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Marcos aims to counter El Niño effect on prices of Philippine agri products

By John Victor D. Ordoñez
Reporter

PRESIDENT Ferdinand R. Marcos, Jr. instructed the Department of Agriculture (DA) on Wednesday to study the potential effect of the El Niño weather phenomenon on prices of agricultural products in the country in order for concerned agencies to prepare countermeasures.

"We are doing an analysis now of prices of food to see what the appropriate fiscal measures... we can undertake," the President told a press briefing.

Mr. Marcos said the data gathered would be added to an online interagency database on the government's efforts to address the effects of El Niño, which is associated with lack of rainfall.

He added that the DA was also exploring new methods to boost farmers' yields.

"We are putting together data from the Department of Science and Technology, Department of Environment and Natural Resources... and others so that the concerned agencies can come up with a model using the data," he said.

On Tuesday, The President ordered the creation of an interagency task force to address the effects of El Niño, which is expected to cause dry spells nationwide until the second quarter of 2024.

State agencies would focus on coming up with ways to effectively manage energy and food supplies to brace for impending dry spells.

Mr. Marcos on Wednesday led the turnover of P776 million worth of excavators in Nueva Ecija, which would be used by the National Irrigation Administration (NIA) for irrigation projects that would help farmers boost their yield next year amid expected episodes of a drought.

He also ordered the NIA and the DA to fast-track construction of supporting structure of the Balbalungao small reservoir irrigation project in Nueva Ecija, which he visited Wednesday.

"When we hear that there is a drought coming, we need to ensure our food supply and our irrigation systems are functional," the President said.

In an advisory on Dec. 6, the Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration (PAGASA) said a strong El Niño has intensified in the tropical Pacific, with sea temperature anomalies exceeding 1.5 degrees centigrade from normal levels.

About 77% of the provinces in the Philippines may experience drought, while 65% of the provinces may see a dry spell, Science and Technology Secretary U. Solidum, Jr. told Tuesday's Palace briefing.



Balbalungao Dam

PRESIDENT Ferdinand R. Marcos, Jr. led the Inauguration of the Balbalungao small reservoir irrigation project in the village of San Isidro, Lupao in Nueva Ecija, on Wednesday.

PPA POOL/RENE H. DILAN



INSPECTION President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. (2nd from left) inspects the newly acquired excavators at the Subic Bay Freeport on Wednesday, Dec. 13, 2023. He is joined by (from left) Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr., special assistant to the president Antonio Lagdameo, National Irrigation Administration Administrator Eduardo Guillen and Subic Bay Metropolitan Authority Chairman and Administrator Jonathan Tan.
PHOTO BY MAHATMA RANDY DATU

Marcos turns over 141 excavators to NIA

SUBIC BAY FREEPORT: President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. turned over to National Irrigation Administration (NIA) the 141 units of various types and sizes of excavators worth P776 million in a ceremony held at the Naval Supply Depot Compound here.

The President was joined by Agriculture Secretary Francisco Laurel Jr., NIA Administrator Eduardo Guillen and Subic Bay Metropolitan Authority Chairman

and Administrator Jonathan Tan.

In his speech, Marcos said the acquisition of brand-new excavators is part of the government's goal to fast-track the irrigation development and improvement of agricultural canals and water system in the country.

The newly acquired excavators are part of the P2.58-billion three-year re-fleeting program of the NIA for its operation and

maintenance equipment.

The excavators will be distributed to the 17 regional offices nationwide.

The 141 excavators represents the first tranche of the three-year re-fleeting program worth P2,588,988,198.94 that also aims to repair the irrigation facilities devastated by natural disasters.

The equipment will also augment the existing 898 units of the NIA, some of which have been

purchased 30 years ago.

NIA said that the project highlights the continuing efforts of the government in providing significant positive impact in the country's irrigation sector.

Marcos also reported that before traveling to Subic, he attended the newly constructed dam in Nueva Ecija which will augment the irrigation system in Central Luzon.

MAHATMA RANDY V. DATU



Marcos orders completion of water projects amid El Niño

PRESIDENT Ferdinand Marcos Jr. directed concerned government agencies to complete water-related projects by April 2024 to prepare for the impact of the El Niño phenomenon.

In his speech during the inauguration of the Balbalungao Small Reservoir Irrigation Project (BSRIP) in Lupao, Nueva Ecija, on Wednesday, Marcos told the Department

of Agriculture and its attached agency, the National Irrigation Administration (NIA), to accomplish the projects as soon as possible.

"We must be prepared to counter these effects, which may last until the second quarter of 2024. So, we remind once again the DA and the NIA to immediately complete the construction of irrigation

facilities, as well as other supporting structures based on the needs of our farmers," Marcos said.

The President said he has to impose a four-month deadline for the accomplishment of all irrigation and other related projects, pointing out what the government can accomplish before the end of April next year to ensure enough

water supply.

"I'm thinking about the projects that we will do. We have four months to finish all that, make it all operational because [of] the deadline I made for our departments. I told them, let's think, what can we finish," he added.

Marcos also said that vital projects,

➤ **CompletionA8**



IRRIGATION PROJECT

President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. leads the inauguration of the Balbalungao Small Reservoir Irrigation project in Barangay San Isidro, Lupao, Nueva Ecija, on Wednesday, Dec. 13, 2023. PHOTO BY RENE H. DILAN





■ COMPLETION FROM A1 Marcos

such as the BSRIP, will help address the effects of El Niño, which may cause a shortage of water and power supply.

The BSRIP, boasting an expansive 840-hectare service area, is designed to foster sustainable development for the benefit of 562 farmers and their families residing in Balbalungao, San Isidro, Salvacion, Sto. Niño and Mapangpang villages in Lupao town.

"It shows this administration's steadfast commitment to develop modern infrastructure systems that will enhance our agriculture sector," Marcos said.

"Once fully operational, this multipurpose dam will provide irrigation for close to 1,000 hectares of agricultural land in Barangay San Isidro, Balbalungao, Salvacion, Mapangpang here in Lupao, benefiting about 560 farmers and their families," he added.

Marcos also said that the BSRIP would facilitate hydroelectric power generation and serve as a flood con-

trol mitigation infrastructure for the communities along the river.

He directed the DA and the NIA to ensure the timely completion of the other facilities of the BSRIP, such as the hydropower and watershed components.

The President enjoined all government agencies, local government units and the private sector to work together to secure the sustainability of water resources and the ecosystem that surrounds the reservoir.

"Let the Integrated Watershed Management Plan serve as your guide in monitoring, protecting and conserving the Balbalungao watershed to prolong the dam's service lifespan," Marcos said.

"Anticipating the success of the BSRIP in transforming the province's lands into thriving hubs of productivity, we remain steadfast in our pursuit of food security, poverty reduction and economic growth," he added.

As of December 2022, Marcos said the country has made significant strides over 2.1 million hectares of our irrigable land, "a testament to our relentless dedication to increasing our irrigable lands around the country, to increase the production

of our food products, to make sure that we have a secure food supply for our countrymen."

"We have generated around 25,000 hectares of new irrigation areas and restored nearly 9,000 hectares of irrigable land," he said.

The President said the government is aiming to establish more than 275,000 hectares of new irrigation areas to restore about 80,000 of existing irrigation areas by 2028.

"So, as we envision a more secure, sustainable and resilient Philippines, let us harmonize our efforts to ensure the continued empowerment of our producers, progress for our industries and advancement for the entire country," he added.

Meanwhile, the President assures farmers and other individuals who will be affected by the El Niño phenomenon that they will receive government assistance as they will be officially registered with different livelihood programs.

Speaking to reporters after the event, Marcos said the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) will continue to assist El Niño victims, such as the Assistance to Individuals in Crisis Situation and the Tulong Pang-

hanapbuhay sa Ating Disadvantaged/Displaced Workers.

He said the government will implement programs similar to what it was doing when the inflation was at its height.

A whole-of-nation approach is being pushed by the Marcos administration to ensure that everyone will participate in the government's efforts to mitigate the impacts of the El Niño phenomenon, which is expected to persist until the second quarter of 2024.

The Department of Science and Technology on Tuesday reported around 65 provinces across the country may experience drought while six provinces may experience dry spells.

A dry spell is defined as three consecutive months of below-normal rainfall conditions, while a dry condition is defined as two consecutive months of below-normal rainfall conditions, both 21- to 60-percent reduction from average rainfall.

Drought is three consecutive months of way below normal rainfall conditions (60-percent reduction from average rainfall).

CATHERINE S. VALENTE



Brace for El Niño, conserve water — Marcos

PH chief economist warns of 'difficult months' ahead

By ARGYLL CYRUS GEDUCOS,
BETHEENA UNITE, and XANDER DAVE CEBALLOS

President Marcos has called on Filipinos to work with the government in combating the effects of the El Niño phenomenon which is expected to last until the second quarter of 2024,

particularly by conserving water.

Marcos said this as he led the inauguration ceremony of the Balbalungao Small Reservoir Irrigation Project (BSRIP) in Nueva Ecija on Wednesday, Dec. 13.

In an interview with reporters, the President said they are preparing an informational ► **8**



NEW NIA EQUIPMENT — President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. (second from left) inspects the newly procured excavators of the National Irrigation Administration (NIA) with, from left, Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr., Special Assistant to the President Antonio Lagdameo Jr., Acting NIA Administrator Eduardo Eddie G. Guillen, and Subic Bay Metropolitan Authority (SBMA) Chairman and Administrator Jonathan D. Tan at the NSD Compound in the Subic Bay Freeport Zone, Zambales, on Wednesday Dec. 13, 2023. (Photo from the PPA Pool)



Brace for El Niño, conserve water — Marcos 1◀

campaign to let the public know what the government is doing and what the people can do to combat the looming dry spell.

He particularly highlighted the importance of conserving water.

"These are some of the few things we will embark upon in our informational campaign to make people understand what the situation is; what they can do themselves in each household, in the farms, industry; what they can do to help us save water," he said.

"Mag-ingat tayo sa kung anong tubig meron tayo; and to try, yung mga rainwater, ipunin natin para hindi naman masayang lang. Dapat pag nakikita natin na umuulan, nakikita natin pumapasok lang yung tubig sa dagat, dapat 'wag nating pababayaang ganoon (Let's be careful with the water we have. Let's save up rainwater so it won't go to waste. Let's not just let it go to sea). We have to always take as much as we can," he added.

Difficult months

National Economic and Development Authority Secretary Arsenio M. Balisacan said they will closely monitor the impact of the El Niño phenomenon on food prices and ensure government interventions.

Speaking at a media forum yesterday, Balisacan said that the agency's board will meet on Thursday, Dec. 14, to discuss preparations for the

upcoming "difficult months."

"With respect to the effect on the economy, it will make an impact but it will channel more into prices because if food prices pick up then the gains that we have made in leaking inflation will be reversed and we don't want that," Balisacan said.

"That's why from the point of view of NEDA we have to watch closely those prices to ensure that we are able to intervene and mobilize government policy tools effectively," he added.

Balisacan also said that it will consider in its meeting the reduction of tariff on basic commodities such as rice, meat, and corn.

He also stated that the government is open to requesting the traders to frontload imports on key commodities to keep the prices stable.

"Definitely, the time to store is now so if such storage happens early, we could moderate the increases in prices next year," Balisacan said.

Fast-track projects

Marcos reminded government agencies such as the Department of Agriculture (DA) and the National Irrigation Administration (NIA) to immediately complete the construction of irrigation facilities and other supporting structures based on the needs of the Filipino farmers who will likely be affected by the dry spell.

The President said he gave these government agencies a deadline to

accomplish all El Niño-related mitigation projects.

"Kaya't itong ganitong klaseng proyekto ay naging mas mahalaga pa at naging mas urgent pa. Dahil kakaunti na lang ang ating natitirang panahon ... meron tayong apat na buwan para tapusin lahat 'yan, mag-ing operational na lahat 'yan (These projects have become more important and more urgent because we don't have much time left. We only have four months left to complete and operationalize them)," Marcos said.

The Department of Science and Technology (DOST) said 65 provinces across the country will be affected by a potential drought while around six provinces by the potential dry spell.

Gov't response to El Niño

Marcos said the government is working on strengthening some sectors that could be severely affected by the El Niño phenomenon.

The President said the Department of Agriculture (DA) is looking into improving the farmers' yields by using new varieties, developing new hybrids, and learning new techniques where they can save water.

"Merong mga technology na bawas na bawas na yung tubig— mga six inches na lang yung tubig pwede na magtanim ng palay, eh. So, baka bumagay 'yan dito sa Pilipinas (There are new technologies wherein we can plant rice with just six inches of water. Perhaps that is appropriate here in the Philippines)," he said.

Aside from the agriculture sector, President Marcos said the government has to keep the energy sector in mind as well, especially since the dry spell would affect the water levels.

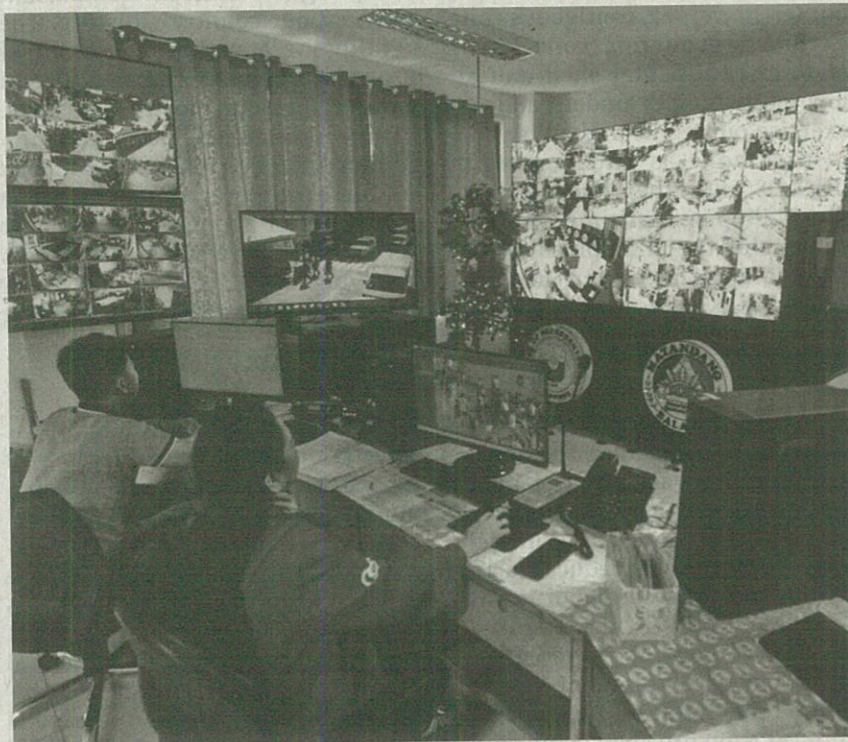
"When the water levels in our dams go down, the energy becomes a scarce resource," he said.

