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## Laurel to importers: Use clearances within 30 days

Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. has issued a memorandum circular directing all importers to utilize their sanitary and phytosanitary import clearances (SPSIC) within 30 days amid reports of rampant non-utilization of the permits.

Laurel signed Memorandum Circular 53 giving importers a month to utilize their SPSIC.

"The actual product/consignment must be shipped out within 30 days from the date the sanitary and phytosanitary import clearance is issued, regardless of the country of origin. This shipment is still subject to plant quarantine procedures at the port of entry upon arrival," Laurel said.

He added his directive was in recognition of the need to protect the welfare of local farmers and producers to ensure food security.

"Furthermore, the importers shall fully utilize their applied SPSICs. Low or no utilization of SPSICs may result in sanctions and penalties in accordance with the guidelines as this can create discrepancies

in the forecasting being done in relation to the availability of rice supply," he added.

According to Laurel, most of the traders and millers are cooperating with the DA to ensure the well-being of local farmers and producers as well as national food security.

Bureau of Plant Industry director Gerald Glenn Panganiban has said that more than one million SPSICs have yet to be used, amid a drop in total volume of imported grains to 2.8 million metric tons.

Panganiban said importers who fail to satisfactorily explain their failure to use their SPSIC would be penalized.

Based on DA monitoring of Metro Manila markets, local regular milled rice was retailed for as high as P52 per kilo; local well-milled rice, P54 per kilo; local premium rice, P62 per kilo, and local special rice, P68 per kilo.

Imported well-milled rice was sold at P52 per kilo; imported premium rice, P60, and imported special rice, P65.

— Bella Cariaso





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## Funding sought for seaweed sector

THE Philippine Chamber of Agriculture and Food Inc. (PCAFI) called for the allocation of funds and the setting up of a program that would protect the country's exports of carrageenan to the United States and Europe.

Danilo Fausto, PCAFI president, told reporters in a briefing in Quezon City last week lobby groups have claimed carrageenan extracted from seaweeds is not an organic product which may negatively affect local exports.

The US government through the National Organics Standards Board (NOSB), is currently reviewing to decide if carrageenan can remain to be classified as an organic product.

In the past, the United States Department of Agriculture voted for carrageenan to continue to be tagged as organic and defied the NOSB's stand to remove the product from list of organic items.

Carrageenan is the main by-product of seaweeds which has multiple industrial uses including as raw material in the manufacture of food products, toothpaste and shampoo, among others.

"We currently do not have budgetary support. We should have advertising, promotion in America so we can fight in a



A seaweed farmer in Tigtabon, Zamboanga City shows his fixed off-bottom seaweed farm growing *Kappaphycus alvarezii*, a source of carrageenan used in food, drinks, and cosmetic. (SEAFDEC/AQD Photo)

science-based (manner.) We should fight lobby groups," Fausto said.

PCAFI said a budget of at least P250 million must be provided for a program that would ensure the viability of the local seaweeds sector which is thriving in Mindanao.

The group said the Philippines cannot afford to lose the lucrative seaweeds, carrageenan industry as it has a potential to be a \$500-million industry.

PCAFI also said experts from the Department of Agriculture, Department of Science and Technology, Department of Trade and

Industry as well as the country's agricultural attache to the US must join forces in fighting against the negative lobbying on carrageenan.

Fausto said at present, the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao produces bulk of seaweeds in the Philippines.

Based on data from the Philippine Statistics Authority, the country produced 1.54 million metric tons (MT) of seaweed last year. Of the said volume, 66 percent or 1.02 million MT were produced from BARMM. -Jed Macapagal



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## NIA deals to maximize use of irrigation

BY JOCELYN MONTEMAYOR

THE Department of Energy (DOE) and the National Irrigation Administration (NIA) yesterday signed agreements that would optimize the country's use of renewable energy and irrigation water to make it more accessible to the public.

DOE Undersecretary Sharon Garin and director Marissa Cerezo signed a memorandum of agreement (MOA) with NIA chief Eduardo Guillen in a ceremony in Malacanang that was presided by Senior Deputy Executive Secretary Hubert Dominic Guevara.

The agreement formalized the two agencies' partnership to en-

hance the countrywide approach in developing the renewable energy resources in line with the nation's goals to generate 35 percent of power from renewable energy sources by 2030 and 50 percent by 2040.

It is also a crucial step forward in the pursuit of water security and sustainable resource management in the country and in accordance with goals outlined and provisions stated in Executive Order No. 22, series of 2023.

The EO, which creates the Water Resource Management Office, states that one of the objectives of the government is the harnessing

See NIA > Page A2

of water supply in order to capitalize on its maximum benefits to society and environment.

Under the MOA, DOE will use NIA irrigation facilities as well as those being constructed, including areas identified and listed for future irrigation development projects, "for public consumption" without compromising the operations of NIA.

As part of the strategic initiative, NIA's irrigation water will not only help the agency to expand economically and generate additional fund for the operation and maintenance of its irrigation facilities while allowing the DOE to provide the public with better access to clean, reasonably priced energy sources.

Garin said with the NIA's

water supply across the country, the DOE can use it to generate alternate sources of power such as solar energy which is not only cheaper but also cleaner and safer.

"This is a big potential for solar energy, so it would be a big help for the attaining the objectives of the President, as well as the DOE...We're happy that NIA is

so proactive in this because this is a whole government attaining the objectives of the President for energy security and food security," she said.

Guillen also signed with Cavite Governor Juanito Victor "Jonvic" Remulla a MOA that aims to maximize the use of irrigation water and repurposes it to benefit the province.

Guillen said about 70 percent of the water resources in the country is under NIA.

Under the MOA, Cavite will work in tandem with the NIA to ensure the responsible and sustainable use of water resources, as aligned with existing laws on water management and utilization, which place strong emphasis on conservation and protection

to meet the evolving needs of the province.

This means NIA's excess irrigation water will now be served and prioritized for the province's use.

The reallocation of water resources is expected to contribute not only to the overall well-being of the province, but also to the economic growth and increased revenue for the NIA.



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## DOE and NIA ink pact for green energy push

By JOVEE MARIE N. DELA CRUZ [@joveemarie](#)

**T**HE Department of Energy (DOE) and the National Irrigation Administration (NIA) on Thursday formalized an agreement for the promotion of renewable energy (RE) accessibility to the public.

