hangad natin na

makinabang talaga ang taumbayan sa batas na ito, lalo na ang mga sitio at komunidad sa ating coastlines," Lee said.

Lee explained that the revival of the salt industry has the potential to generate thousands of new jobs, particularly in the countryside and coastal communities.

For the law to achieve its objectives, the lawmaker said the government should adopt and apply the acronym "ASIN," which stands for: A -- Advancing Market Strategies and Expansion of salt farms; S -- Sufficient appropriation and funding; I -- Innovative Techniques in Salt Development and N -- National Salt Development Roadmap.



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

CHIT U. JUAN

The need to grow

Yes, we all find that we need to grow – grow up, grow old, but grow. And it is the same for our soil. We need to grow soil. Sadly, we are losing healthy soil and we probably have only 60 years left of farmlands to grow food on. I learned from this documentary that we are losing soil every day due to bad practices like using too much fertilizers, too much pesticides and too much tilling of the soil.



Before I watched "The Need to Grow," I came across a news feed on the same evening where our Department of Agriculture spokesperson declared: We need mechanization, scale, clustering of lands, making the farmer more efficient in terms of yields, etc. etc. He probably should first watch this documentary and understand why there is a move to use technology for ancient practices – that of growing the soil. You can read more about the project called "Green Power House" or GPH and its creator, who chose to do something for the Earth with his super high tech knowledge, than making cyber games.

Once we understand why Regenerative Agriculture is the way to correct mankind's mistake, only then can we start to repair the land which has provided us food. Food used to be more nutrient-dense, but sadly our food production today has been affected by hybrid seeds, chemicals and genetically-modified organisms. Think about that every time you rave about your harvest of sweet Thai green mangoes, or the biggest *atis* (sugar apple) in the world. Those were not their natural states, but they have been tampered with and re-engineered to give you the taste or size that you gladly pay for. It is NOT NATURAL.

I do not wish to be preachy but I would like to share with you my own experience in tilling the soil. I made the mistake of hiring a gardener who tilled our organic soil and all the worms went away. The tilled earth also exposed all the microbes in the soil, killing the very life of it. Thanks to our Regenerative Agriculture consultant, we immediately repaired the damage by mulching and allowing the soil once again to heal itself and regenerate. That is on our garden merely 300 square meters in size. Now imagine that in acres and hectares of land that is being tilled everyday. And it could be true that our farmlands will now only be available for the next 60 years globally... if we do not act now.

Also not wanting to sound political as I avoid talks on politics and religion, do read up on why pesticides and fertilizers were created after the world war. They

had excess chemicals and the war had ended so it was turned to inputs for agriculture use. The rest, they say, is history.

Marketing these products to farmers for increased yields was the next project, which sadly we still believe today. It has become a system, an ecosystem, that sees no end. Until you become more aware of what you eat. And where it comes from.

What is more interesting about this film is the fact that the solution to saving the Earth is in what we do everyday. Where we shop, what we eat all dictate what the farmer grows. If we are OK with the quality of food available, things will not change. So I dare you to pick a pechay from the supermarket and pick one from an organic farm. Put on a blindfold and do a sensory test. Smell each one, taste each one. If you do not taste any difference, then chances are you have been so used to eating chemical-laden food, it becomes your new normal. But once you taste tomatoes grown on vines in healthy soil, versus tomatoes grown under hydroponic conditions and further a commercial tomato that is picked green to withstand travel (and becomes red only a week or so after), you may be able to tell the difference. The problem is, we take what is sold as gospel truth of what a tomato should taste like. And then we completely forget there are sweeter choices.

I remember a lunch hosted by our consultant farmer in Bukidnon some years ago. He gave us a basket to pick fresh greens and the ripest heirloom tomatoes at his little farm. Once we were done, he sliced up the red ripe fruits (tomatoes are fruits) and mixed the greens and drizzled some oil and voila! that was our lunch. Our "ulam" (viand) was beef jerky from his grass-fed native cows. You may think – what a hippie lifestyle of the Age of Aquarius era! But that is how we go back to what our ancestors used to feed on – nutrient-dense food from healthy soil. We need to try what Nature is good at bringing us without interventions from high-yield fertilizers or prevention of leaf damage through pesticides. Nature is smart but we need to help Her by providing an environment where worms can freely grow to mix the earth, where microbes make the soil medium healthy, creating humus and making it living soil. Because healthy soil will give us healthier or nutrient-dense food.

I wonder how much more time it will take until our agriculture officials and the general public become aware that growing food locally, doing no-till agriculture and using heirloom seeds that are open pollinated will be the order of the day. If we buy from local farmers, we can watch what they do to our food. They can grow what we need and they will always be assured of a market. Alas, this is not the way right now but hopefully, with more people being aware, it soon will be the norm.

We all need to grow. We can grow food. We can grow up and we can grow soil.



Date: 25 NOV 2023

Page: 15



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DEPT. OF AGRICULTURE

House bill creating pension fund for elderly farmers filed



A FARMER transplants rice seedlings in Sumapang Matanda, Malolos, Bulacan on September 14, 2023. United Senior Citizens Party List Rep. Milagros Aquino Magsaysay on November 17, 2023 pushed for the creation of an agriculture pension fund for aging and elderly farmers and fisherfolk so that they may enjoy social security benefits upon their retirement. PNA PHOTO BY JOAN BONDOC

BY FILANE MIKEE CERVANTES

MANILA—A party-list lawmaker on Friday pushed for the creation of an agriculture pension fund for aging and elderly farmers and fisherfolk so that they may enjoy social security benefits upon their retirement.

In filing House Bill 9455, United Senior Citizens Party-list Rep. Milagros Aquino Magsaysay said the proposed agricultural pension will serve as the foundation for social security benefits that aging and elderly agriculture workers can access, similar to the pension enjoyed by employees upon their retirement.

Magsaysay noted that while agriculture is considered one of the primary drivers of the country's economy and the work of farmers is considered essential in ensuring the Philippines's food security, the agricultural sector remains one of the poorest sectors in the country.

"In as much as the government is pushing developments in agriculture and campaigning for the younger generation to take an interest in the industry to ensure continuity, it is equally imperative to ensure that our elderly farmers are well-taken care of in their old age," Magsaysay said.

"This is the least we could do for them after they have given the best years of their lives putting food on our tables so that we

do not go hungry," she added.

The proposed fund, according to the bill, shall serve as the contribution from both the national government and local government units (LGUs), which shall be given only upon payment of the monthly contribution of the poor farmer or fisherfolk, in accordance with the schedule of payments prepared and prescribed by the Social Security System (SSS).

Farmers and fisherfolk identified to be extremely poor will avail themselves of the full subsidy from the national and local governments until such time that upon regular assessment by their LGU under the supervision of the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA), they have been found to be non-extremely poor.

The bill states that poor farmers and fisherfolk who are over 55 years old and would like to be part of the agricultural pension fund shall contribute only up to the time they reach 60 years old and the rest of the contribution shall be subsidized by the government to complete the minimum contribution of 120 months.

The pension fund shall have the following benefits and entitlements: retirement benefits of P2,000 per month upon reaching 65 years old; death benefits; and disability benefits, among others.

The SSS shall be the administrator of the agricultural pension fund. **PNA**