"We have to be more efficient in the distribution of whatever power that we generate. Maraming savings 'yan kung maganda ang pag-transmit— doon talaga, pumupunta talaga doon sa nangangailangan at walang power (We will save a lot if we make sure that power goes to those who need it)," he added.

He noted that the government is now accelerating putting up transmission lines.

In addition, Marcos said the government has to be "logical and rational" in the way it distributes water by determining which areas need the water most.

"So yun ang unahin natin (That's what we should prioritize) and then



CLOSE WATCH — Barangay staff monitor the CCTV at the barangay hall of Barangay Balara in Quezon City on Tuesday, Dec. 13, 2023. Metro Manila barangays have stepped up security measures to ensure a safe and peaceful Yuletide season. (Mark Balmores)

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we go down the line, let's see kung saan pa dadalhin (where else to bring it)," he said.

The Chief Executive also said that hospitals should be ready to attend to those who might be affected by the extreme heat and other recurring diseases.

"Pag tag-araw, alam naman natin, lalo na yung mga may edad na nahihirapan sa init (We know that when it's hot, the elderly will have a difficult time), so we have to make sure that the hospitals are operating well," Marcos said.

"Bumabalik yung Covid, tumataas yung pneumonia, lahat ng mga gan-yan (Covid is returning, the number of pneumonia cases is increasing, things like that). So, we have to keep in mind the healthcare system," he added.

He said the country's healthcare system is ready so long as they have sufficient power and water supply.

Restore irrigation systems

It is imperative to continue restoring irrigation systems in the country, Marcos said amid looming El Niño effects until the second quarter of next year.

"To ensure the productive and efficient use of our agricultural lands, it is imperative that we continue restoring and maintaining our irrigation systems," Marcos said as he led the turnover of P776 million worth of excavators in Olongapo, Zambales.

He stressed that irrigation is very important when it comes to farming, which is crucial in achieving food sufficiency.

Next to this, he added, is the assistance and processing from the government.

"Lahat ng ating mga hinahanda para dalhin ang produkto sa merkado. Kaya't ito na muna. Inuuna natin ang production at alam natin ang pinakamahalagang bahagi na para pagandahin ang ating ani ay ang mas magandang patubig (We are preparing everything to bring the products to the market. So, we are doing this first. We are prioritizing production and we recognize that irrigation systems are the most important aspect to improve our production)," Marcos said.

The President also urged the National Irrigation Administration (NIA) to maximize the full potential of the equipment to assist farmers in order to increase their yields and incomes, aside from providing sufficient and affordable food.

He also recognized that restoring the irrigation systems in the country is an "urgent subject" as El Niño is forecasted to persist until the end of May next year.

"[T]his has become a particularly urgent subject in the face of what is being forecast as an El Niño season at least for the first quarter of 2024," Marcos said.

He likewise called on the DA and NIA to assess the farmers' needs, to accelerate construction of irrigation facilities from existing water sources.

"We must be prepared to address the effects of El Niño. We have instructed — we have included in this effort the Department of National Defense, the DENR (Department of Environment and Natural Resources), and the Department of Agriculture para pag-aralan lahat ng ating kay-ang gawin upang mapaghandaan ang mga magiging hamon pagdating nga ng tagtuyot (to study everything we can do to prepare against drought)," Marcos said.

On Tuesday, Marcos ordered the creation of a task force to mitigate the effects of El Niño.

The task force will be led by the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council (NDRRMC) under the Office of the President.

Assistance

Marcos has assured those who may be affected by the impending El Niño phenomenon that the government is ready to assist them to weather the effects of the dry spell.

Marcos said this in an interview with reporters in Nueva Ecija on Wednesday, Dec. 13.

According to the President, farmers and other individuals will receive government assistance as they will be officially registered to different livelihood programs.

He said the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) will continue to assist El Niño victims.

"DSWD is there. We will continue to provide AICS (Assistance to Individuals in Crisis Situation), TUPAD (Tulong Panghanapbuhay sa Ating Disadvantaged/Displaced Workers), especially for farmers who have — na tinamaan, na masira ang kanilang tanim (whose crops would be ruined by the dry spell)," Marcos said.

"Siyempre, may support na magagaling sa gobyerno diyan (Of course the government would provide them assistance)," he added.

The President said the government would implement programs similar to what it did when the inflation was at its height.

"Papasok ang pamahalaan to make sure naman na kahit papaano may hanapbuhay ang ating mga magsasaka (The government would intervene to make sure that our farmers would have a livelihood)," Marcos said.

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MARCOS SETS WATER INFRA DEADLINE AMID EL NIÑO

STORY BY NESTOR CORRALES AND IAN NICOLAS P. CIGARAL

The President orders the completion of water-related projects, mainly for irrigation and power supply, by April 2024 as part of several measures lined up to mitigate the impact of what is forecast to be the worst drought in decades.

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KUMAI

By Nestor Corrales
and Ian Nicolas P. Cigaral
@Team_Inquirer

President Marcos on Wednesday ordered concerned government agencies to complete water-related projects, mostly for farm irrigation and power supply, by April 2024 as part of several measures lined up to mitigate the impact of potentially the worst drought in decades due to the El Niño weather phenomenon.

The Department of Science and Technology (DOST) on Monday warned that at least



UNPRODUCTIVE The El Niño is forecast to reduce rainfall and cause farms to dry up, such as this parched field in Tanza, Cavite, photographed on May 3, 2023. —MARIANNE BERMUDEZ



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65 provinces, or 77 percent of the archipelago, were likely to experience moderate to severe drought conditions from February to May next year due to a "strong" El Niño, which is characterized by a warming of the ocean surface that increases the likelihood of below-normal rainfall conditions, potentially causing prolonged dry spells in some parts of the country.

In a speech during the inauguration of the Balbalungao Small Reservoir Irrigation Project (BSRIP) in Lupao, Nueva Ecija, the President said the government would also implement fiscal measures to cushion the impact of the El Niño dry spell.

"I think we will also have some other strategies concerning the fiscal measures that we can undertake to reduce the load on our countrymen," he said.


"We are doing an analysis now of world prices of food to see what would be the appropriate tariff level, what will be the appropriate fiscal measures that we can undertake, at what level do we do this, how much, what percentage, all of these," he added.

Mr. Marcos said he had ordered the creation of a Task Force El Niño under the Office of the President.

"There already exists one but we will change the structure because this is I think a more serious and a more extensive effort because we really have to get everybody involved to be able to prepare, to make sure that we can minimize, alleviate and adapt to climate change," he said.

Mr. Marcos said the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) would also continue to assist El Niño victims, adding that the government would implement programs similar to what the government did when inflation was at its peak.

"DSWD is there. We will continue to provide AICS [Assistance to Individuals in Crisis Situation], Tupad [Livelihood Assistance to Our Disadvan-



Temperatures in Metro Manila could reach up to 38.3 degrees Celsius in April and May—comparable to 1998 figures, Solidum said

tagged/Displaced Workers], especially for farmers who have—that have been hit, whose crops were damaged," he said.

Tempered GDP growth

The El Niño phenomenon, along with the impact of high interest rates on consumption and investments, has prompted the government to give up on hitting 8-percent economic growth, the upper end of its target range, in 2024.

At most, Secretary Arsenio Balisacan of the National Economic and Development Authority (Neda) noted on Wednesday that the economy could still attain the lower-limit, saying "I would not this early give away the 6.5 target, but 8 (percent) may be way out."

As gross domestic product (GDP) growth averaged 5.5 percent in the first three quarters, the economy would have to expand by 7.2 percent in the fourth quarter to attain at least the low-end of the government's 6-7 percent growth target for this year.

Balisacan said what was worrying was the threat of a prolonged El Niño dry spell.

"We have been mobilizing for the anticipated impacts of the upcoming El Niño through a comprehensive, coordinated, science-based approach," the Neda chief said.

The government will ask traders to frontload their commodity imports, Balisacan said, pointing out that "the time to store is now and if such storage happens early, we can moderate the increases in prices next year."

The government is also considering extending a reduction in tariffs for commodities such as meat, corn and rice beyond the Dec. 31, 2023, deadline.

"Managing this El Niño is very crucial," Balisacan said. "If we intervene enough, early enough and fast enough, we may be able to reduce upward pressure on prices."

Dry spell underway

The "moderate to severe drought conditions" from February to May next year would be comparable to the drought during the 1997-1998 El Niño, which was the country's worst-ever dry spell.

According to the DOST chief, El Niño was already underway, bringing drier conditions to some areas of the country where there had been up to an 80-percent reduction in rainfall.

Solidum urged government agencies to begin preparing to ensure enough water, food and electricity would be available.

"We need to plan ahead and make it fast," Solidum said.

Temperatures in Metro Manila could reach up to 38.3 degrees Celsius in April and May—comparable to 1998 figures, he said.

The country has so far endured fewer storms in 2023 than in any of the past 25 years.

Ranked among the most vulnerable countries to the impacts of climate change, the Philippines is usually affected by around 20 major storms a year.

So far this year, only 10 have made landfall or came close, the lowest number since 1998 when 11 were recorded, said Ana Solis, chief climatologist at the state weather forecaster.

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PPA POOL

MEN AND MACHINES President Marcos inspects the new excavators of the National Irrigation Administration (NIA) at Subic on Dec. 13. With him (from left) are Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiul Laurel Jr., Special Assistant Antonio Ladameo Jr., NIA chief Eduardo Guillen and Subic Bay Metropolitan Authority Chair Jonathan Tan.

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MARCOS SETS WATER INFRA DEADLINE AMID EL NIÑO THREAT

FROM A2

With less than three weeks of the year left, "it looks like the record will be beaten," Solis told the AFP news agency, adding that climate change was "probably" a factor.

The Philippines began keeping weather records in

1948, Solis said.

In his Nueva Ecija speech, the President assured Filipinos of the government's commitment to develop modern infrastructure systems that would enhance the country's agriculture sector.

Once fully operational, the Nueva Ecija multipurpose dam would provide irrigation for close

to 1,000 hectares of agricultural land in the villages of San Isidro, Balbalungao, Salvacion and Mapangpang, benefiting about 560 farmers and their families.

"The dam will generate diversified income opportunities through increased crop yields, fish culture, tourism and watershed management for environmental protec-

tion," Mr. Marcos said.

The dam, according to the President, would facilitate hydroelectric power generation and serve as a flood control mitigation infrastructure for the communities along the river for years to come.

He called on the National Irrigation Administration (NIA) and the Department of

Agriculture (DA) to ensure the timely completion of the other facilities of the project, such as its hydropower, its watershed components, so that communities would be able to fully enjoy the benefits of the project.

"Anticipating the success of the BSRIP in transforming the province's lands into thriving hubs of productivity, we remain

steadfast in our pursuit of food security, poverty reduction and economic growth," he said.

"So, we remind once again the DA and the NIA to immediately complete the construction of irrigation facilities as well as other supporting structures based on the needs of our farmers," he added. —WITH REPORTS FROM REUTERS AND AFP INQ



Marcos rushes irrigation projects for El Niño

By ALEXIS ROMERO

President Marcos yesterday directed state agencies to finish the construction of irrigation facilities and similar projects in four months to ensure enough water supply as the country braces for El Niño.

In a speech delivered in Nueva Ecija, Marcos said rains

may not be that frequent in January so everything must be done to prepare for El Niño, which is seen to persist until the second quarter of next year.

"Because we do not have much time... I thought about the projects we will undertake. We

have four months to finish all of them, to make them operational. Because that is the deadline I set for the departments," Marcos said during the inauguration of the Balbalungao Small Reservoir Irrigation Project in Lupao town.

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President Marcos leads the National Irrigation Administration's turnover of P776 million worth of excavators at Subic Bay Freeport Zone in Olongapo City yesterday. With him are Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel, NIA administrator Eddie Guillen and SBMA chairman Jonathan Tan.

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Marcos From Page 1

"I told them, we have to think of what we can finish by April of next year so that when May comes, when there is a dry spell and it is not raining, we have enough water supply," he added.

According to the Philippine Atmospheric Geophysical Astronomical Services Administration (PAGASA), El Niño increases the likelihood of below-normal rainfall conditions, which could bring negative impacts like dry spells and droughts in some areas.

On Tuesday, Science Secretary Renato Solidum Jr. said about 65 provinces may be affected by severe drought by the first half of 2024.

He added that the effects of El Niño are currently felt in some areas in the country, and this is characterized by the reduction of rainfall up to 80 percent, which led to dry conditions.

He has likened the prevailing El Niño to the 1997-1998 event – the worst experienced by the country that left billions of pesos in damage to agriculture.

Moderate to severe drought conditions may be experienced from February to May next year, the science chief added.

Solidum said the majority of the global climate model suggests that El Niño will likely persist until the second quarter of 2024.

Marcos noted that low water supply could also cause problems in the health and power sectors, describing the present situation as "urgent."

Marcos said he has created an El Niño task force under his office but its structure has to be modified to boost the country's preparedness measures.

Multi-purpose dam

As part of the efforts to ensure food security, Marcos led the inauguration of the Balbalungao Small Reservoir Irrigation Project, a project that is expected to benefit 562 farmers and their families in Lupao.

The multi-purpose dam will provide irrigation to about 840 hectares of agricultural land in Barangays San Isidro, Balbalungao, Salvacion and Mapangpang and will also serve as flood control mitigation infrastructure.

It is seen to generate diversified income opportunities through increased crop yields, fish culture, tourism and watershed management

for environmental protection and facilitate hydroelectric power generation.

Marcos said the project is part of the continued efforts of the Department of Agriculture (DA) and the National Irrigation Administration to boost rice productivity in Nueva Ecija, which is known as the "rice bowl of the Philippines."

Aside from accelerating the building of dams and flood-control projects, Marcos said the government is also embarking on a new information campaign to make people understand El Niño and encourage them to save water and collect rainwater.

LGU preparation

Former agriculture secretary Leonardo Montemayor said yesterday that many local government units (LGUs) have yet to prepare for the possible impact of El Niño on the agricultural sector, emphasizing their importance in mitigating the effects of the phenomenon.

In a radio interview, Montemayor cited his experience where local agriculturists from a municipality admitted that they have yet to start preparing for El Niño.

"One manifestation if we are ready is if the LGUs are doing the necessary preparations, like if they are coordinating with the farmers. As of now, the DA has no direct contact with the farmers. It's through the mayors and the technicians under the mayors and governors," Montemayor said.

He added that PAGASA should provide accurate and timely information to the farmers.

"The DA, the Department of the Interior and Local Government and other agencies should relay this information to our farmers and planting materials should be made available in case they cannot plant," Montemayor said.

He added that the DA should provide small water impounding systems and irrigation systems to lessen the impact of the drought, which can be finished in just a few weeks.