During the signing ceremony at the Presidential Guest House in Malacañang, DOE Undersecretary Sharon Garin and NIA Administrator Eduardo Eddie G. Guillen signed the agreement with Senior Deputy Executive Secretary Hubert Dominic B. Guevara serving as witness.

Garin emphasized that this agreement aligns with the goals set by President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. to achieve 35 percent of power generation from RE sources by 2030 and 50 percent by 2040.

She highlighted that the collaboration aims not only to safeguard the

assets of the NIA and DOE but also to generate power for irrigation and communities.

She added that it will not only protect the assets of the NIA and the DOE but will also generate power for irrigation and the communities.

"This is a commendable achievement for the entire government because various agencies are working together to attain food security and energy security for the country," said Garin.

Guillen, expressing his perspective on the collaboration, indicated that the initiative is a result of repurposing water rights for multi-purpose use, opening the door for NIA proposals related to "floating solar" projects.

"This partnership streamlines the application process for renewable energy service contracts," noted Guillen.

He added that the agreement only showed the unity of the government agencies under the administration of President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr.





## Poe seeks DA support for creation of proposed bureau for animal care

By BUTCH FERNANDEZ

Twitter: @butchfBM

SENATOR Grace Poe prompted the Department of Agriculture (DA) to take an active role in making policies and programs for the promotion of animal welfare in the country.

The senator recently filed Senate Bill No. 2458, seeking to strengthen animal welfare standards, policies, rules and regulations, implementation and enforcement as well as provide tougher penalties to violators.

The measure proposes to create an Animal Welfare Bureau (AWB) that will have city, municipal, provincial and regional offices. The proposed body will be placed under the DA.

"Basically, you will form a policy, and in every local government there should be an animal rights council," Poe told Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. when he recently faced the Commission on Appointments for confirmation.

"Iyong ibang local governments

meron silang dog pounds pero hindi naman talaga naaalagaan ang mga aso," she added.

Poe said that under her bill, the DA through the AWB would be tasked to monitor the compliance of local governments on animal welfare programs, standards, rules and regulations.

The AWB will also implement a system for inspection of animal facilities to ensure adherence to animal welfare standards and regulations.

It will also provide the minimum

standards on the appropriate food, water, and shelter for each species of pet and animals depending on the age, breed, size, and special needs of the animals.

"Hopefully, we will get the cooperation of the DA in pushing for the bill because it's the agency that will be at the helm of implementation," said Poe.

The senator noted that various groups, including animal welfare advocates, have expressed support for the passage of the strengthened Animal Welfare Act.





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## PhilMech completes farm equipment design facility in Nueva Ecija

THE Philippine Center for Post-harvest Development and Mechanization (PhilMech) said it has completed an agricultural machinery design center in Nueva Ecija which it expects to start operating soon.

In a statement, PhilMech said construction of the Agricultural Machinery Design and Prototyping Center has wrapped up.

The facility will focus on developing and adapting equipment suitable for the Philippine agricultural environment.

PhilMech Director Dionisio G. Alvindia said the facility will also

help come up with post-harvest solutions.

"The farm equipment manufacturing industry in the Philippines also stands to gain from the AMPDC as the center will take the lead in modernizing the industry by helping improve their manufacturing systems and design of their products," Mr. Alvindia added.

The facility is partly funded by the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA).

The facility's construction cost was P370.55 million. About P289 million was provided by the South Korea through KOICA. — **Adrian H. Halili**



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## NIA agrees to host RE projects at irrigation sites

THE Department of Energy (DoE) and the National Irrigation Administration (NIA) said on Thursday that they signed an agreement to use irrigation sites for renewable energy (RE) projects.

Under the agreement, the DoE will use NIA sites, including areas identified for future irrigation projects, in a manner that does not hinder the facilities' irrigation functions.

"The agreement between DoE and NIA signifies a crucial step forward in the pursuit of water security and sustainable resource management, which is aligned with the goals outlined in Executive Order No. 22, series of 2023," according to a statement issued by the Presidential Communications Office.

Energy Undersecretary Sharon S. Garin said the agreement is in line with the government's goal of generating 35% of power from renewable energy sources by 2030 and 50% by 2040.

NIA administrator Eduardo G. Guillen said the project converts water rights for multi-purpose use, adding that the NIA is now looking at floating solar power generating plants.

"As part of the strategic initiative, NIA's irrigation water will not only help the agency to expand economically and generate additional funds for the operation and maintenance of its irrigation facilities, while allowing the DoE to provide the public with better access to clean, reasonably priced energy sources," the Palace said.

**Kyle Aristophere T. Atienza**





## CTALK CITO BELTRAN

### 'Camella farms'

I have just been informed by small farms and backyard farm owners that property taxes in the City of Lipa have substantially increased. While this may be part of growing urbanization and the need of local governments to raise income for programs and projects, the impact on farm owners, agriculture and productivity is a serious concern that is often overlooked.



I have learned from past experience that the saying "No taxes without consultation" has become a myth if not a joke after the Local Government Code was passed by Congress. Since then, a number of local government units have simply done "table mapping and taxation" but without proper research and consultation. They do so because they can.

What these armchair local legislators and appraisers fail to realize is that there is a huge difference between the size of residential-commercial properties compared to "farm lots," agricultural properties or backyard farms. While city lots or businesses range from about 200 to 1,000 sq meters, farm lots often start at 2,500 sqm, 10,000 sqm to 100,000 sqm upwards.

What may seem affordable to urban dwellers becomes an economic shock to farm lot owners and farmers in general. Ironically, farms and farmers are the last to benefit from LGU projects that prioritize infrastructure and commercial development and not farm-to-market roads. To this day, there are many areas in the provinces, even in Lipa City, where roads to farms are still packed mud and gravel and not paved roads. They don't have running water or street lighting even in the age of solar streetlamps.

Hopefully this article will reach LGU officials, the Department of Agriculture as well as the DILG, to pay attention to this poorly studied approach of table taxation that also disregards land classifications stamped on titles that say "AGRICULTURAL LAND." If the practice continues, then there is a strong possibility that the only remaining farms we will see will be up in the "bundocks." I recently visited the Visayas, and someone shared a "loaded joke" where rice farmers called their farms "Camella Farms."

I did not get it at first, so they explained that farming has become so unprofitable that there is a future possibility that they will all be selling their farms to property developers. Sadly, someone in property development did tell me that they often work with LGU assessors and property tax officers as well as barangay personnel because they are the ones who give leads on people seriously considering selling out.

We are already reeling from the high cost of feeds, livestock, importation that displaces backyard farmers. Now we will be pushed out of our farms by a simple act of table taxation. Yes, the Philippines is indeed anti-farmer!





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## Science-based agriculture

**T**HERE has been a persistent call from various quarters that we need to inject science to our agricultural endeavors. They argue that science is the force that will transform our laggard agriculture into a modern, productive and competitive sector.

Expectedly, they recommend the employment of various innovative agricultural practices from the use of drip irrigation, hydroponics, tissue culture, biofertilization, artificial insemination, etc., to more sophisticated ones like the application of satellite and drone technology and artificial intelligence. These will undoubtedly result in raising farm yields while ensuring the production of better quality products.

The downside is that these technologies are beyond the reach of our small cultivators. During a conversation with one of the donors supporting the construction and operation of greenhouse facilities, I was informed that it costs them between P8,000 and P10,000 per square meter to construct the building and provide it with the proper equipment.

Arsenio "Toto" Barcelon of Harbest Agribusiness Corp., an outstanding Filipino agripreneur, told



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me that they were able to substantially lower the construction cost of the facility. But even assuming that it is just half the price, it will be difficult for small farmers, owning a hectare of land, to afford the cost of constructing the facility at P4,000 per square meter. This is practically buying land (outside Metro Manila) to build a house.

Sophisticated science and technology are beyond the means of our small cultivators. The best that they can hope for to access modern agricultural technologies is through government subsidies like the free distribution of better quality seeds, small farm machineries and post-harvest facilities. However, the current dole out system necessitates implementation of two imperatives to improve access to modern farm technology.

One is that small farmers must be organized into clusters under a cooperative or farmers association. This will facilitate extension

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## Science

of subsidies as the government does not have the resources to deal individually with millions of small tillers.

The second is to promote the development of Filipino middle-class farmers or family-based farms who possess or have access to capital, are relatively educated and have a better understanding of the market. This will require raising the land ownership retention ceiling from 5 hectares for a couple tilling the land and 3 hectares for an individual to 20 to 24 hectares, which is the economically viable land size. In turn, this will necessitate amending the provision of the agrarian reform law.

The other level where we need to inject science in agriculture to foster its rapid and high growth is in the realm of the decision-making process. Policies formulated and issued by the Department of Agriculture (DA) should be based on a thorough analysis of evidence. It cannot and should not depend on the whims or the gut-feel of senior DA officials or politicians.

We should not allow substituting "evidence-based policymaking" with "policy-based evidence making" because of political imperatives. Unfortunately, we experienced that in the way the sugar importation was conducted, onion supply was managed and more recently the imposition of the rice price caps. Dodgy empirical evidence was presented by sycophants to support policies already enunciated by powerful politicians. In the end, those erroneous policies caused more harm than good to

the public, manifested in soaring commodity prices.

After the publication of my last week's column on the data problem confronted by the agricultural sector, I was swamped by reactions from friends and colleagues validating my observations and recommending ways by which agricultural data gathering and storage can be improved and strengthened.

Leonardo Gonzales, an agricultural economist and policy expert, recalls that during the time of Agriculture Minister Arturo Tanco Jr. during the incumbency of the current President's father, the services of an expatriate professor, supported by international and local experts, to advice on agricultural data gathering and analysis (i.e., supply and demand, per capita consumption, income and price elasticities, etc.) were even contracted.

He laments the quality of data generated and reported by the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) and the DA. For instance, he cited the data on harvested area for rice which was claimed to be 4.8 million hectares, asking: "Where is this coming from? Was it from higher crop intensity due to [an] increase [in] irrigation services? However, the data on the field shows otherwise. Was it due to new irrigation areas by the National Irrigation Administration's (NIA) construction? Again, the additional yearly irrigation areas are small. Was it due to a shift from rainfed areas to irrigated areas in rice farming? Or is it due to double counting of unreconciled NIA irrigation areas with PSA survey of harvested areas? Who is doing data reconciliation?"

The same sentiment was expressed by Norberto Chingcuangco from the fishery sector. He cited that

the shrimp production of Batangas is way off that of farms in Calatagan, Batangas, even for the few registered ones. He added that "the estimate of PSA for the whole of Region 11 (Davao Region) is a lot less than a friend's production at the Malalag Bay, a sleepy town in Davao del Sur."

Jess Cham from the meat importers' association noted that the estimate of the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources on local fish sufficiency ratio does not only suffer from the faulty divisor used (deducting the non-fish eating population, defined as kids 9 years and below from the total population). He stressed that the total fish supply estimate included seaweed which makes up a significant portion of aquatic yield. Unfortunately, seaweed is hardly part of the Filipino diet.

Rep. Jose Maria Clemente "Joey" Salceda, one of the most brilliant legislators in the House of Representatives, challenged me to come out with a list of nominees for the position of chief economist in the DA. He lamented that recruitment by merit alone might not work under our current political economy context. In other words, we need to lobby for one who we deem will be the best to serve the country and our agriculture sector.

Higino Ables of UP Los Baños, one of my revered mentors when I was a young professional in the academe, once exhorted me that for key positions requiring utmost public service commitment, it should be the "position that should seek the man/woman, rather than latter seeking the position." His advice stuck with me and this is the reason why I never became a politician.

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## Funding urged for seaweed industry

THE Philippine Chamber of Agriculture and Food Inc. (PCAFI) proposed a P250 million budget for the local seaweed industry seeing its potential in local and international markets.

PCAFI President Danilo Fausto said that the request for higher funds was in line for the upcoming review of carrageenan as an acceptable ingredient for US organic products.

In 2016, carrageenan was removed from the list of products approved for use in organic food.

"Delisting of carrageenan would imperil PH market share in the USA and potential adverse effect in the European market due to disinformation about carrageenan safety," Fausto said in a memorandum submitted to the Department of Agriculture.

According to PCAFI, the product accounted for 52 percent of the country's market share in the USA and was valued at \$40 million while 18 percent market share or about \$75 million for the European market.

"Losing these markets will jeopardize the main livelihood of BARMM (Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao) and those living at the Zamboanga Peninsula," Fausto added.