According to him, the first to be affected during the drought is palay as it needs a big amount of water.

The DA should provide farm technicians who should be able to advise farmers if they need to shift to other crops, he said.

"Corn seedlings, root crops and other planting materials should be readied so that the LGUs can distribute the said planting materials to the farmers," he added.

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President Marcos leads the inauguration of the Balbalungao Small Reservoir Irrigation Project in Barangay San Isidro, Nueva Ecija yesterday. Once fully operational, the multi-purpose dam will provide irrigation for around 1,000 hectares of agricultural land.



Rice imports to fall by 5% due to high prices

By JASPER EMMANUEL Y. ARCALAS

✉@jearcalas

THE Philippines's rice imports this year could reach over 3.6 million metric tons (MMT), about 5 percent lower than the 3.826 MMT recorded last year, according to the Department of Agriculture (DA).

The latest DA estimates indicated that the country's full-year rice imports could reach around 3.65 MMT, including the remaining volume covered by valid permits.

Public DA presentation to lawmakers recently showed that the country has imported 3.03 MMT as of end-November while 1.24 MMT has not arrived.

"Based on historical data, at least 50 percent [about 620,000 metric tons] is still expected to arrive within the year," the DA said.

"Last year, around 800,000 MT [metric tons] arrived during the months of October to December [so far 352,000 MT]," it added.

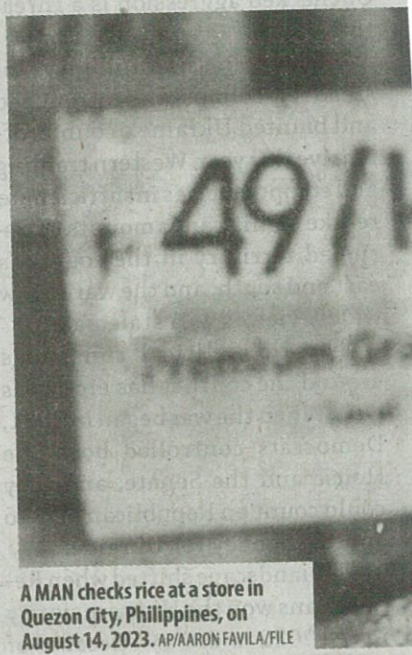
Using Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) data, the DA projected that the country would end the year with at least 3.158 MMT of rice which is sufficient to last for 85 days.

"The available supply of rice is projected at 65 [to] 85 days at the end of the year. [It] will increase

with more imports arriving," the DA said.

Pundits and industry players have noted that the high global rice prices caused the drop in the country's rice import volume.

The Philippines's rice imports



A MAN checks rice at a store in Quezon City, Philippines, on August 14, 2023. AP/AARON FAVILA/FILE

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from January to November fell by 14 percent year-on-year to 3.033 MT from 3.526 MMT in the same 11-month period last year, based on Bureau of Plant Industry (BPI) data.

The DA presentation showed that the prevailing global prices of 5 percent broken rice from Vietnam stood at \$663 per MT while those coming from Thailand and Pakistan were estimated at \$625 per MT and \$598 per MT, respectively.

Meanwhile, the 25 percent broken rice was priced at \$643 per MT (Vietnam), \$566 per MT (Thailand) and \$528 per MT (Pakistan).

Based on BPI data, Vietnam remained as the Philippines's top rice import source in January to November, accounting for 2.689 MMT followed by Thailand and Myanmar with 161,990.67 MT and

127,818 MT, respectively.

Roehlano M. Briones, senior research fellow at the Philippine Institute for Development Studies, argued that the minimal increase in domestic rice production was insufficient to compensate for the drop in rice imports to keep retail prices stable.

"The root cause is increased world prices that led to a drop in import volume which was not adequately compensated [by local production]," Briones told the BUSINESSMIRROR.

Citing his own computations, Briones said the increase in the local rice production in the third quarter was at about 64,500 MT but the reduction in rice imports during the July to September period stood at 320,424 MT.

"This helps explain the recent rice price increases," he said.





PBBM unveils fiscal, infra plan to blunt El Niño impact

By SAMUEL P. MEDENILLA

X @sam_medenilla

TO mitigate the effects of El Niño, President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. announced the government is now fast-tracking the completion of water-related infrastructure and looking at fiscal measures to help those affected by the looming nationwide drought.

In his speech during the inauguration of the dam component of the Balbalungao Small Reservoir Irrigation Project (BSRIP) in Nueva Ecija on Wednesday, the chief executive said he ordered the concerned government agencies to complete "irrigation facilities as well as other supporting structures" by April

next year.

"As early as now, the rains have become intermittent and maybe by the start of January there will no longer be much rain so we need to do everything to prepare for the droughts, which can last until the second quarter [of next year]," Marcos said in Filipino.

He said finishing projects such as the BSRIP has become "urgent" after the Department of Science and Technology (DOST) projected the worsening impact of El Niño will reach its peak on May 2024.

DOST expects as many as 65 provinces will suffer from drought during the said period.

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"So that when May comes and the drought is still there and there is still no rain, we will still have sufficient water supply," Marcos explained.

He noted the said infrastructure will be augmented by government cloud seeding initiatives.

Expanded irrigable lands

THE P887-million BSRIP multi-purpose dam will provide irrigation for close to 1,000 hectares of agricultural land in Barangays San Isidro, Balbalungao, Salvacion, Mapangpang in Lupao, Nueva Ecija benefiting about 560 farmers and their families.

It also has pending hydropower and watershed components which, when completed, will also provide the energy and better flood control mitigation in nearby areas, where the facility is located.

Initiatives such as the BSRIP, he said, will help his administration to not only reduce the impact of El Niño on agriculture, but also achieve its target of establishing more than 275,000 hectares of new irrigation areas and restore around 80,000 hectares of existing irrigation by 2028.

Currently, Marcos said they generated around 25,000 hectares of new irrigation areas and restored nearly 9,000 hectares of irrigable

land.

The expanded irrigation network will help farmers increase their planting period each year from two to three.

"That will immediately translate to 30 percent increase in [their] production," Marcos said.

Fiscal measures

MARCOS also disclosed that possible fiscal measures to provide support to those affected by El Niño are being studied.

"We are doing an analysis now of world prices of food to see what would be the appropriate tariff level, what will be the appropriate fiscal measures that we can undertake, at what level do we do this, how much, what percentage, all of these," the President told reporters in an interview after the inauguration event.

Government economic managers earlier said drought caused by El Niño can significantly reduce local food production, which will put additional burden to consumers.

Farmers who will lose their livelihood during El Niño, Marcos said, will get cash aid and emergency employment.

"The government will step in to make sure the [affected] farmers will have a livelihood," he said.

Health and energy impact

SOARING temperature from El

Niño, he said, are also expected to cause harm to health, particularly for the elderly.

"So, we have to keep in mind the healthcare system has to be made ready. It's ready so long as they are able to—they have sufficient power supply and they have sufficient water supply," Marcos said.

In response to the expected lower power supply during droughts as hydro power plants see reduced output, the President said the setting up of additional transmission lines for efficient power distribution is being ramped up.

"We have to think about energy because as we all know, when the water levels in our dams go down [the energy] becomes a scarce resource and we have to be more efficient in the distribution of whatever power that we generate," the chief executive said.

A restructured Task Force El Niño, now under the Office of the President through the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council (NDRRMC), will consolidate all government efforts to minimize the impact of the nationwide dry spells and droughts next year.

"We're still working on the structure of the task force. We should have it by next week and we'll be able to show at least what the structure is and what the general plan is," Marcos said.



Imported sugar helping keep millgate prices low — planters

SUGAR farmers said low sugar prices at millgate level are due to the preference by traders to deal in imports, according to the Confederation of Sugar Producers Associations, Inc. (CONFED).

In a statement, CONFED said that more imported sugar is being withdrawn by traders, resulting in prices realized by planters remaining at P2,300-P2,500 per 50-kilogram bag.

"Compared to locally refined sugar, imported refined sugar is cheaper, and so it will deliver more profit for importers and traders," CONFED President Aurelio J. Valderrama, Jr. said.

Citing data from the Sugar Regulatory Administration, it said that out of 209,408 metric

tons (MT) of sugar withdrawn from stocks, 32% (66,608 MT) was locally refined sugar and 68% (142,800 MT) was imported.

Mr. Valderrama called for the intervention of the Department of Agriculture (DA) to grant priority to locally refined sugar.

It added that producers could suffer if locally refined sugar was not given priority as 40% of raw sugar is being withdrawn for refining.

"While millgate prices drop, retail prices remain high. Clearly, neither sugar farmers nor consumers are benefitting from this situation," CONFED said.

It added that millgate prices will continue to drop due to the oversupply of raw sugar. In recent

weeks prices have declined from P2,500 to P2,300 per 50-kg bag.

The SRA has said that it was pushing for a suggested retail price for refined sugar of P85 per kg.

In September, the SRA issued Resolution No. 2023-159 which required importers to distribute their allocations by Oct. 15.

The resolution also reclassified 150,000 MT of imported refined sugar as buffer stock.

"Sugar farmers want to know now, how much of the 150,000 MT was actually distributed and how much was left undistributed as a result of the Board Resolution," CONFED said.

On Sunday, another producer's group called for government in-

tervention due to the continued divergence of raw sugar millgate prices with retail prices, according to the United Sugar Producers Federation of the Philippines (UNIFED).

UNIFED said the government should engage in sugar purchasing to help farmers.

The regulator earlier projected a trading price for the commodity of P3,000 per 50-kg bag.

Meanwhile, Mr. Valderrama said his organization has also urged President Ferdinand R. Marcos, Jr. to provide fuel subsidies to sugar producers "because production inputs continue to rise even as sugar prices go down." — **Adrian H. Halili**



El Niño interventions readied

BY JOCELYN MONTEMAYOR

PRESIDENT Marcos Jr. yesterday ordered the Department of Agriculture (DA) and its attached agency, the National Irrigation Administration (NIA) to expedite and complete the construction of all irrigation facilities and other supporting structures throughout the country in the next four months to help ensure the supply of water and cushion the impact of the El Niño.

The President, during the inau-

guration ceremony of the Balbalungao Small Reservoir Irrigation Project (BSRIP) in Nueva Ecija, said El Niño is expected to worsen and will extend until the second quarter of 2024, giving everyone four months to prepare.

"We remind once again the DA and the NIA to immediately complete the construction of irrigation facilities as well as other supporting structures based on the needs of our farmers ... we need to do all that we can to prepare for the dry months," Marcos said

The Philippine Atmospheric Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration (PAGASA) initially said El Niño is expected to occur from the last quarter of 2023 to the first quarter of 2024.

Last week, PAGASA said El Niño is currently being felt in the country and it may extend until May next year. It said the current El Niño, which is comparable to the level from 1997 to 1998, may result in drought in more than 60

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EL NIÑO

provinces.

The President also directed DA to immediately complete the construction of supporting structures of the Balbalungao Small Reservoir Irrigation Project (BSRIP), such as its hydropower and watershed components, so that communities will be able to fully enjoy the benefits of the project especially during the dry months.

Marcos said once fully operational, the BSRIP multipurpose dam will provide irrigation to close to 1000 hectares of agricultural land in Barangays San Isidro, Balbalungao, Salvacion, and Mapang-pang here in Lupao and benefit 560 farmers and their families.

The BSRIP is composed of irrigation infrastructures that were finished on Feb. 13, 2019. It also includes the P887 million, 29.9-meter-high earth-fill dam that was finished last November 15.

The President said the P1.28-billion BSRIP is expected to improve agricultural productivity in Nueva Ecija, which is also known as the "Rice Bowl of the Philippines."

The project is also expected to generate diversified income opportunities through increased crop yields, fish culture, tourism, and watershed management for environmental protection.

The President also directed the Department of National Defense, Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) and the Department of Agriculture to study and update government responses to the looming dry spell.

Marcos said the Office of the President is also creating a Task Force El Niño, which aims to involve the Filipino people to prepare and make sure to minimize, alleviate and adapt to climate change.

The task force, which is expected to be formed by next

week, will also put together all the data from Department of Science and Technology (DOST), Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), DA, Department of Energy (DOE) to establish an El Niño database.

Marcos assured farmers and vulnerable sectors, who will be affected by the El Niño that the government will provide them with assistance including livelihood programs to cushion the impact of El Niño.

He said Department of Social Welfare and Development will continue to assist El Niño victims through its Assistance to Individuals in Crisis Situation while the Department of Labor and Employment also assist the affected sectors through its Tulong Panghanapbuhay sa Ating Disadvantaged/Displaced Workers.

He said the government will also implement some fiscal measures to cushion the impact of the El Niño.

"We are doing an analysis now of world prices of food to see what would be the appropriate tariff level, what will be the appropriate fiscal measures that we can undertake, at what level do we do this, how much, what percentage, all of these," he added.

From Nueva Ecija, Marcos proceeded to the Subic Bay Freeport Zone in Olongapo in Zambales and led the turnover 141 of excavators worth P776 million.

The excavators, which is the first batch of the bought equipment, will be used in maintaining the 257 national irrigation systems and 10,144 communal irrigation systems nationwide

The second tranche of NIA procurement, amounting P782.9 million, will be composed of 183 excavators, trucks, and other heavy equipment while the third tranche, will be worth more than P1 billion and distributed nationwide.



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DA Region 2 pushes drone direct seeding

THE Department of Agriculture-Regional Field Office 2 (Cagayan Valley) is into scaling up the application of the modified planting calendar, and precision and digital farming using drones.

With this, DA Regional Office 2 Executive Director Rose Mary Aquino said her office conducted on December 7 a method demo on rice direct seeding using an unmanned aerial vehicle or drone in Mallig, Isabela.

"We are currently undertaking research in a 20-hectare demonstration [area] in Mallig," she said, adding that aside from showcasing direct seeding using a drone, the activity also featured precision/mechanical and manual seeding techniques.

Aquino said the initiative, a

collaborative effort of the DA Regional Field Office 2 through its Field Operations, Research, Integrated Laboratory and Regional Agricultural Engineering Divisions; Regional Crop Protection Center; Cagayan Valley Research Center; Southern Cagayan Research Center; Rice and Farm, and Fisheries Clustering and Consolidation Programs; and the National Irrigation Administration in Region 2.

She said this project is also strongly supported by the municipal local government of Mallig and the provincial government of Isabela.

Titled "Scaling-up of Modified Planting Calendar cum Precision Crop Establishment Technologies and Nutrient Management in Ir-

rigated Area of Isabela Province," Aquino said the research's main objective is "to improve farm productivity and profitability of farmers using digital farming."

She also explained that a modified cropping calendar is an adjusted time of planting from that of the existing one.

"Our most important consideration here is to avoid rainy months and other adverse weather conditions during critical stages of plants," Aquino said.

She said the research project also aims to determine the profitability and acceptability of a modified planting calendar in the area.

"If this is proven successful, it may also be introduced and adopted in other areas of the Cagayan

Valley region," Aquino said.

According to Rodel Carlos, DA-CVRC science research specialist, the demonstration was attended by farmers and stakeholders in Mallig.

Carlos said members of the Casili Dam Farmers Irrigators Association, agricultural extension workers and DA-RFO2 officials joined in witnessing the demonstration.

He said a field day will be conducted before harvesting this 2024.

"This is to showcase the significant findings and their impact on yield and income of each intervention in comparison with the current farmers' production practices," Carlos added.

LEANDER C. DOMINGO



■ The Department of Agriculture office in Region 2 is introducing the drone-based direct seeding technique in cultivating rice. CONTRIBUTED PHOTO



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BFAR Region 2 produces career scientist

THE Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) in Region 2 (Cagayan Valley) has produced another recipient of a career scientist position.

BFAR is an agency under the Department of Agriculture (DA).

The Scientific Career System (SCS) conferred Dr. Evelyn C. Ame, DA-BFAR 2 head researcher and chief of the Regional Fisheries Training and Fisherfolk Coordinating Center, the rank of Career Scientist 1.

Ame took her oath as Career Scientist 1 during the Investiture of Career Scientist 5 Rank and Oath-Taking Ceremony at the Philippine International Convention Center, Pasay City, Metro Manila, on Dec. 11, 2023.

Administered by the National Academy of Science and Technology (NAST) Philippines, the SCS applies to scientific personnel in government service holding at least a master's or doctorate and extends to non-faculty full-time researchers from state universities and colleges.

Since its establishment, the SCS has conferred 198 Filipino researchers with scientist ranks, 63 of whom are active career scientists. It serves several functions, contributing to the overall development and advancement of science and technology in the country.

The second recipient of a career scientist position to date produced by the BFAR Region 2 and the entire BFAR

bureaucracy, Ame rose from the ranks.

As head of the DA-BFAR Region 2 Fisheries Research and Development Center, Ame is actively involved in the development and promotion of research in the fields of aquaculture and management of fisheries resources.

She pioneered the conservation and protection of two important endemic species, which are among her notable accomplishments in Cagayan Valley.

These species include the "Ludong" or president's fish, which is considered the most expensive fish in the county, and the catadromous Anguillid Eel. Ame is the focal person for the preservation of the two fish species.

A Facebook post by the BFAR Region 2 said Ame led the implementation of various research from niche assessment, reproductive biology, stock assessment, climate vulnerability, and socioeconomic impacts in her pioneering effort.

These were used as a basis for crafting a comprehensive management plan and regulatory measures or ordinances that deter the overexploitation of those species.

The bureau said these ordinances include BFAR Administrative Circular 247, series of 2013, an ordinance banning the catching of Ludong fish from October 1 to November 15 each year during spawning season.

LEANDER C. DOMINGO



Time to scale up biotech crop adoption

WHEN it comes to the development and adoption of biotechnology-derived crops, I can say that the Philippines is not very far behind.

There are currently two biotech crops cultivated in the Philippines: Bt corn and Golden Rice. Meanwhile, Bt eggplant is almost to be commercialized. And what will be the next biotech crop that will be adopted in the Philippines?

And when another biotech crop is about to be commercialized in the country, my wish is we adopt a scientific approach in assessing it, and, more importantly, take into account the welfare of both smallholder farmers and consumers, especially those living in impoverished communities.

In the developed countries like the United States, biotech crops have become mainstream, according to figures posted at the website of the International Service for the Acquisition of Agri-biotech Applications (ISAAA) (<https://www.isaaa.org>), citing a report from the US Department of Agriculture (USDA).

The ISAAA said in its website that as of this year, over 90 percent of corn, cotton and soybeans planted in the United States are genetically-modified or -engineered (GE) varieties.

"Commercial planting of GE crops started in the US in 1996. The adoption rates of GE seeds increased rapidly in the succeeding years. Most of the GE crops are classified as herbicide tolerate (HT), insect resistant (Bt) or stacks (a combination of Bt and HT). Other GE traits have been introduced, but HT and Bt traits have been the most popular for US growers," ISAAA said.

PH and Chinese efforts

Chinese media recently reported that plant scientists from the Chinese Academy of Agricultural Sciences and Henan Agricultural University have solved a genetic challenge in corn, which will make it possible for them to develop a variety rich in iron.

Chinese media reported that the corn gene ZmNAC78 is responsible for regulating iron concentration in kernels. The researchers took nine years of research to unravel that puzzle.



MOVING
FORWARD
**WILLIAM
D. DAR**

"One challenge to biofortifying Fe (iron) in maize is that Fe concentrations in grain are negatively correlated with maize yield," the paper of the scientists said in the opening statements.

Chinese media also cited Chu Chengcai, a renowned plant scientist from South China Agricultural University who is not involved in the said research, as saying that iron deficiency causes up to 200,000 deaths in some of the most impoverished parts of the globe.

With those, I can say that China has made a breakthrough that can help address malnutrition globally and prove to the skeptics that biotechnology is key to also improving the lives of the impoverished.

In the Philippines, the commercialization of Golden Rice in July 2021 was considered a milestone by Jean Balié, who was then the director general of the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI).

Golden Rice, developed jointly by the Philippine Rice Research Institute and the IRRI, aims to combat vitamin A deficiency (VAD) in the Philippines, especially among poor households. I also see Golden Rice as addressing vitamin A deficiency in other developing countries, putting the Philippines as a major contributor in the biotech sphere when it comes to providing solutions to address the nutritional needs of poor households. This view is also shared by Balié.

"This milestone puts the Philippines at the global forefront in leveraging agriculture research to address the issues of malnutrition and related health impacts in a safe and sustainable way," he said in July 2021.

According to the IRRI, about 1 in 5 children in the poorest communities in the Philippines suffer from VAD. Globally, VAD affects about 190 million children and can cause childhood blindness. It is also a factor in making children's immune system weak.

The future of biotech crops

The good news is there is no stopping the development of more biotech crops using other technologies like gene editing, where the genetic makeup of a crop is modified but no additional organism or gene is added.

Also, scientists are developing crops using biotechnology to make food healthier for human consumption and for phytoremediation.

According to the website of the USDA, scientists are using biotechnology to develop crops with reduced saturated fats in cooking oils, reduce allergens and increased disease-fighting nutrients.

"They are also researching ways to use genetically engineered crops in the production of new medicines, which may lead to a new plant-made pharmaceutical industry that could reduce the costs of production using a sustainable resource," the USDA said in its website.

Also, the USDA said genetically engineered plants are under development for phytoremediation or where plants absorb polluting substances from the soil.

Of course, the USDA and the Environment Protection Agency also perform risk assessment to minimize the possible negative impact of biotech crops on the environment, particularly on other plants and animals.

I also believe that the Department of Agriculture and its attached agencies, as well as the Philippine scientific community have the competence to also conduct risk assessment of biotech crops.

And with Philippine agriculture facing challenges like dwindling soil and water resources, lesser land to plant crops and extreme weather changes, my wish is that we continue to adopt and elevate a scientific approach, including biotech crops.



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DA to import breeding stock from US, Australia

BY JANINE ALEXIS MIGUEL

THE Department of Agriculture (DA) is set to import breeder animals to increase the number of livestock in the country.

The breeder animals will be shipped from the United States and Australia and will be funded through the National Livestock Program (NLP), the agency said.

A selection team will also be formed to evaluate and select breeder animals to be imported, a memorandum released by the DA said on Wednesday.

Of the P167.5 billion approved budget of the DA for 2024, P2.20 billion was allocated for hog

repopulation and recovery, while the National Livestock Program will receive P4.35 billion.

To ensure the efficient importation of breeder animals, the selection team is tasked to evaluate and determine that the animals in the selection pool are fit for breeding.

The selection team will also "witness the weighing and ear-tagging of animals in the US and Australia."

Other expenses for the program, such as travel expenses, allowance,

local transportation costs, and other miscellaneous expenses both in the US and Australia, shall be shouldered by the supplier, the DA said.

The plan to import breeders is in line with the government's thrust to increase the country's livestock production.

The Agriculture department announced in October its plan to increase the local production of livestock and poultry by five times in five years, which will minimize the need for food imports.

It added that this move would also raise farmers' profits and lower the price of livestock and poultry products, ensuring the availability of protein sources for

consumers.

Data from the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) showed that in 2022, the Philippines produced 2.14 million metric tons (MT) of livestock commodities, while the poultry sector produced 2.6 million MT the same year.

The DA and the Philippine Coconut Authority, meanwhile, have entered into a partnership to implement an P850-million livestock program to support local coconut farmers.

The agency will distribute chicken, native pigs, and goats toward the end of the year in accordance with the Coconut Farmers Industry and Trust Fund Act under Republic Act 11524.



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Imported sugar blamed for domestic price drop

SUGAR producers and farmers are blaming importation for the declining prices of the commodity.

The Confederation of Sugar Producers Association Inc. (Confed) said more imported sugar is being withdrawn by traders than locally produced sugar.

"Compared to locally refined sugar, imported refined sugar is cheaper, and so it will deliver more profits for importers and traders," said Confed President Aurelio Valderrama Jr.

The Sugar Regulatory Administration (SRA) has reported that sugar prices dropped below the comfortable profit margin of P3,000 per 50-kilo bag.

Likewise, the United Sugar Producers Federation (Unifed) said last week that the prices of the sweetener have plummeted to P2,300 to P2,500 per bag.

Valderrama urged the Department of Agriculture to give more importance to locally refined sugar to address declining prices.

Citing SRA's data, out of the total refined sugar withdrawal of 209,408 metric tons (MT) as of November 12, about 32 percent, or 66,608 MT, were locally refined sugar, while the remaining 68 percent, or 142,800 MT, were imported.

Another report as of Oct. 29, 2023 showed that 31 percent, or 54,209 MT, of 173,257 MT

of refined sugar were sourced locally, while 69 percent, or 119,050 MT, were imported refined sugar.

"Approximately 40 percent of raw sugar are withdrawn for refining, so if locally refined sugar is not given priority, the local sugar farmers who produce the raw sugar stand to suffer," said Valderrama.

"This seems to indicate that priority is given to imported sugar over locally refined sugar, as suggested by the trend in the two SRA reports," he said.

Valderrama also said that neither sugar farmers nor consumers are benefiting from the situation as millgate prices drop while local retail prices remain high.

The SRA, meanwhile, is pushing for a suggested retail price (SRP) of refined sugar and has urged retailers to sell the sweetener at P85 per kilo.

Based on the price monitoring report of the DA as of Dec. 8, 2023, the prevailing prices of refined sugar was P86.96 per kilo, while washed sugar was priced at P81.37 per kilo.

"At this point, all remedies are welcome. We have also written to President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., asking for fuel subsidy, because production inputs continue to rise even as sugar prices go down," Valderrama said.

JANINE ALEXIS MIGUEL



Mindanao sustains P1-B quake damage

By AARON RECUENCO

Mindanao has sustained almost P1-billion damage to agriculture and infrastructure as a result of the 7.4-magnitude earthquake early this month.

The National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council

(NDRRMC), in a situation report on Wednesday, December 13, said damage to infrastructure was P837.5 million, majority in the Caraga region, and the rest in the Davao region.

The National Irrigation Administration reported P91-million damage to agriculture infrastructure. On the other hand, the Department of Agriculture reported P19.2 million in

damage to agriculture products.

A total of 177,689 families composed of 790,773 individuals lost their homes, with 354 damaged and 5,442 partially damaged houses, in the earthquake.

Three persons, including a pregnant woman, were killed, and 74 sustained injuries in the tremor. However, the NDRRMC said they have

yet to validate casualty reports from the field.

The Philippine Institute of Volcanology and Seismology (Phivolcs) has recorded 5,151 aftershocks in the earthquake with magnitudes ranging from 1.7 to 6.6.

Phivolcs said that as of 12 p.m. on December 13, 1,291 aftershocks had been plotted, 57 of which were felt.

On the other hand, 2,427 aftershocks were recorded in the magnitude-6.8 earthquake that rocked Cagwait, Surigao del Sur on December 4. These aftershocks had magnitudes 1.3 to 5.8.

Of these aftershocks, Phivolcs said 596 were plotted and 10 were felt. (with a report from Lizst Torres-Abello)



PBBM orders creation of task force vs El Niño

PRESIDENT Ferdinand R. Marcos yesterday ordered the creation of a coordinating body to consolidate all measures to mitigate the impacts of the El Niño phenomenon, which is expected to persist until the end of second quarter of next year.

In a sectoral meeting in Malacañang, President Marcos said the task force will be led by the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council (NDRRMC) under the Office of the President.

"We'll have to organize first the task force. This is the time to put every conditions together," Marcos said.

The President stressed the need to prioritize efforts based on short-term and long-term interventions of the government.

Based on the National Action Plan for El Niño, the government has identified

five sectors where plans and activities are being laid out to mitigate the effects of El Niño, namely in water, food, power, health, and public safety.

DOST reports showed that 65 provinces across the country have potential for drought, while there are around 6 provinces with potential for dry spell.

The President stressed the need to intensify efforts and ensure timely release of assistance to affected areas.

Marcos also told officials to encourage the public to take part in the government efforts. He stressed the need for a massive information campaign that would remind the people to conserve resources, such as water and energy.

The President has ordered the Department of Agriculture (DA) and the National Irrigation Administration

(NIA) to immediately complete the construction of supporting structures of the Balbalungao small reservoir irrigation project in Nueva Ecija to help cushion the impact of El Niño.

Speaking during the inauguration of the project, President Marcos stressed that the BSRIP will further improve agricultural productivity in Nueva Ecija, which is also known as the "Rice Bowl of the Philippines."

The BSRIP, worth P1.28 billion, is composed of irrigation infrastructures that were finished on February 13, 2019. The construction of the P887 million, 29.9-meter-high earth-fill dam and accompanying structures began on February 5, 2020, and was finished on November 15, 2023, ahead of completion target slated on January of next year.

PCO



Govt urged to restore abundance of fisheries production to mitigate hunger and poverty

THE government should rehabilitate the country's coastal and marine ecosystem and restore fisheries abundance to mitigate hunger and poverty.

Oceana Philippines said no Filipino deserves to be hungry as it has fisheries resources that can feed the Filipino people.

The Philippines ranks second in

the world in terms of population highly dependent on healthy and vibrant oceans for nutrition, livelihood, and coastal protection.

"Sadly, our ocean is threatened by human-induced pressures that caused an alarming decline of the fish population, such as rampant overfishing and the continuing destruction of marine habitats," Oceana Philippines vice president

Gloria Estenzon Ramos said in a statement.