Data from the Philippine Statistics Authority showed seaweeds accounts the biggest share for fisheries production at 36.2 percent. PCAFI noted that from the total, 72 percent are produced in BARMM and Zamboanga Peninsula "areas representing the poorest of the poor in our poverty index."

"Let us not suffer the same fate as that of our coconut oil in the US market that strong lobby groups in the US have eliminated our coconut oil market," said Fausto.

He added that the seaweed industry has the potential to hit \$500 million in annual exports earnings and this can be achieved "with improved production efficiency in seaweed farming and international trade promotions."

PCAFI said the country still has a huge untapped suitable hectareage for seaweed production.

Out of the 102,000 hectares of municipal waters available, only 17,000 hectares is being used.

Moreover, PCAFI urged the government to boost the whole fisheries sector and encouraged the quick establishment of marine hatchery and backyard fingerlings' production to increase farmers' income.

**JANINE ALEXIS MIGUEL**





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## *NIA signs agreements on renewable energy, water rights*

By ALEXIS ROMERO

The National Irrigation Administration (NIA) yesterday signed two agreements with the Department of Energy (DOE) and the provincial government of Cavite seeking efficient use of the country's water resources.

The agreement with the DOE will allow the use of irrigation facilities for renewable energy in line with the Marcos administration's goal to generate 35 percent of power from renewable energy sources by 2030 and 50 percent by 2040.

The agreement with the Cavite provincial government formalized an agreement reassigning existing water rights and optimizing the use of excess water without sacrificing the irrigation needs of the agricultural sector.

Energy Undersecretary Sharon Garin said the agreement between the DOE and NIA would generate power for irrigation and communities while protecting the assets of the two agencies.

NIA administrator Eduardo Guillen said the agreement is an offshoot of repurposing water rights into multi-purpose use.

The agreement is in line with the water security aims of Executive Order 22, which established the Water Resources Management Office last year.

Guillen and Cavite Gov. Jonvic Remulla signed NIA's agreement with the provincial government also at the Presidential Guest House. Under the agreement, the provincial government will work with the irrigation agency to ensure responsible and sustainable use of water resources and emphasize conservation and protection to meet evolving water needs.



## Egg prices drop slightly amid high demand - DA

A slight drop in the retail price of eggs was recorded amid an increase in demand during the holiday season, according to data from the Department of Agriculture (DA).

Based on DA's monitoring of Metro Manila markets, the retail price of medium-sized eggs ranged between P7.50 and P8.50 per piece, compared to the previous P7.50 to P8.80 per piece on Dec. 1, or a P0.30 decrease.

United Broiler Raisers Association and Philippine Egg Board (PEB) chair Gregorio San Diego confirmed that there was a decline in the cost of eggs as farmgate prices also went down.

"Yes (there was a decrease in retail prices) as the farmgate level also went down," San Diego told **The STAR**.

He attributed the downward trend in the retail prices of eggs to the low demand.

As for the threat of bird flu, he said that many egg producers decided to slow down their production as the DA and the Bureau of Animal Industry have yet to approve the avian flu vaccine.

The retail price of whole chicken ranged between P140 and P220 per kilo; pork ham, between P250 and P340 per kilo; and pork *liempo*, between P280 and P400 per kilo.

- Bella Cariaso





## **Cordillera farmers dump tomatoes amid oversupply**

By **BELLA CARIASO**

Farmers in the Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR), particularly in Ifugao, Benguet and Nueva Vizcaya were forced to dump tomatoes amid oversupply and lack of buyers as farmgate price reached as low as P5 per kilo.

In Dupax del Norte in Nueva Vizcaya, a farmer dumped at least 200 crates or four tons of "sleep tomatoes" on Tuesday, according to farmers' group advocate Rural Rising Philippines founder Ace Estrada in an interview with **The STAR**.

"When you say 'sleep' tomatoes, these stay overnight at Nueva Vizcaya Agricultural Terminal. The tomatoes are not yet overripe but since new tomatoes arrive the following day, the tomatoes need to be removed as NVAT has limited capacity to store. If you cannot sell your tomatoes in one day, the middlemen will no longer buy them as they prefer fresh harvest," Estrada said.

On Dec. 5 alone, the stocks at NVAT reached at least 200 tons or 200,000 kilos of tomatoes, he said.

"As you know, our farmers are completely dependent on the buyers of supermarket, grocery and if the buyers have already reached their quota or secured lower price, what happens to the rest?" Estrada added.

According to Estrada, farmers were also forced to sell their produce at very low prices instead of dumping them.

"The production cost was higher compared to the farmgate. Farmers who are desperate are forced to sell even though the traders offer very low prices instead of dumping them. There will be overproduction if the farmers compete with one market," Estrada said.

He said that the Rural Rising Philippines targets to sell at least 4,000 kilos a week to help the farmers.

"We'll do one truck this week. Every member of Rural Rise is requested to buy 10 kilos. One truck is equivalent to 4,000 kilos," he added.

According to Estrada, the dumping of tomatoes has been a yearly occurrence during harvest season.

"Last year, we were able to sell 60 tons. A farmer texted me that another dumping of tomatoes will be done this afternoon. We are just talking about one farmer and this is one barangay and this is just one town. We are not yet talking about other tomato-producing areas like Tinoc, Atok, La Trinidad," he noted.

He said despite a slump in the farmgate price of tomatoes, the retail price of the agricultural product remains high in Metro Manila.

Based on monitoring of the Department of Agriculture (DA), the retail price of tomatoes ranged between P40 and P100 per kilo.

"In Tinoc, we are trying to contact the DA to try to catch tomatoes at source, meaning we will work with the local municipal agriculture office so that we will determine the farmers who will harvest so that we can harvest the tomatoes as we have to balance the quality so that our buyers will be satisfied with the quality," he said.

According to Estrada, Rural Rising Philippines will also provide financial help to farmers who are already affected by the rotting of their produce.

"We just sent P1,500, P2,000 to help them even for their fuel. That's the maximum power of Rural Rising Philippines but at least if we cannot buy their produce, we can provide a little financial assistance to them," he said.





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## DSWD BINUTATA NFA SA CASH AYUDA

Supalpal sa Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) ang hirit ng National Food Authority (NFA) na bigas mismo sa halip na pera ang ipamudmod na buwanang allowance para sa mga benepisyaryo ng Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program o 4Ps.

Iginiit ni DSWD Assistant Secretary Romel Lopez na hindi maaari ang rekomendasyon ng NFA na bumili na lamang ng bigas at ipamudmod ito sa mga benepisyaryo kaysa ibigay ng cash ang P600 na buwanang rice allowance.