Ramos' statement is in reaction to a recent Social Weather Survey report, indicating that 9.8 percent of Filipino families experienced involuntary hunger.

This is characterized by being hungry and not having anything to eat, at least once in the past three months.

"Filipinos are highly dependent on the consumption of seafood aside from rice and vegetables. Seafood is an inexpensive and accessible source of animal protein, rich in critical micronutrients, such as iron, zinc, vitamin A, and omega-3 fatty acids that should address stunted growth, malnutrition, and other ailments that are, otherwise, preventable. We call on the government to seriously work on the restoration of our fisheries abundance to significantly reduce the incidences of hunger and health challenges, especially among the poor," she said. *Jonathan L. Mayuga*



MPIC farm projects secure green lane endorsement

By ANDREA E. SAN JUAN @andreasanjuan

THE Board of Investments (BOI) has granted green lane certificates of endorsement to two agricultural projects of conglomerate Metro Pacific Investment Corp. which cost a total of P3.4 billion.

The agency attached to the Department of Trade Industry (DTI) said the government will fast-track the permit and license application processes for MPIC's vegetable farm project in Bulacan and its dairy farm project in Laguna.

Trade Undersecretary and BOI Managing Head Ceferino S. Rodolfo awarded the Certificate of Endorsement to the officials of MPIC's subsidiaries, Metro Pacific Fresh Farms Inc. (MPFF) and the Metro Pacific Dairy Farms Inc. (MPDF), last November 30.

The One-Stop Action Center for Strategic Investments of the BOI, which operates as the "sole entry point" for strategic investments under Executive Order (EO) No. 18 will expedite the endorsement of the project's permit and license procedures to ensure the "swift" realization of strategic investments in the country.

According to the investment promotion agency, the MPFF's Metro Manila Greenhouse Vegetable Production Project will be a "state-of-the-art" complex of

modern greenhouses.

"The project aims to promote sustainable farming practices and modern farming technology," BOI said in a statement on Wednesday, adding that this project is the "largest" vegetable greenhouse facility in the Philippines, located in San Rafael, Bulacan.

BOI said the farm is expected to start commercial operation in the fourth quarter of 2024, producing "high-quality" vegetables.

The agency said agriculture is the largest user of freshwater, accounting for 70 percent of global usage. By implementing modern farming practices such as Nutrient Film Technique hydroponics and Drip Irrigation systems, BOI said MPFF hopes to reduce the agriculture sector's consumption of natural resources.

MPFF's sustainable farming project redefines agriculture by "discarding conventional farming methods."

BOI said this initiative aims to make fresh locally-sourced organic produce available to Filipinos.

Meanwhile, BOI said MPDF's In-

tegrated Dairy Farm Project aims to manufacture 30,000 liters of dairy products per day. The project, it added, expands local milk production capacity by 20 percent, which currently stands at 26.3 million liters.

It is set to begin its commercial operations in the first quarter of 2025 in Bay, Laguna.

"Its main objective is to replace imported milk with locally produced high-quality dairy products, which will help boost the country's self-sufficiency," BOI said.

The project will address food security and value chain gaps by offering premium locally-produced products, which it said signifies a shift towards "efficient" local substitutes, according to the agency.

BOI told reporters in a Viber message on Wednesday that there are already 22 projects approved for green lane. Of these, 15 are renewable energy projects, 2 are under food security, 2 under manufacturing of new products/new technology and 3 are in the digital infrastructure category.

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Bill pushing for sustainable 'blue economy' hurdles House

By JOVEE MARIE N. DELA CRUZ

[@joveemarie](#)

THE House of Representatives has approved on third reading a Legislative Executive Development Advisory Council (Ledac) priority bill—the proposed “Blue Economy Act,” which seeks to establish a framework for the blue economy and promote stewardship and sustainable development of marine resources.

Under House Bill (HB) 9662, marine and coastal ecosystems will be conserved through a strong institutional mechanism for maritime monitoring and regulatory enforcement.

It defines the blue economy as the “integrated, holistic, cross-sectoral, and cross-stakeholder approach for the sustainable, resilient, and inclusive use, governance, management, and conser-

vation of oceans, seas, as well as marine and coastal resources and ecosystems for economic growth, leveraging green infrastructure and technologies, innovative financing mechanisms, and proactive institutional mechanisms, improving human well-being and social equity, and reducing environmental risks and ecological scarcities.”

Negros Occidental Rep. Jose Francisco Benitez said HB 9662 will transform the country's maritime economy into a sustainable “blue economy.”

Benitez described the bill as landmark legislation that is “vital not only to sustaining economic growth but also to building our national identity.”

Voting 254-3, the House passed the blue economy bill, which is included in the Ledac Common Legislative Agenda. The

bill promotes stewardship and sustainable development of the country's marine wealth within its maritime domains, including its Exclusive Economic Zone.

“The Philippines is an archipelagic and maritime nation. Maritime industries contributed 857 billion pesos to our economy, or 3.9 percent of our GDP, in 2022. But unsustainable economic development is threatening to destroy our marine and coastal ecosystems. The blue economy bill will strike a balance between our economic, social, and ecological imperatives,” Benitez said.

“The concept of the blue economy also enriches our understanding of national security and highlights civilian objectives. After all, national security is not only about border control but also about pollution control; not only about territorial integrity but also en-

vironmental integrity; not only about military security but also food security.”

The bill will ensure that ocean-based and ocean-related industries, from fisheries to shipping and tourism, will not cause damage to marine habitats. It also mandates marine spatial planning, a process to identify the best use of our maritime areas to prevent overlapping and conflicting uses and to mitigate environmental impacts.

“At the core of our blue economy are small fisherfolk. We guarantee that subsistence fisheries, or fishing mainly for household fishing consumption, will not be displaced as we delineate our maritime zones for different uses,” Benitez said.

The bill also promotes cross-sector engagement, where local and indigenous knowledge systems of small fisherfolk will be valued.

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GOVT EYES FLEXIBLE TARIFF RATES TO EASE INFLATION

THE government is keen on temporarily lowering tariffs for the importation of certain commodities as a means to cushion the impact of El Niño on inflation, according to the National Economic and Development Authority (Neda).

In a briefing on Wednesday, Socioeconomic Planning Secretary Arsenio M. Balisacan said expanding the coverage of Executive Order 10 may be "severe" and would depend on the situation.

Balisacan noted that many provinces will be affected by the El Niño but their products will be different. If provinces producing

commodities that still have high tariffs are affected by drought, the tariffs of these items could be reduced.

"If you don't want to import those high-priced [commodities or those with] heightened prices, what do you do? One way is if you already have existing high tariffs for those commodities, why don't you lower it temporarily to reduce the impact of high global prices on the local market?" Balisacan said in Neda's Yearend Briefing.

Balisacan said this is not unusual for countries, and even

SEE "TARIFF," A2

European countries adjust tariffs of commodities they import to help stabilize local prices.

"If the prices are high in the world market, they lower the tariffs. If the prices are low in the world market, they raise the tariffs. And so the domestic prices are stable," Balisacan said.

No big impact on growth

MEANWHILE, Balisacan said while the El Niño phenomenon is expected to be severe and would affect 65 provinces next year (<https://businessmirror.com.ph/2023/12/13/drought-may-strike-65-provinces-dost/>), this may not have a significant impact on growth.

The last time the country experienced a severe dry spell was in the 1997-1998 period. In 1998, the Philippine economy's GDP contracted 0.5 percent.

Only the first and third quarters of the year recorded a growth of 1.8 percent and 0.4 percent, respectively.

In the second quarter, GDP contracted 0.9 percent.

The fourth quarter of 1998 saw GDP plunge 3 percent, which was then considered the largest decline in economic performance since the third quarter of 1985 when it contracted by 5.2 percent.

"The big difference between 1997-1998 and now is that the relative share of agriculture in the economy is now much smaller," Balisacan said.

"Now our agricultural produc-

tion is around 10 percent of our economy."

Earlier, Neda said the Committee on Tariff Related Matters (CTRM) has recommended the extension of reduced tariff rates on select agriculture commodities to maintain the recent gains in inflation reduction.

Balisacan said the CTRM, co-chaired by the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) and Neda, is expected to present its recommendation to the Neda Board, chaired by the President, next week.

Balisacan said Executive Order (EO) 10 was recommended for extension for another year or until December 2024.

He said the government intends to have the extension of the EO approved by the President before the existing one expires at the end of the year.

Under Marcos's EO 10, the lower tariff rates on imported rice, corn and pork were extended until the end of 2023.

Under existing rules and regulations governing the President's power on modifying tariff rates, the Neda is the one that will make the necessary recommendation to the President on tariff adjustments. **Cai U. Ordinario**

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ADB maintains PHL growth forecast at 5.7% for 2023

THE ASIAN Development Bank (ADB) maintained its growth forecasts for the Philippines for this year and 2024, as it expects robust domestic demand to continue.

In its latest Asian Development Outlook report, the multilateral lender kept its Philippine gross domestic product (GDP) growth projection at 5.7% this year and 6.2% next year.

"The growth forecasts for Indonesia and the Philippines for both years are maintained as both countries showed robust growth in the first nine months of 2023; this momentum is expected to continue, despite tighter financial conditions," it said.

The ADB's forecast for the Philippines makes it the fastest-growing economy in Southeast Asia for this year and in 2024.

However, the projections are below the government's 6-7% and 6.5-8% growth targets for 2023 and 2024, respectively.

"The growth forecast for the Philippines for 2023 is unchanged. The economy continues to be supported by domestic demand, with growth accelerating to 5.9% in the third quarter, averaging 5.5% in the first nine months," the ADB said.

To meet the lower end of the government's 6-7% GDP target this year, the economy would need to expand by 7.2% in the fourth quarter.

"Household consumption eased in the third quarter due in part to elevated inflation, but overall it remained robust amid low unemployment and steady remittances from overseas workers," the ADB said.

The ADB also noted that government expenditures, infrastructure spending, and employment figures also showed an improvement.

It maintained the GDP growth outlook at 6.2% for 2024 amid expectations that strong domestic demand will continue.

ADB, SI/9

ADB,
from SI/1

"The business outlook, based on the central bank's third-quarter survey, was more upbeat for 2024 on anticipation of buoyant domestic demand. Manufacturing PMI (purchasing managers' index) in November rose at its strongest pace in 10 months. And services exports, particularly business process outsourcing and tourism, posted double-digit growth," it said.

However, the multilateral lender also said policy makers in developing Asia must remain vigilant as risks to growth still remain, including uncertain global economic conditions, persistent core inflation, and further tightening.

Meanwhile, the ADB retained its inflation forecasts for the Philippines at 6.2% this year, and 4% in 2024.

The ADB's 6.2% inflation projection this year is still above the central bank's 2-4% target range and full-year forecast of 6%.

The Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas (BSP) expects inflation to average 3.7% next year.

"The monetary authorities hiked the policy rate by another 25 basis points (bps) in October, which will help contain inflation," the multilateral lender said.

From May 2022 to October this year, the BSP has raised interest rates by 450 bps, bringing the benchmark interest rate to a 16-year high of 6.5%.

However, the ADB noted that food inflation is still a challenge for most countries in the region, including the Philippines.

"All these economies are facing double-digit increases in international rice prices on supply concerns. Latest policy rate increases in Indonesia and the Philippines are meant to keep inflation at bay," it added.

Food inflation eased to 5.8% in November from 7.1% in October and 10.3% in the same month a year ago.

Rice prices have been volatile this year, prompting the government to impose a one-month price ceiling on the key commodity. In September, rice inflation surged to 17.9%, the highest print since March 2009. — **Luisa Maria Jacinta C. Jocson**



Balisacan tempers economic outlook amid El Niño

By Luisa Maria Jacinta C. Jocson
Reporter

THE PHILIPPINES may not be able to achieve the upper end of the government's 6.5-8% growth target next year amid global headwinds and the El Niño weather event, National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA) Secretary Arsenio M. Balisacan said.

"I would not, this early, give away the 6.5% target, but the 8% may already be out of (reach). Reducing the range is one proposal, but we'll see once we get all the information," Mr. Balisacan told reporters at a briefing in Ortigas on Wednesday.

The NEDA chief cited risks such as the El Niño, which is expected to persist until the second quarter of 2024 and may send food prices spiraling.

Mr. Balisacan said he will maintain the 6.5-8% gross domestic product (GDP) growth target for the medium term.

"The reality next year is all the major multilateral agencies are seeing that the global economy is not as expansive as initially expected. For us to also ignore that is not good as well. There's no harm in reducing that 8% to something lower to be realistic, but not lower the 6.5% because then you're surrendering too early," he added.

Mr. Balisacan said he expects growth to continue to be driven by services, particularly tourism, as it has not returned to pre-pandemic levels.

"On the demand side, the good thing about the Philippine economy is we are not so dependent on exports as a driver of economic activity. It's largely domestic. Although of course, if we get exports growing faster... we hope exports can recover towards the second half of next year," he added.

Easing inflation will also help support growth next year. "If we can go back to 2-4% (inflation) next year, that will rekindle robust demand," the NEDA chief said.

However, Mr. Balisacan flagged the potential impact of the El Niño weather phenomenon on the economy.

"We are keenly aware of the persisting challenges we confront as we aim to hit such a target. Elevated inflation remains a risk because of the onset of El Niño," he added.

Latest data from the state weather bureau showed that a strong El Niño is present in the tropical Pacific and is showing signs of further intensification in the coming months.

While the dry spell may not necessarily impact growth, Mr. Balisacan said it could stoke inflation.

"With respect to growth, the effect on the economy, I don't think it will make a big impact. The challenge will be more on the prices. If the prices pick up, then the gains we have made in (fighting) inflation will be reversed and we don't want that. We (don't want to) go back to the old cycle of high inflation, high interest rates, low demand, low growth," he said.

The agriculture sector's growth may be at risk next year due to El Niño. However, Mr. Balisacan noted that unlike previous El Niño episodes, the country's dams have enough water to cover the dry spell.

El Niño, S1/9



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El Niño, from SI/1

Mr. Balisacan also said that the share of agriculture to the economy is smaller than in previous years, limiting the impact of the weather event on GDP growth.

Agriculture typically accounts for around 10% of the economy.

Science and Technology Secretary Renato U. Solidum, Jr. said on Tuesday that 65 out of 82 provinces will likely suffer droughts until May 2024 due to El Niño.

"We are watching closely the markets. If it affects many provinces simultaneously, that could lead to an uptick in prices, that's what we want to prepare for," Mr. Balisacan added.

He also said the NEDA is intent on ensuring that inflation returns to the 2-4% target band next year despite the El Niño.

"We will monitor closely and use tools in government, including trade policy tools to ensure we are able to minimize the negative effects of the El Niño phenomenon," he added.

Mr. Balisacan said that frontloading imports could be one policy tool to mitigate price pressures brought by the dry weather event.