Ayon kay Lopez, susundin ng DSWD ang mga binuong alituntunin para sa implementasyon ng batas ukol sa 4Ps kung saan ay kailangan na cash ang ibibigay na ayuda para sa buwanang rice allowance.

"Under sa ating 4Ps Law, talagang nakalagay doon

na ang stipend natin ay cash at ito po ay ibibili ng bigas ng ating mga beneficiaries," ayon kay Lopez.

Mas praktikal at epektibo aniya ang sistema na ipinatutupad ngayon kung saan ginagamit ng mga benepisyaryo ang kanilang cash card para makuha ang ayudang pera dahil sila pa mismo ang pipili ng bibilhing bigas.

Subalit nasa desisyon din aniya ng National Advisory Council (NAC) ng 4Ps kung aaprubahan ang isang resolusyon na gawing bigas na lamang kaysa pera ang ipamumudmod sa mga benepisyaryo.

Binubuo ang NAC ng mga ahensiya ng gobyerno at kabilang dito ang DSWD, Department of Health, Department of Education, Department of Agriculture, Department of Labor and Employment, at Department of Trade and Industry.





## DA, NFA execs asked to explain failure to stabilize rice prices

OFFICIALS of the Department of Agriculture and the National Food Authority were asked to explain the disparities between the promised stabilization and the current market prices of rice.

In the hearing of the House Committee on Agriculture, lawmakers expressed disappointment over the failure of the two agencies to lower or stabilize the prices of rice at least this holiday season.

House Deputy Majority Leader ACT-CIS party-list Representative Erwin Tulfo expressed concerns on the unfulfilled commitment made by DA officials around July, August, and September regarding the anticipated price reduction

of rice.

It can be recalled that the two agencies assured consumers that prices of rice will stabilize because of the harvest season.

The hearing was initiated following the recent surprise visit of Speaker Ferdinand Martin Romualdez and Tulfo at Farmers Market in Cubao, Quezon City, to assess the prices of essential commodities, particularly food items, and ensure compliance with suggested retail prices.

Tulfo noted that despite the promised stabilization, rice prices have remained between P52 and P60 per kilogram.

"Whatever happened to that promise na bababa [ang presyo

ng bigas], because people were waiting? Bakit hindi po bumaba?" Tulfo asked.

NFA chief Roderico Bioco cited key factors contributing to the surge in rice prices, including a shortfall in production between 2021 and 2022, low fertilizer uptake among farmers affecting yields, and international factors such as Indonesia's announcement to buy two million tons of rice.

He mentioned that the combination of these factors, along with import parity being higher than the landed cost, has resulted in higher rice prices in the local market.

Romualdez said Congress wanted to make sure that traders do not take advantage

of the holiday season to jack up prices of basic commodities.

"The Christmas season is meant to be a time of giving and compassion, and we want to make sure that prices of goods are affordable to a great majority of our people," he added.

At the hearing, committee chair Quezon Rep. Mark Enverga said they expect that the information presented by the DA and its attached agencies will guide the committee in taking necessary steps to address concerns about the escalating prices of agricultural commodities, particularly rice and chicken eggs, and prevent further complications.

*Jester Manalastas*



## DA prodded to help promote animal welfare

SENATOR Grace Poe has prompted the Department of Agriculture (DA) to take an active role in making policies and programs for the promotion of animal welfare in the country.

Poe filed Senate Bill No. 2458 seeking to strengthen animal welfare standards, policies, rules

and regulations, implementation and enforcement as well as provide tougher penalties to violators.

The measure proposes to create an Animal Welfare Bureau (AWB) that will have city, municipal, provincial and regional offices. The proposed body will

be placed under the DA.

"Basically, you will form a policy, and in every local government there should be an animal rights council," Poe told Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiur Laurel Jr. when he recently faced the Commission on Appointments.

PS Jun M. Sarmiento





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## **Over P22-M projects to boost livelihood of Bicol fisherfolk**

LEGAZPI CITY – The Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR)-5 (Bicol) on Wednesday said more than PHP22 million worth of projects have been turned over to fisherfolk in the provinces of Catanduanes, Camarines Sur and Albay.

In an interview, Rowena Briones, BFAR-Bicol spokesperson, said the projects aimed to increase fish production and strengthen sustainable fisheries in the region.

"The initiatives were distributed during the visit of our National Director Demosthenes R. Escoto last week. For Catanduanes, the groundbreaking of the village-level Mangrove Crab Hatchery and Sanctuary in Barangay Agojo, San Andres with an approved budget of PHP6 million, was held. The establishment of the project is expected to enhance the sustainable production of mangrove crabs in the province," Briones said.

She said the project would contribute to the restoration of mangrove crab resources and create economic opportunities for local communities.

"For Camarines Sur, awarded to the Sagñay Tuna Fishers Association was a 62-footer tuna handline fishing boat amounting to PHP6.5 million. It will improve the fishing capacity and production efficiency of municipal fisherfolk, increase the production of small pelagics and tuna from the municipal subsector, and advance the fisherfolk's capability in the organization, operation, and management of Fisherfolk Associations and Cooperatives to help them become sustainable," she said.

PNA



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## Agricultural goods trade deficit widens in Q3

THE trade in agricultural goods posted a deficit of \$2.97 billion in the third quarter, with the decline in exports outweighing weaker imports, according to the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA).

In a report, the PSA said agricultural trade — the sum of exports and imports — fell 12% to \$6.2 billion, reversing the 17.5% increase a year earlier.

Agricultural exports declined 13.3% to \$1.61 billion for the period, accounting for 8.2% of total exports.

Leading exports were edible fruit and nuts as well as peel of citrus fruit melons, valued at \$492.09 million or 30.5% of the total.

Agricultural products shipped to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations ac-

counted for \$182.98 million, with tobacco and manufactured tobacco substitutes the top items.

Malaysia was the Philippines' top agricultural export market in the region, accounting for \$53.88 million.

"Exports of agricultural goods to (the European Union) in the third quarter of 2023 reached \$285.19 million, which contributed 12.5% to the country's total value of exports to EU member countries," the PSA said.

The Netherlands remained the top buyer of agricultural goods within the EU. It purchased \$285.19 million or 52.8% of Philippine farm exports to the region.

Animal or vegetable fats and oils and their cleavage products, prepared edible fats

and animal or vegetable waxes remained the top agricultural exports to the EU.

Imports of agricultural goods fell 11.5% to \$4.59 billion, representing 14.6% of total imports.

Cereals remained the top agricultural imports for the period at 21.1% of the total, or \$969.89 million.

"The (Philippine) agricultural imports from EU member countries amounted to \$382.34 million or 20.5% of the total value of imports in the third quarter," it said.

Among EU members, Spain was the top supplier of goods, accounting for \$91.69 million or 24% of overall farm imports.

Meat and edible meat offal were the top imports from the EU. — **Adrian H. Halili**





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## The importance of treating farmers as the entrepreneurs they really are

A major problem in the Philippine agriculture industry is the lack of farmers' direct access to the buyer. Another major problem is a lack of professionalization among many small farmers, which leads to mistrust among institutional buyers who require a set quota and quality of produce.

Some local businesses who rely on fresh produce and want to support local farmers have tried to remedy this by forging partnerships with farmer groups and cooperatives.

The Jollibee Group Foundation (JGF) has been supporting local farmers via its Farmer Entrepreneurship Program (FEP), where, according to FEP literature, the program "helps farmers become agro-entrepreneurs that can do collective marketing and supply institutional markets such as the Jollibee Group."

JGF works with farmer collectives to source supplies of different vegetables for their various brands. One such collective is SHSC in turn organized a cluster of farmers in Tagudin, Ilocos Sur and partnered with the Ilocos Sur Polytechnic State College to

create the Tagudin Agropreneurs Association (TAA), which supplies the Jollibee Foods Corporation (JFC) with tons of white onions.

Stephania P. Labcaen, SHSC Business Development Head, explained that membership is voluntary, and even then, not all farmers were on board with planting white onions at first, since they were used to planting red onions. Some even refused to believe that they were going to be selling straight to Jollibee. But once the program got underway, it was easier for members to stay motivated. "Even if... they had challenges like their crops wouldn't grow or they were hit by a storm, they keep persevering because they know that they'll get (their profit) back in the next harvest," she explained in Tagalog.



AVANT GARDENER  
YVETTE TAN

TAA delivers onions to JFC every week. They are given a set quota and quality they have to reach with each delivery. But how do they do this, given that in the Philippines, onions are harvested only twice a year, and that's aside from the constant threats of pests, diseases, and natural disasters?? The answer is planting according to a schedule decided in advance by each cluster, which includes a buffer stock that can be used if supplies aren't enough. There's at least a week's interval between planting to ensure that, say, the main crop is wiped out by a typhoon, there's still something to harvest and sell a week after.

Michael Lorica is a white onion farmer from Tagudin, Ilocos Sur. He is also the General Manager of the Tagudin Agroentrepreneurs Association (TAA), many of whom also plant white onions. A farmer for 38 years, he said that before the farmers switched crops, many of them used to cultivate tobacco, but he himself used to plant corn. While he owns his land, many farmers rent theirs. His decision to plant white onions was simple: it made money because there was a ready buyer.

He said that when he was planting corn, he stood to earn about ₱40,000 per harvest for a 4,000 sqm field. And though he wouldn't disclose figures, he said that he earns more than that. About 80 percent of his onion harvests (approx. 2,000 kilos) go to JFC, which has strict standards that all farmers have to adhere to. The rest are sold in the local market. He said that aside from the cooperative, who among

other things, picked the onion variety for them, the farmers also have the support of the local government, who sometimes sponsors fertilizers and seeds.

TAA, in particular, is composed of 51 farmers who have a quota of 10-17 tons of white onions per delivery, which as of the interview is once a week during harvest season. The farmers follow a planting schedule so that there isn't an overflow or understocking of onions, and also so that should a typhoon pass through the province, they will still have something to harvest the week after.

By working with cooperatives such as SHSC who in turn organize farmer groups like TAA, JGF supports small farmers by being a sure buyer for their produce. The farmers in turn provide a local source for the Jollibee Group's fresh ingredients.

Small farmers still have a long way to go. They're still some of the poorest and most underappreciated sectors in Philippine society. Reforms in the agricultural industry are not instant and will take time to achieve. A food giant partnering with local farmers for fresh produce instead of importing their needs (which in some cases might even come out cheaper) is a good start.

Farmers should be trained and treated as entrepreneurs. They aren't charity cases but businesspeople. They need support, not handouts. The Jollibee Group Foundation's Farmer Entrepreneurship Program is one way to instill this mindset. The more farmers are able to earn, the more young people will be encouraged to go into farming.



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# PCG SAYS ANOTHER SINO VESSEL RAMMED PH BOAT

STORY BY DEXTER CABALZA, GERALDFORD TICKE AND MADONNA T. VIOLA

**The Philippine Coast Guard rescued five fishermen who were cast adrift in the West Philippine Sea for about 20 hours after the MV Tai Hang 8 reportedly hit their fishing boat off Occidental Mindoro province on Dec. 5.**

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## ANOTHER SINO VESSEL RAMMED PH FISHERMEN'S BOAT-PCG

### FROM A2

Records from China Shipbuilding showed MV Tai Hang 8 is a 72,270-metric ton, 225-meter bulk carrier owned by Shanxi Coal International Energy Group Co. Ltd., headquartered in Taiyuan, China.

According to Jaziel Juano, owner of Ruel J and a resident of the Liberty area in Barangay Bagong Sikat, Puerto Princesa City in Palawan province, the boat left in the last week in October for a six-month fishing operation in Sablayan.

#### All traumatized

"Based on the account of my personnel, they were just at-

tached to their payao in the afternoon [on Dec. 5]. They were resting, while waiting for the night to return to fishing. They did not expect that they would be hit because the sun was still out there," she said in an interview, also on dwPM.

"When the ship was very near to hit them, they went into the smaller service boats. They were swept away from their boats because of the impact," Juano said, citing the survivor's accounts.

"They said that while they were in their boats, they saw the people aboard MV Tai Hang 8 looking at them," she said.

"They were all traumatized after what happened," she said.

In a separate phone inter-

view with the Inquirer, Juano, 44, said the damaged boat was her family's only source of income.

"Which is why we are asking for help to go after the vessel owner and file charges against them because they just left the boat damaged," she said.

Sablayan Mayor Walter Marquez said the fishermen were being interviewed by the social welfare officers for the disbursement of assistance.