Meanwhile, Mr. Balisacan said that the government's 6-7% GDP growth target this year is still within reach.

"We are confident we can still reach the lower end of the target or at the very least hit a figure near the lower end of the range. We need to grow by at least 7.2% in the fourth quarter to achieve the official target," he said.

In the first nine months, the Philippine economy expanded by 5.2%.

The NEDA chief remained optimistic that fourth-quarter GDP growth will be strong due to an increase in household spending amid the holiday season.

EL NIÑO TO DELAY EASING

Meanwhile, Fitch Ratings said the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas (BSP), along with other central banks in the region, could delay monetary policy easing in 2024 due to likely high food inflation caused by El Niño.

In a Dec. 13 report written by Fitch analysts Thomas Rookmaaker and Kathleen Chen, the debt watcher said Asian central banks in emerging markets may see some relief once the US Federal Reserve starts policy easing next year.

However, some emerging economies such as the Philippines, India, and Thailand are still at risk from El Niño given the large weight of key food items in the inflation basket.

"Policy responses to potential high food inflation could include delayed monetary policy easing if it affects core inflation, subsidies and protectionism, such as India's rice export curbs," Fitch said.

India, Thailand and Vietnam are the largest rice exporters in the world, while the Philippines is more vulnerable as food importers.

The BSP is widely expected to keep its key policy rate at a 16-year high of 6.5% on Thursday, as forecasted by 15 out of 17 analysts from a *BusinessWorld* poll conducted last week.

A pause on Thursday would be the second straight meeting the BSP left rates unchanged since its 25-basis-point (bp) off-cycle hike on Oct. 26.

The BSP earlier said one of the key upside risks to inflation is the impact of El Niño on domestic food prices, along with higher transport fares, electricity rates, international oil prices, as well as higher-than-expected minimum wage adjustments.

GlobalSource Country Analyst Diwa C. Guinigundo in a note said the BSP's risk-adjusted inflation forecasts of 6.1% for 2023, 4.4% for 2024, and 3.4% for 2025 are still unacceptable relative to the 2-4% target.

This, as forecasts for the next two years still remain "uncomfortably close to the upper end of the 2-4% official target," even if the BSP may announce new inflation forecasts on Thursday.

Mr. Guinigundo said the public should consider the BSP's risk-adjusted inflation forecast rather than the baseline, as it gives "a more realistic picture of what to expect" amid all potential risks.

"We expect the prolonged dry spell, or El Niño, to hit the supply side and possibly cause an upset of the downward spiral. This could be worsened by higher transport cost and power rates as well as the anticipated minimum wage increases in areas outside Metro Manila," he said.

Even if the Monetary Board pauses at the Dec. 14 meeting, the BSP is unlikely to immediately turn dovish given the long lag of monetary policy and the numerous risks to the inflation outlook, Mr. Guinigundo said.

"A more circumspect monetary authority will choose to play it safe and keep the policy rate at 6.5% for the time being and at least maintain a steady differential vis-à-vis the US Fed's target interest rate. A weakening of the peso is a potential outcome, and that could motivate another price upsurge," he said.

The US Federal Reserve kept the target Fed funds rate unchanged at 5.25-5.5% at its November meeting. The US central bank has raised 525 bps from March 2022 to June 2023. —

with Keisha B. Ta-asan



The triumph of mothers in urban gardening

THE world is steadily redefining how cities are deemed. Through the transformative power of urban gardening, cities are no longer concrete jungles but vibrant oases, teeming with life greenery.

As urban gardening takes root, it allows people to rediscover the bountiful benefits of connecting with greenery, even in the heart of urban environments. Two homemakers, Lisa Alcantara and Jennie Fernandez proved just this as they completed SM Foundation's Kabalik sa Kabuhayan's urban gardening program.

Lisa has been ingenious ever since her former company closed down due to the global economic crisis in 2007. She tried venturing into multiple side hustles and micro businesses, helping her make ends meet.

Always looking for ways to put food on the table, she learned about the basics of urban gardening years back and has become passionate about it since then.

"Noong sumali po ako sa KSK ng SM Foundation, mas lalo ko po naintindihan kung paano ba alagaan at mas palalaguin ang bawat uri ng halaman. Natuto rin po kami kung paano po paikutin ang puhunan at kita," she shared, adding that she and her fellow KSK farmers can rely on their garden for their daily meals.

The program not only brought fresh produce to her table but also allowed her to give back to her roots. Collaborating with fellow community members, Lisa and her batchmates cultivated the garden at her alma mater, Sto. Cristo Elementary School beside SM North EDSA in Quezon City. Teachers and other staff members can harvest from the surplus vegetables, creating a cycle of generosity that echoes Liza's newfound commitment to her community.

"Dito po talaga ako lumaki sa Brgy. Sto. Cristo at dito din po ako nagtapos ng elementarya. Masarap po sa pakiramdam na marami pong nakikinabang sa aming mga pa-



Some of the KSK farmers tend their urban garden in Sto. Cristo Elementary School



Lisa proudly shows some of eggplant they grew in their urban garden in Sto. Cristo Elementary School, Quezon City.

nanim. Dahil po nakapalibot ang classrooms sa garden, maganda po ang kapaligiran ng mga bata habang minsan naman ay nakakapagbigay ito ng gulay sa mga teachers at sa aming mga urban farmers," she said.

Much like Lisa, Jennie from East Ortigas faced the challenging aftermath of her online business closure due to the pandemic.

"Gusto ko po talagang bumalik sa pagne-negosyo na malapit sa puso ko," she said, seeking a sustainable and personally fulfilling venture. Through KSK's urban gardening initiative, she acquired the skills needed for cultivating vegetables in their urban community and rediscovered her entrepreneurial spirit as an urban farmer.

Together with her batchmates from the program, they envisioned establishing a cooperative to formalize their business, opening doors to new entrepreneurial opportunities and creating a sense of empowerment among the participants.

Jennie, an SM Foundation KSK urban farmer, joins the market tour in SM East Ortigas to learn about marketing and supplying fresh produce.

"In the next two years, gusto po naming i-institutionalize ang urban gardening sa aming subdivision para rin po makatulong sa mga kapitbahay namin those na wala o nawalan ng trabaho," she said.

As the homeowner's association president, she also looks forward to sharing her new skills so that houses in their village would be filled with produce they can always rely on.

Both Lisa and Jennie shared how they see gardening in a whole new light. For them, it goes beyond putting food on the table but also serves as a catalyst for empowerment and community collaboration.



Land distribution vs conversion

WHEN President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. led the distribution of land titles to agrarian reform beneficiaries in Passi, Iloilo last Monday, the audience at the simple ceremony and those listening via radio-TV and social media elsewhere in the country heard from Marcos what was expected of him to say.

The Chief Executive ordered the Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR), now headed by Secretary Conrado Estrella III, to expedite the distribution of land to deserving beneficiaries.

"To continue what we have done in agrarian reform, I ask the DAR to complete the distribution of lands to their deserving owners while collaborating with all the agencies of government to support our beneficiaries in anything that they might need," the President said.

Marcos said that with the handover of the land titles in Western Visayas and in other areas, the administration is set to exceed its nationwide target for land distribution this year.

'Land conversion is clearly the bane of agriculture and land reform because our farmers, especially those engaged in rice production, are making do with fewer and fewer hectares of land.'

The President said the distribution of over 2,900 hectares of land to more than 2,000 beneficiaries in the Western Visayas region is part of the administration's push for agrarian reform in the country.

He also assured the agrarian reform beneficiaries that the government will continue to provide them support such as fertilizers, machinery and farm facilities.

Marcos also led the turnover of P26.7 million worth of farm machinery and equipment, as well as tissue culture.

Aside from these, PP10.8 million worth of tractors, mobile rice mill, corn sheller and palay reaper and thresher were handed over by the President to more than 3,000 agrarian reform beneficiaries from Capiz, Guimaras and Iloilo.

Tissue culture facilities with greenhouses amounting to P15.3 million were also distributed, benefitting more than 7,000 agrarian reform beneficiaries in Capiz and Iloilo.

While land distribution is a key component of the government's land reform program, it is a fact that land conversion or the act of changing the current use of a piece of agricultural land into some other use is a problem that has bogged down the program for years now.

In 2017, former DAR secretary Rafael Mariano called for a two-year moratorium on land conversions to ensure food security, for which he was bypassed by the Commission on Appointments. He was replaced by former Agrarian Reform Secretary John Castriciones who was more inclined to give land conversion permits to housing developers and industrial users of land.

Land conversion is clearly the bane of agriculture and land reform because our farmers, especially those engaged in rice production, are making do with fewer and fewer hectares of land. Sadly, in former President Rodrigo Duterte's desire to boost industrialization and ramp up housing, he advocated shortening the land conversion process by the DAR from at least 24 months to just 30 days.

Promoting the policy of land conversion is diametrically opposed to achieving a productive and robust agricultural sector. Farmers producing our basic food necessities such as rice, corn, vegetables, fruits, nuts and root crops need the land to feed the nation and themselves.

This need for land for cultivation should be balanced with other needs, with the scale tilted a little towards agriculture.



Study: Food insecurity highest in BARMM

BY CLAIRE BERNADETTE MONDARES

THE Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) recorded the highest prevalence of household food insecurity at 84.1 percent among all regions, and the National Capital Region (NCR) lowest at 44.5 percent.

These food insecurity prevalence figures are based on the Expanded National Nutrition Survey (ENNS) conducted in 2018, 2019 and 2021 by the Department of Science and Technology-Food and Nutrition Research Institute (DoST-FNRI).

Next to BARMM, other regions with high food insecurity prevalence were also found mostly in the southern part of the country, namely Caraga Region at 69.8 percent, Eastern Visayas at 68.8 percent, Northern Mindanao at 68.7 percent, and Zamboanga Peninsula at 67.9 percent, and the Bicol Region (south of Luzon) also at 67.9 percent.

Household food insecurity refers to those who experienced limited physical, economic, and social access to safe and nutritious food.

Meanwhile, the National Capital Region (NCR) had the lowest food

insecurity prevalence at 44.5 percent, and this coincides with the poverty incidence released by the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) in 2021, where BARMM recorded the highest and NCR the lowest, according to the FNRI.

During the 2023 National Nutrition Summit held Tuesday, the DoST-FNRI further revealed the contrasts in food and nutrition situation by region through regional estimates.

The results presented were among the indicators monitored to track the country's progress in various national and global commitments, such as the Philippine Development Plan (PDP) 2023-2028, particularly Sub-chapter 2.1: Boost Health and Sub-chapter 3.1: Ensure Food Security and Proper Nutrition, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) like

SDG2 (Zero Hunger) and SDG3 (Good Health and Well-being).

Regional estimates were based on the cumulative provincial and highly urbanized city (HUC) results from the three periods of the ENNS in 2018, 2019 and 2021. With these results, the regional development councils can identify focus areas to improve food, nutrition and health status, the agency said.

In addition, the DoST-FNRI also conducted the 2022 Epidemiologic Follow-up of the 2019 Expanded National Nutrition Survey (ENNS), where a total of 23,410 households from 20 provinces and highly urbanized cities (HUCs) are covered in a Special Survey in 2022.

This study determined the changes in selected food, nutrition and health indicators after almost three years of the Covid-19 pandemic.

"There was an observed significant improvement in the prevalence of stunting among preschool children 0-59 months old, from 28.4 percent to 23.3 percent, who were followed up from 2019 pre-pandemic to 2022 during the latter part of the pandemic," Dr. Imelda Angeles-Agdeppa, director at DoST-FNRI, said during the presentation.

Among the followed-up school-age children 6-12 years old, the prevalence of stunting also significantly decreased from 23.9 percent to 18.9 percent.

Meanwhile, the follow-up study showed there was a significant increase in the prevalence of overweight and obesity in the country from 40.6 percent in 2019 to 44.4 percent in 2022 among followed-up adults ages 20-59 years old.

The NCR was found to have the highest prevalence in all age groups, particularly preschool children (6.4 percent), school-aged children (19.5 percent), adolescents (17.7 percent), and 20-year-olds and over at 46.5 percent.

Also, the agency said that although deeper analyses of the data are needed, these results seem to show that efforts to reduce the long-term impact of the pandemic on undernutrition, such as stunting, have worked, like the promotion of exclusive breastfeeding, better food diversity and caregiving practices for young children.

However, it added that restrictive policies, such as prolonged lockdowns that reduced physical activity across population groups, seemed to have contributed to the significant increase in obesity.



Antique attains 159% rice self-sufficiency

SAN JOSE DE BUENAVISTA, Antique: Antique has attained rice self-sufficiency level of 159.33 percent.

Nicolasito Calawag, Office of the Provincial Agriculture (OPA) chief, said in an interview Tuesday that as of November 30, their office recorded a total production of 248,334.28 metric tons from the 61,420.48 hectares of rice farms throughout the province.

"Of the 69,262.29 hectares

total rice area planted, there were 41,402.54 hectares irrigated area, 25,414.74 hectares were rain-fed and 2,445.01 hectares were upland," he said.

Calawag said the actual number of farmers who planted rice this year was 60,796 for both wet and dry seasons.

He added various forms of assistance were provided to the farmers through the Rice Com-

petitiveness Enhancement Fund (RCEF) program.

The RCEF program provided 38,653 bags of seeds to Antique, of which 35,381 bags or 91.5 percent had been delivered and planted by farmers in 18 municipalities.

Nancy Montecastro, OPA in charge of the high-value crops and vegetables production, said that despite the calamities that

hit Antique this year, the farmers were still able to plant and apply the farm inputs on time because of the seeds, fertilizers and other farm inputs provided them through the RCEF.

"There were also several briefings and trainings that were conducted among the farmer participants that had made them aware on how to increase their yield," Montecastro said. **PNA**



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Balisacan: El Niño unlikely to have significant impact

AN extended El Niño is unlikely to have a significant impact on the economy and inflation, Socioeconomic Planning Secretary Arsenio Balisacan said on Wednesday amid fears of droughts hitting most of the country.

"With respect to growth ... I don't think that it will make a big difference," he said, adding that "the big difference between 1997-1998 and now is that the relative share of agriculture in the economy is now much smaller."

Balisacan's statements followed Science and Technology Secretary Renato Solidum Jr.'s having said on Tuesday that the current El Niño was "comparable" to the 1997-1998 event, during which rainfall fell to half of historical levels and droughts occurred in two-thirds of the country.

Balisacan claimed that the country's irrigation systems could handle demand but also said that this shouldn't lead to complacency.

"We need to conserve and ensure that El Niño will not linger longer than expected so that we can have enough food cover," he added.

"The challenge will probably be more on the prices, because if the food prices will pick up then the gains that we have made in inflation will return, will be reversed, and we don't want that."