"The fishers have no capacity to file a marine protest because they do not even know who the vessel's owner are and where to reach them. We will pursue a case as local government. I have requested for the police report from which we will decide what type of legal

intervention to pursue," Marquez said.

Abanilla said the crew of the MV Tai Hang 8 should not have abandoned the distressed Filipino fishers.

"Under the [United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea], any vessel which has witnessed a maritime incident in the sea is obliged to help. What more if you are the ship that hit a smaller vessel?" he explained.

#### Ramming incidents

It was not the first time that a Chinese ship had rammed a smaller Filipino fishing boat in Philippine waters.

On June 9, 2019, the Filipino fishing vessel Gem-Ver was crushed by the Chinese steel-

hulled Yuemaobinyu 42212. Gem-Ver's 22 crew members were abandoned at sea for at least two hours before they were rescued by a passing Vietnamese fishing boat.

A P6-million compensation was awarded to the Filipino fishermen but they were paid only in May 2022.

Collisions were reported during the Oct. 22 resupply mission to BRP Sierra Madre, a grounded World War II-era warship serving as a military outpost on Ayungin (Second Thomas) Shoal.

Unaizah May 2, one of the two Filipino supply boats, suffered "small" damage after it was hit by Chinese Coast Guard vessel 5203.

In the second incident, a Chinese maritime militia vessel with tail No. 00003 also bumped into PCG's BRP Cabra, which was escorting the mission.

Philippine authorities are still awaiting for the result of the investigation of its foreign counterparts after Filipino fishing boat Dearyn was hit by Pacific Anna, a 44-meter crude oil tanker vessel registered under the flag of Marshall Islands, also on Oct. 22, in waters off Agno, Pangasinan, facing the West Philippine Sea. Of the 14 crew members of Dearyn, three died.

Pacific Anna is owned by Sinokor Maritime Co. Ltd., a Chinese-Korean shipping company based in Seoul, South Korea. **INQ**





## 'Agriculture needs to be more attractive to entrepreneurs'

GO Negosyo founder Jose Maria "Joey" Concepcion 3rd said that the concept and image of agriculture needs to change in order to attract more business interest.

"We really must inspire the new generation (to take up agriculture). If you look up the digital entrepreneurs and then compare them with the farmers, who would want to drive farm equipment when you can drive expensive cars? We really have to change that mindset," Concepcion said at The Manila Times Forum



"Microenterprise 2024, Growing MSMEs, nurturing prosperity."

"We have many businessmen and women who are successful as agriculture entrepreneurs but they were really passionate about it. If we are trying to attract the micro-farmers or the children to love

agriculture, they have to see more of these people," he said.

Concepcion said Go Negosyo partnered with the Department of Education (DepEd) and Vice President Sara Duterte in setting up gardens in schools as part of efforts to get learners interested in agriculture.

"We are very happy with this collaboration with Vice President Sara Duterte, as she wants to see this project happen. Our big brothers in agriculture are willing to do it and set up these gardens and this is

sort of a small way to make the children look at agriculture and hopefully, make them interested in it," he said.

Several micro, small and medium enterprises (MSME) stakeholders said that along with financial technology (fintech) and digitalization, agriculture will become popular with businesses in 2024.

In an interview following the forum, PLDT Enterprise SMBIZ Customer Relationship Management Head Euan Rex

► **AttractiveA8**

### ■ ATTRACTIVE FROM A1

## Agriculture

Toralballa said big businesses are starting to look at the agriculture sector for investment opportunities.

To be more attractive, the sector must be capable of growing its own products and "not depend on imports," Toralballa said.

"And since this cannot be done by the agriculture sector themselves, it is up to the private sector to do a multifaceted approach, and this is what they have been doing currently as well as continue the push for digitalization," he said.

talization," he said.

"Now that technology is at the forefront of everything, we believe that it can accelerate the transformation of various sectors (including the agriculture sector) to ten, maybe twenty times versus the way we predicted it five years ago," Toralballa said.

"Technology basically caters to a lot of productivity tools, relative to artificial intelligence (AI) being more efficient, and on top of that, another related business that has not been tapped as much is the Internet of Things (IoT) market and that is another consideration too for the sector," he said.

Toralballa said that despite technological advances, challenges still remain, which will make

people think twice before going into agriculture.

"The trick with agriculture is to scale, and I think that is a very hard part that the Filipino farmers and those in the agriculture business face until now. There are a lot of limitations, especially the government and regulatory type, on how they will be able to operate, how they will own lands, and the like," Toralballa said.

"And this is why digitalization is even more important because even though one cannot create the scale of big farmers, at least you will be able to decide on how you will be able to market and sell your products real quick and that will be one of the game changers for digitalization," he added. **ED PAOLO SALTING**





## PH piña weaving makes it to Unesco list

THE Philippines' piña handloom weaving has been enrolled on the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco) list of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) of humanity.

The piña handloom weaving is the country's sixth element inscribed in the Lists of Intangible Cultural Heritage, the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) said.

The others are the Hudhud chants of the Ifugao (2008), the Darangen epic of the Manarano people of Lake Lanao (2008), the Tugging rituals and games (2015), the Buklog-thanksgiving ritual system of the Subanen (2019), and the School of Living Traditions (2021).

National Commission for Culture and the Arts Chairman Victorino Manalo said

►PiñaA8

### ■ PIÑA FROM A1

## PH piña

the Philippines is the "only country that extensively produces piña cloth in the whole world." The pineapple textiles, or piña, are part of the diverse traditional weaving practices of the Philippines, he said. "They stand out as national cultural icons symbolizing ingenuity, craftsmanship, and social cohesiveness as well as shared val-

ues of our communities," Manalo said. "We wholeheartedly express our gratitude for this recognition, which inspires us to safeguard their heritage and affirms the importance of our contribution to the richness of human creativity," he added.

The inclusion of piña handloom weaving in the Unesco ICH list of humanity took place at the 18th session of the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of ICH in Kasane, Botswana.