The aim is to avoid a return of

elevated inflation, high interest rates, diminished demand and slow growth, Balisacan continued.

"We have to watch closely those prices to ensure that we can intervene and mobilize government tools, policy tools, effectively," he said, adding that hitting the 2.0- to 4.0-percent inflation target remained doable.

"That's why for us managing this El Niño is very crucial, and managing supply demand for basic commodities is crucial," Balisacan said.

The National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA) chief expects consumer price growth, which hit 4.1 percent last month, to fall even further this December.

As part of efforts to stave off higher price growth, Balisacan said the NEDA Board was set to approve another extension of reduced tariffs on rice, pork and corn today.

"The board will be on it on Thursday ... and that's part of ... the extension of the EO 10," Balisacan said.

Executive Order (EO) 10, issued by Malacañang last December extended reduced tariffs on rice, corn and pork to the end of 2023.

An interagency committee created by Malacañang has already recommended the move and Balisacan earlier said that this was also endorsed by the NEDA's Committee on Tariff and Related Matters.

NIÑA MYKA PAULINE ARCEO

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BOI okays Metro Pacific's ₱3.4-B farm projects for greenlane processing

By KHRISCIELLE E. YALAO

The Board of Investments (BOI)'s One-Stop Action Center for Strategic Investments (OSACSI) has endorsed for greenlane processing Metro Pacific's ₱3.4-billion vegetable and dairy farm projects.

Trade Undersecretary and BOI Managing Head Ceferino Rodolfo said they already conferred on Nov. 30 the Green Lane Certificates of Endorsement to representatives from Metro Pacific Fresh Farms, Inc. (MPFF) and Metro Pacific Dairy Farms, Inc. (MPDF).

The certificates were given in adherence to Executive Order (EO) No. 18: Constituting Green Lanes for Strategic Investments. The EO allows the OSACSI to grant expedition and streamlining of processes and requirements, particularly in permit and license procedures, for eligible entities and their projects.

The MPFF's Metro Manila Greenhouse Veg- ▶ **B-4**

BOI okays...

B-1 ◀

etable Production Project aims to become the largest vegetable greenhouse facility in the country that promotes sustainable and modern farming practices such as Nutrient Film Technique hydroponics and Drip Irrigation systems.

The farm, which will be located in San Rafael, Bulacan, is expected to

begin commercial operations in the last quarter of 2024.

MPDF's Integrated Dairy Farm Project set at Bay, Laguna will start operations by the first quarter of 2025.

It aims to expand local milk production by 20 percent to 30,000 million liters daily from the 26.3 million liter capacity at present.



ADB keeps PH growth forecasts unchanged

Manila-based Asian Development Bank (ADB) is maintaining its growth projections for the Philippines this year of 5.7 percent and 6.2 percent for 2024, based on its latest Asian Development Outlook (ADO) for December 2023.

The growth projections are the same as in the September 2023 ADO report.

Meanwhile, ADB revised its growth outlook for developing economies in Asia and the Pacific and it now expects the regional economy to grow by 4.9 percent this year versus its earlier forecast of 4.7 percent in the September ADO.

For 2024, it retained the previous 4.8 percent for regional growth.

However the growth forecasts for Southeast Asia have been revised lower to 4.3 percent for 2023 and 4.7 percent for 2024 due to weak external demand, according to the report.

Among Southeast Asian nations, the Philippines has the highest growth forecast at 5.7 percent for 2023, followed by: Vietnam with 5.2 percent; Indonesia with five percent; Malaysia with 4.2 percent; Thailand with 2.5 percent; and Singapore with one percent.

ADB cited the strong domestic demand in major Asian economies such as China and India as drivers for the next years' regional growth.

The Chinese economy it expects will grow by 5.2 percent this year,

higher than its previous forecast of 4.9 percent amid its high third quarter growth due to expansion of household consumption and public investments.



ADB said India's growth outlook is also adjusted higher to 6.7 percent from 6.3 percent due to its double-digit growth.

The multilateral agency said "the upgrades for the PRC (Peoples Republic of China) and India more than offset a lowering of the forecast for Southeast Asia, caused by lackluster performance in the manufacturing sector."

"Developing Asia continues to grow at a robust pace, despite a challenging global environment," said ADB Chief Economist Albert Park in the report.

He added that "inflation in the

region is also gradually coming under control (but) still, risks remain, from elevated global interest rates to climate events such as El Niño."

Park noted that governments in Asia and the Pacific "need to remain vigilant to ensure that their economies are resilient, and that growth is sustainable."

The latest ADO highlighted Developing Asia's outlook which "remains solid despite global challenges" on robust domestic demand.

ADB also revised East Asia's growth forecast higher for 2023 to 4.7 percent (from 4.4 percent) and 4.2 percent for 2024, while South Asia is now expected to grow by 5.7 percent (from 5.4 percent) this year and six percent in 2024.

For other areas, the ADB forecasts the Caucasus and Central Asia to grow by 4.8 percent this year and 4.6 percent in 2024, while the Pacific's growth projections are unchanged at 3.5 percent for 2023 and 2.9 percent for 2024.

ADB said in September that for the Philippines, downside risks to the outlook are likely to come from global headwinds such as geopolitical tensions and a sharper-than-expected slowdown in major advanced economies."

For next year, ADB expects economic ac-

►B-4

ADB keeps...

B-1 ◀

tivity in the country to perk up as price pressures decelerate on the back of household consumption and infrastructure as well as as social services' public spending.

ADB's growth projections for 2023 of 5.7 percent is lower than the government's target of six percent to seven percent. Its 2024 growth esti-

mate is also below the state's target of 6.5 percent to eight percent.

Meanwhile, the multilateral agency's inflation forecasts for the Philippines is also maintained at 6.2 percent for 2023 and four percent for 2024. Both projections are higher compared to Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas' (BSP) own forecast of 5.6

percent for 2023 and 3.4 percent in 2024.

ADB said inflation risks include: possible severe weather disturbances including the El Niño dry weather phenomenon; pressures from elevated global commodity prices; and second round effects from higher transport fares and minimum wage hikes could slow the pace of inflation easing. (Lee C. Chipongian)



BOI endorses Metro Pacific's P 3.4-B farm projects

By CATHERINE TALAVERA

The Board of Investments (BOI) has endorsed two agriculture projects of the Metro Pacific group worth P3.4 billion for greenlane processing.

In a statement yesterday, the BOI said its One-Stop Action Center for Strategic Investments (OSACSI) granted green lane certificates of endorsement to Metro Pacific Fresh Farms, Inc.'s (MPFF) Bulacan vegetable farm project and Metro Pacific Dairy Farms' (MPDF) Laguna dairy farm project.

MPFF's Metro Manila Greenhouse Vegetable Production Project will be a state-of-the-art complex of modern greenhouses. The project aims to promote sustainable farming practices and modern farming technology.

Located in San Rafael, Bulacan, the project is set to be the largest vegetable greenhouse facility in the country. The farm, which will produce high quality vegetables, is expected to start commercial operation in the fourth quarter of 2024.

"By implementing modern farming practices such as Nutrient Film Technique

hydroponics and Drip Irrigation systems, MPFF hopes to reduce the agriculture sector's consumption of natural resources," the BOI said, emphasizing that agriculture is the largest user of freshwater, accounting for 70 percent of global usage.

It said that MPFF's sustainable farming project redefines agriculture by discarding conventional farming methods.

"The initiative aims to make fresh locally sourced organic produce available to Filipinos," the BOI said.

Meanwhile, MPDF's Integrated Dairy Farm Project will manufacture dairy products at a capacity of 30,000 liters per day.

The project expands local milk production capacity by 20 percent. Currently, local milk production stands at 26.3 million liters.

The dairy farm located in the municipality of Bay in Laguna is set to begin its commercial operations in the first quarter of 2025.

Its main objective is to replace imported milk with locally produced high-quality dairy products, which will help boost the country's self-sufficiency.

"This initiative will address food se-

curity and value chain gaps by offering premium locally-produced products, demonstrating a shift towards efficient local substitutes," the BOI said.

Trade Undersecretary and BOI managing head Ceferino Rodolfo recently awarded the certificate of endorsement to officials of MPFF and MPDF in a brief awarding ceremony on Nov. 30.

In February, the Office of the President approved executive order 18, which aims to hasten, simplify, and automate the permit and license application processes for strategic investments. The measure was officially launched in July.

Operating as the sole entry point for these investments, OSACSI will expedite the endorsement of the project's permit and license procedures, ensuring the swift realization of strategic investments in the country.

Earlier BOI data showed that the government had approved 16 strategic investment projects worth P336.3 billion for greenlane processing as of the end of October.

Bulk or 11 of the approved projects fall under the renewable energy (RE) sector, consisting mostly of solar projects.



The One-Stop Action Center for Strategic Investments of the Board of Investments has granted green lane certificates of endorsement to two of Metro Pacific's projects. These include a vegetable farm project located in Bulacan and a dairy farm project situated in Laguna. Photo shows Trade Undersecretary and BOI managing head Ceferino Rodolfo (center) awarding the Certificates of Green Lane Endorsement to Metro Pacific representatives for the firm's dairy and vegetables farms. Also in photo (from left) are: BOI investment assistance executive director Bobby Fondevilla, Metro Pacific Dairy Farms Inc. and Metro Pacific Fresh Farms Inc. president and CEO Juan Victor Hernandez, MPDF and MPFF chief finance officer Reginald Angelo Gripal and BOI Investment Assistance Service director Ernesto delos Reyes.



Marcos: Tax adjustments eyed to combat El Niño

By ALEXIS ROMERO

The government is resorting to fiscal measures, including possible tariff adjustments, to ensure that food remains affordable during El Niño, President Marcos said yesterday.

The El Niño phenomenon is expected to cause dry spells and droughts and may adversely affect climate-sensitive sectors such as water resources, agriculture, energy, health, public safety, and other key sectors, according to the state weather bureau.

About 65 provinces may be hit by severe drought in the first six months of 2024.

"We are doing an analysis now of world prices of food to see what would be the appropriate tariff level, what will be

the appropriate fiscal measures that we can undertake, at what level do we do this, how much, what percentage, all of these. We are studying that and that will also become part of the effort," Marcos said during the turnover of P776 million worth of excavators in Zambales.

The President gave assurance that aid would be provided to farmers and others whose livelihoods will be affected by El Niño.

"The Department of Social Welfare and Development is there. We will continue to provide AICS (Assistance to Individuals in Crisis Situation), TUPAD (Tulong Panghanapbuhay sa Ating Disadvantaged/Displaced Workers), especially for farmers whose crops will be damaged," Marcos said.

Late last year, Marcos issued Executive Order (EO) no. 10, which extended the reduced tariff rates on rice, maize, coal and meat of swine to keep prices affordable and increase the supply of basic agricultural commodities.

An El Niño task force, Marcos said, would consolidate data from agencies like the science, environment, agriculture and energy departments so they can conduct their modeling.

Other El Niño-related measures to be undertaken by the administration include finishing irrigation and other related infrastructure and conducting a new information campaign to encourage people to save water and collect rainwater.

The President led the turnover of 141 excavators worth

P776 million to ensure the efficient and productive use of agricultural lands.

The excavators will be used to maintain 257 national irrigation systems and 10,144 communal irrigation systems nationwide.

Green lanes

Meanwhile, a farmers' group yesterday opposed calls for the Bureau of Customs to allot green lanes for imported rice amid the spike in the retail prices of the grains.

The Federation of Free Farmers (FFF) said that the call of traders' group Philippine Rice Industry Stakeholders Movement (PRISM) to allot green lanes is not necessary "considering that there are no reported problems in the re-

lease of imported stocks from the ports."

"We are concerned that this green lane will relax the inspection and monitoring of rice imports and will make it easier for importers to continue undervaluing their imports or declaring volumes lower than what is actually being brought in," FFF national chairman Raul Montemayor told **The STAR**.

PRISM co-founder Orly Manuntag earlier told **The STAR** that green lanes should be allowed to ensure the timely arrival of imported rice amid the high demand this month due to the holidays.

Manuntag also noted that at least 300,000 to 500,000 metric tons of imported rice should arrive before March 2024 to

bring down the cost.

In response, Montemayor said traders could import more rice.

"There is nothing to stop them from bringing in as much rice as they want, as long as they get the required Sanitary and Phytosanitary Import Clearance," he said.

Meanwhile, watchdog group Bantay Bigas yesterday said the spike in the retail prices of rice is felt not only in Metro Manila but also in other parts of the country as local regular milled grain reached as high as P54 per kilo.

Bantay Bigas spokesperson Cathy Estavillo blamed the implementation of the Rice Tariffication Law for the upward trend in the retail prices of rice. — **With Bella Cariaso**



FIRST PERSON

ALEX MAGNO

Fetish

Over the last two decades, the Philippines has been sliding down the ASEAN ladder. Tony Lopez recounted this in his column a few weeks ago.

From being second only to Singapore among the core ASEAN economies, the Philippines fell to last place. We were overtaken by Vietnam about three years ago. If we remain unwilling to radically alter some of our most fundamental policies, we will eventually fall behind even Cambodia and Laos.

The principal reason why we are struggling to build national productivity and attract investment flows into our economy is our tightly held orthodoxy regarding land. I will call this our "land fetish."

Decades earlier, it became politically correct to equate land ownership with social justice. Foolish as that may be, we enshrined it as national policy. For decades, against the basic teaching of economic science regarding "economies of scale," we proceeded to break up landholding. This involved tremendous amounts of financing from government – diverting from major infrastructure investments.

"Land reform," as we love to call it, was not designed to increase agricultural productivity. It was principally a "social justice" program impervious to economic science.

By breaking up landholding into small family-sized plots, we trapped our farmers in subsistence mode. It made no business sense for them to capitalize their farms. There was no means for them to invest in higher value crops that might have multi-year gestation periods. They did not have the means to mechanize farming nor build better logistics linking their farms to the market.

"Land reform" guaranteed our farms will be primitive. They had higher costs of production and could not meet the food needs of a growing population. That set the stage for the agricultural crisis we are now enduring where we import some of the most basic commodities we could have very well produced.

The agricultural crisis produced widespread rural poverty. It forced massive rural-to-urban migration – and eventually the creation of a large army of migrant workers deployed all over the globe.

This crisis in farm production resulted in a comparatively high food price regime. Every food item, it seems, is more expensive for Filipino consumers than it is for our regional neighbors. Many farm items are more expensive here than they are in Singapore, which has no agriculture to speak of.

The high food price regime in turn created widespread malnutrition and a significant level of stunting. The intellectual capabilities of the next generation of Filipinos is threatened by this food price regime.

Our high level of poverty is principally a function of food inaccessibility. If our farms were more efficient and the money spent to subsidize farmers to save



them from starvation instead spent on building an efficient logistics system, our population should be more prosperous today.