Piña handloom weaving is

practiced in Aklan province in Panay Island where it originated, the DFA said in a statement posted on X (formerly Twitter). The farming of pineapple plant locally known as "pinya Bisaya" (*Ananas comosus*), the main source of piña fiber, takes place in 15 municipalities — Altavas, Balete, Banga, Batan, Buruanga, Kalibo, Lezo, Libacao, Madalag, Makato, Malay, Malinao, Nabas, Numancia and Tangalan. Piña handloom weavers have transmitted their knowledge of han-

dloom weaving to weavers of nearby provinces of Antique and Capiz in Panay Island; Leyte; Camarines Sur; and Palawan. The knowledge and skills of piña handloom weaving are primarily passed on from elders to the young family members, the DFA added.

Philippine Ambassador to France and Permanent Delegate to Unesco Junever Mahilum-West welcomed the recognition of piña handloom weaving in the ICH list.

**BERNADETTE E. TAMAYO**





## Agri trade contracts in third quarter

THE Philippines' agricultural trade contracted by 12.0 percent to \$6.20 billion in the third quarter from a year earlier, the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) reported on Thursday.

The result was an improvement from the 14.8-percent drop posted in April-June but reversed from the 17.5-percent growth posted in July-September last year.

Total agricultural exports during the third quarter fell to \$1.61 billion, a 13.3 percent drop from \$1.8 billion a year earlier, while imports of farm goods also dropped by 11.5 percent to \$4.58 billion from \$5.18 billion.

From July to September, the agriculture trade balance was a deficit of P2.97 billion, up from P2.71 billion in the prior quarter but narrower than the year-earlier P3.32 billion.

Edible fruits and nuts and the peel of citrus fruit melons accounted for the largest share of agriculture exports during the third

quarter at \$492.09 million, up from the previous year's \$470.01 million.

Animal or vegetable fats and oils, and their cleavage products; prepared edible fats; and animal or vegetable waxes — the previous year's top export at \$511.78 million — fell to \$324.23 million.

Preparations of vegetables, fruit, nuts, or other parts of plants were valued at \$195.56 million, down from \$222.97 million recorded a year earlier.

Shipments of tobacco and manufactured tobacco substitutes, meanwhile, reached \$115.52 million, and preparations of meat, fish crustaceans, molluscs, and other aquatic invertebrates totaled \$114.11 million to round up the country's top five agricultural exports for the third quarter.

As for agricultural imports, cereals accounted for the biggest share at \$969.89 million, down from the previous year's \$1.10 billion.

Residues and waste from food

industries and prepared animal fodder followed with \$522.29 million; miscellaneous edible preparations at \$470.02 million; meat and edible meat offal at \$469.44 million; and sugar and sugar confectionery at \$358.84 million.

All were lower compared to year-earlier results.

Malaysia was the top buyer of the Philippines' agricultural exports at \$182.98 million among Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) member countries, the PSA said.

Among the European Union member countries, the Netherlands was the top destination for Philippine agricultural commodities at \$150.44 million.

As for imports, Vietnam was the leading supplier of agricultural products to the Philippines among Asean member countries at \$539.32 million. In the EU, it was Spain that topped the list at

► **Contracts B2**

### ■ CONTRACTS FROM B1

## Agri trade

\$382.34 million.

Sought for comments, chief economist at Rizal Commercial Banking Corp. Michael Ricafort attributed the decline in both agricultural exports and imports to lower demand in view of higher agricultural and commodity prices.

"Some downward correction in some world agricultural prices in recent months also partly led to the declines in both agricultural exports and imports," he added.

The impact of the El Niño weather pattern, Ricafort said, "could reduce agricultural exports but could lead to higher agricultural imports to make up for any reduction in local farm output/production."

**JANINE ALEXIS MIGUEL**





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## Wheat, corn retreat

CANBERRA- Chicago wheat futures held steady on Thursday after a third large Chinese purchase of US wheat in three days pushed prices to a four-month high in the previous session.

Soybeans rose slightly and corn inched lower after both fell on Wednesday as forecasts for rain in major exporter Brazil eased concerns about hot and dry conditions damaging crops.

The most-active wheat contract on the Chicago Board of Trade (CBOT) was down 0.1 percent at \$6.33 a bushel after reaching \$6.49-1/2 on Wednesday, its high-

est since Aug. 9.

The contract is up about 12.5 percent since market open on Nov. 28.

Wednesday's US government confirmation of private sales of 372,000 metric tons of soft red winter wheat to China took total US sales this week to China to more than 1 million tons, the biggest one-week total to China since July 2014.

The Chinese purchases triggered a flurry of short-covering by investors who had bet heavily on price falls. Commodity funds were net buyers of CBOT wheat again on Wednesday, traders said. - Reuters





## India plans to prioritize sugar production

MUMBAI/NEW DELHI- India is planning to discourage the diversion of sugar for ethanol production as part of efforts to ensure sufficient supplies of the sweetener in the local market, government and trade sources said on Wednesday.

Lower diversion for ethanol will help the world's second biggest sugar producer in increasing output of the sweetener, which is expected to fall because of below normal rainfall in key growing states.

The government could ask mills not to use sugar cane juice and B-heavy molasses - a byproduct with higher sucrose levels - to produce ethanol, they said.

India's fuel retailers buy ethanol from sugar mills to blend with gasoline and they were paying higher price for ethanol produced from juice and B-heavy molasses.

"After assessing the demand-supply situation, the committee of ministers decided to focus on sugar production this year," said one of the government sources who declined to be named according to official rules.

The government would allow mills to produce ethanol only from C-heavy molasses, a cane by-product that has hardly any sugar content left in it, the second government official said.

The new guidelines for ethanol procurement in the 2023/24 marketing year, which commenced on



A file photo shows vendors load sugarcane onto a vehicle at a wholesale market in Kolkata. (Reuters Photo)

November 1, will be finalized soon and oil marketing companies are likely to honor contracts already awarded, the first source said.

The government's move is a setback for the industry, which has invested billions of dollars in the last five years to increase ethanol production capacity, said a senior industry official who declined to be named.

"Hopefully, this setback will be

short-term, and the government will shift its focus back to ethanol once sugar cane supplies improve," the official said.

Patchy rains in the top sugar cane-growing western state of Maharashtra and southern Karnataka state have raised concerns about this year's sugar output.

The Indian Sugar Mills Association, a producers' body, last month said sugar production is

likely to fall 8 percent to 33.7 million metric tons in the 2023/24 marketing year.

The likely production drop has lifted local sugar prices to their highest levels in nearly 14 years.

Lower sugar production could lead the world's second-largest producer of sweetener to refrain from allocating export quotas and support global prices, that are trading near multi-year highs. -Reuters