Instead of challenging the land fetish, government after government took the more politically convenient route of distributing subsidies to keep our small farmers afloat. This is not the way to build a thriving economy. Subsidies do not lead to cumulative improvement of our farm efficiency. Only the consolidation of our agricultural units will do that.

Subsidies for small farmers, in the dominant orthodoxy of liberals and the nationalist Left, is an act of abdication on the part of the state. It is a measure of political cowardice and the failure of the imagination of our ruling elite.

We even passed a law requiring all banks to lend a portion of their portfolio to agriculture-related activities. This is called the "Agri-Agra Law" – one of the most useless pieces of legislation we have in the books.

Our small farmers were high risk borrowers. A major storm could wipe out their crops and render them bankrupt. We do not have a functioning crop insurance system in place to protect them. At any rate, our small farmers will probably resist paying insurance for their meager crops.

The banks, for their part, would rather pay the penalties for violating the "Agri-Agra Law" that assume the great risks of lending to subsistence agriculture. Year after year, our banks pay billions in penalties to protect their risk profile. That makes our banking system less efficient and less able to lend to economic activities that will help our economy develop.

Our agriculture is handicapped to begin with. We are an archipelago of over 7,000 islands. Transporting crops across the sea requires a superior domestic shipping system – not the inefficient and protectionist system we have in place.

Our smaller islands have little slivers of arable land between the mountains and the sea. They have small rivers insufficient for irrigation. Samar island, in particular, has highly mineralized soil unsuitable for high yield agriculture. It has a lot of minerals, however, but environmentalists frown on exploiting that natural wealth.

A solution to this was the "nautical highway system" initiated during the presidency of Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo but abandoned by the administration of Noynoy Aquino. This system was spearheaded by the DBP – the bank now unable to meet its minimum capital requirements after being forced to contribute to the Maharlika Investment Fund.

As a result of the "land fetish" that inspired our policy for years, we forbid foreigners to own land. That has proven a disincentive for major industrial projects funded externally.

We have spent years doing legislative acrobatics to get around the ban on foreigners owning land – the Condominium Law is an example – to little avail. We are last among our regional peers in attracting investment flows.

Apart from the "land fetish," there are other unproductive orthodoxies plaguing our policies. See the next column.



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Report: Millions of people in Asia-Pacific can't afford a healthy diet

THE convergence of higher food, feed and fuel prices, and a slow recovery from the global pandemic, has done serious harm to the health and livelihoods of millions of already vulnerable people in the Asia-Pacific region, a new report by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) has revealed.

During the Covid-19 pandemic and the "5Fs" crisis—Food, Feed, Fuel, Fertilizers and Finance—the region witnessed harrowing statistics, yet even now the region is still suffering from their protracted effects.

"This report is by no means exhaustive. However, the facts presented serve as food for thought. At the same time, they will not put meals on the table of the many food-insecure and nutritionally vulnerable people living in this

part of the world," said Jong-Jin Kim, Assistant Director-General and FAO Regional Representative for Asia and the Pacific.

"Clearly, there is an urgent call for whole-of-government, well-coordinated and integrated actions and investments towards agrifood systems transformation if we are to turn the tide and put the countries back on track to meeting the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals."

FAO said the latest statistics indicate that the region, with 370.7 million undernourished people, continues to represent half of the global total. Similarly, the Asia and Pacific region accounts for half of the world's severe food insecurity, with more women than men being food insecure.

"Indeed, rates of anemia among women of reproductive age, are still off track in terms of World

Health Assembly global nutrition targets. So too are prevalence rates on stunting, wasting and overweight among children under 5 years of age."

The new report titled "Asia and the Pacific Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition 2023—Statistics and Trends," finds that these problems are compounded by the rising cost of a healthy diet, which, according to FAO and UN latest available statistics, rose on average 5.3 percent in purchasing power parity (PPP).

It was estimated that 232.8 million people in the region could not afford the cost of a healthy diet.

While the figures of undernourishment vary from country to country in this region, Southern Asia, in particular, has the highest prevalence of undernourishment at 15.6 percent (313.6 million), while more than 809 million are

either moderately or severely food insecure in that subregion. This accounts for some 85 percent of the total of undernourished across Asia-Pacific.

However, in the South-West Pacific Islands, the per-capita situation is even worse, estimated at 20.9 percent, or one in five inhabitants undernourished.

With the exception of Eastern Asia, women tend to fare worse than men as regards undernutrition, with nearly one-in-10 dealing with severe food insecurity, while nearly one-in-four women deemed to be at least moderately food insecure.

While the overall numbers are slightly better than the pandemic years, they still indicate that these regions are far off track to meet the Sustainable Development Goal of eliminating hunger by 2030 (SDG2).

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Fertilizer industry sway to face scrutiny in US bill backed by farmers

AFTER cracking down on concentration in the meat industry, US senators now want the government to scrutinize the power of fertilizer companies.

An upcoming bill from Senators Chuck Grassley, an Iowa Republican, and Tammy Baldwin, a Wisconsin Democrat, calls for the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) to examine concentration within the fertilizer industry and any possible "anticompetitive impacts," according to text of the legislation set to be introduced on Tuesday.

American farmers have questioned the availability and cost swings of crop nutrients, most recently after Russia's invasion of Ukraine last year wreaked havoc on world supply chains and sent prices to record highs. The push for a sweeping study of the fertilizer market would follow intense scrutiny of US meatpackers as well as the Biden administration stepping up its oversight of competition within the seed industry.

"With fertilizer being one of the agriculture industry's highest input costs, it's problematic farmers have such a limited window into market fluctuations," Grassley said in an emailed statement. "Our bill will provide farmers in Iowa and across the heartland with needed transparency and certainty as they navigate production costs."

The bill, dubbed the Fertilizer Research Act of 2023, also directs the US Department of Agriculture to look at pricing transparency, imports, emerging technologies and other issues.

The Fertilizer Institute, a trade organization that advocates on behalf of the industry, said it supports transparency through improved data collection and analysis. The group also seeks the reestablishment of a fertilizer economist at the USDA to serve as a liaison between the agency and Congress on crop nutrient matters and also to develop reports on global supply, demand and prices.

North America held a 16-percent share of global fertilizer production as of 2021, with 90 percent of worldwide usage happening outside the US, according to the institute.

A spokesperson for top fertilizer maker Nutrien Ltd. said the company would review the legislation and declined further comment. Crop nutrient producers CF Industries Holdings Inc. and The Mosaic Co. didn't immediately respond to requests for comment.

Groups representing Iowa corn and soybean farmers back the pending bill, according to Grassley's office. The senator, who is on the Agriculture Committee, seeks to have the legislation folded into next year's five-year farm bill reauthorization, though is open to other paths for passage if opportunities arise.

Baldwin, who is on the Senate Commerce Committee, said high fertilizer costs in recent years have hurt profitability of growers as well as rural communities.

Copper supply

FORECAST surplus of copper going into 2024 has suddenly all but disappeared.

The next couple of years were supposed to be a time of plenty for copper, thanks to a series of big new projects starting up around the world. The expectation across most of the industry was for a comfortable surplus before the market tightens again later this decade, when surging demand for electric vehicles and renewable energy infrastructure collide with a lack of new mines.

Instead the mining industry has highlighted how vulnerable supply can be—whether due to political and social opposition, the difficulty of developing new operations, or simply the day-to-day challenge of pulling rocks up from deep beneath the earth.

In the past two weeks, one of the world's biggest copper mines was ordered to close in the face of fierce public protests, while a slew of operational setbacks has forced one of the leading miners to slash its production forecasts.

The sudden removal of around 600,000 tons of expected supply would move the market from a large expected surplus into balance, or even a deficit, analysts say. And it's also a major warning for the future: copper is an essential metal needed to decarbonize the global economy, which means mining companies will play a key role in facilitating the shift to green energy.

While the price reaction to the supply disruptions has so far been muted—amidst ongoing worries about China's property sector—any sign of demand recovery would hit a tight market.

Last week, Panama's government formally ordered First Quantum Minerals Ltd. to end all operations at its \$10 billion copper mine in the country. The order followed weeks of protests and political wrangling that came to a head when the country's Supreme Court invalidated the law that underpinned its mining license. The giant Cobre Panama can produce about 400,000 tons of copper a year. *Bloomberg News*



AN employee handles granules of urea, or carbamide, at a fertilizer plant in Russia. BLOOMBERG CREATIVE PHOTOS/BLOOMBERG



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Soybeans decline

SINGAPORE- Chicago soybean futures lost more ground on Wednesday, with forecast of rains in parts of Brazil's dry oilseed-producing areas easing concerns over dry weather conditions hurting the newly planted crop.

Corn and wheat futures slid.

"Rains are expected in dry areas of Brazil, which have taken out some of the weather premium from market," said one Singapore-based trader. "Prices will come down further if Brazilian weather continues to improve."

The most-active soybean con-

tract on the Chicago Board of Trade (CBOT) was down 0.2 percent at \$13.21-1/4 a bushel. Corn lost 0.2 percent to \$4.84-1/4 a bushel and wheat slid 0.1 percent to \$6.24-3/4 a bushel.

Heat and dryness have hurt crops in northern and central parts of Brazil, but analysts said some forecasts on Tuesday looked wetter than previous outlook.

Brazil is the world's biggest soybean exporter, and dryness in recent weeks has raised crop concerns and prompted China to book larger volumes from rival supplier - the United States. - *Reuters*



Climate change causes warmest Arctic summer

THE Arctic saw its warmest-ever summer in 2023, the result of accelerating human-caused climate change that is pushing ecosystems and the people that depend on them into uncharted territory, according to an official report Tuesday.

Average summer surface air temperature from the months of July to September was

43 degrees Fahrenheit (6.4 degrees Celsius), the highest since records began in 1900.

The Arctic is warming roughly four times faster than the rest of the planet, primarily as a result of a vicious cycle of sea ice loss in a phenomenon called Arctic Amplification.

➤ **ArcticA8**

"The overriding message from this year's report card is that the time for action is now," National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Administrator Rick Spinrad said in a statement.

"We as a nation and global community must dramatically reduce greenhouse gas emissions that are driving these changes."

Average summer temperatures have been rising 0.31F (0.17C) per decade.

Overall, it was the Arctic's sixth-warmest year, at 20F (-7C).

Now in its 18th year, the NOAA Arctic Report Card is the work of 82 authors across 13 countries.

Observations from this year's report emphasize an ongoing trend line of warming sea and air temperatures, decreasing snow cover, diminishing sea ice and continued melting of the Greenland Ice Sheet.

Wildfires

But the year also brought high-impact events that had the "clear signature" of climate change.

While the Arctic is growing wetter, there are distinct regional and seasonal differences, co-author Tom Ballinger of the University of Alaska Fairbanks told reporters.

"For example, a wet winter characterized portions of Alaska, though a dry spring was observed over western Eurasia, and northern Canada was impacted by a dry summer," he said.

Warm, dry summer conditions across northern Canada, combined with early snowmelt, contributed to the Canadian Arctic experiencing its worst wildfire season on record, causing the evacuation of 20,000 people from

the town of Yellowknife in August.

Also in August, a glacial lake near Juneau, Alaska, burst through its dam, causing massive flooding and property damage along the Mendenhall River as a result of two decades of glacial thinning.

Fisheries impacted

The long-term warming trend has a variety of uneven impacts across ecosystems and food webs that people rely upon.

For example, sockeye salmon reached a record-high abundance in Bristol Bay, Alaska, in the years 2021 and 2022.

The species, a staple of commercial fisheries, has thrived under warmer waters. Increased plankton abundance has allowed juveniles to grow faster in lakes and increase their odds of survival when they reach the ocean.

But record-high catches have flooded markets and depressed wholesale prices to their lowest levels in decades, said co-author Daniel Schindler of the University of Washington.

On the other hand, chinook and chum salmon that Indigenous communities rely on have drastically declined following heat waves that negatively impact their growth rates, contributing to smaller adults for reasons that aren't fully understood.

"Livelihoods, nutrition and cultures at the subsistence communities have all been heavily impacted," said Schindler.

Another chapter of the report examines subsea permafrost, a field that is relatively little known, even among scientists — though potentially an important source of greenhouse gas emissions. **AFP**



Alarm raised over livestock industry GHG

BY CONRAD M. CARIÑO

THE Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) under the United Nations sees the need for the global livestock industry to lower its greenhouse gas emissions (GHG) as the demand for animal products increases amid a growing population.

The report titled "Pathways toward lower emissions — A global assessment of the greenhouse gas emissions and mitigation options from livestock agrifood systems" that was released on December 8 on the sidelines of the UN Climate Change Conference COP28 also raised alarm of the GHG emissions

of the global livestock industry.

The report also aims to enable the livestock sector to contribute its share to the efforts to limit the global temperature increase to well below 2 degrees Celsius.

"Beyond evaluating baseline emissions, this report offers estimations of future emissions under scenarios

of increased production and outlines pathways to reduce emissions through the application of well-established best practices in animal management," said FAO Deputy Director General Maria Helena Semedo.

"It clearly demonstrates that ambitious and innovative programs, and wide-ranging interventions have the potential to bend the emissions curve while production grows," she said.

The FAO official cited the solutions to help reduce the livestock industry's GHG emissions such as improving animal health, breeding practices, and reducing food loss and wastes, among others.

"But they require investments in the sector to narrow efficiency gaps, while meeting an increased

global demand for animal protein," Semedo added.

The report, subject to a double-blind peer review process involving world experts, outlines several pathways impacting both the supply and demand sides for livestock sectors, which, if adopted collectively, could address the environmental impacts and promote sustainability in global agriculture.

FAO said that while there is no universal solution and more work is needed to understand the barriers to implementing and upscaling interventions, enhancing productivity and production efficiency across the entire value chain is the most promising way to mitigate and reduce livestock emissions.

Livestock agrifood systems, including on farm production activities and some key supply chain processes such as land use change related to feed, transport and input manufacturing, accounted for approximately 6.2 billion tons of carbon dioxide (CO₂) equivalent emissions (GtCO₂eq) per year, equal to around 12 percent of all anthropogenic GHG emissions and about 40 percent of total emissions from agrifood systems. This is estimated by FAO at about 16 GtCO₂eq. Without interventions and productivity gains, meeting increased demand is likely to bring global livestock emissions to nearly 9.1 GtCO₂eq by 2050.

The figures are derived from the

Global Livestock Environmental Assessment Model, or Gleam, an innovative FAO tool that adds significant value and opportunities to support better analyses of mitigation pathways.

FAO said that direct emissions, including methane from enteric fermentation by ruminants and nitrous oxide from manure management systems, account for 60 percent of the sector's total emissions, with the rest stemming from the manufacture of fertilizers and pesticides for feed production, feed production itself, as well as processing and transportation of feed, live animals and livestock products, and land-use changes associated with feed production.