

CLIPPINGS FOR SATURDAY, DECEMBER 23, 2023

A. SEC. FTL Jr. QUOTED

THE PHILIPPINE STAR
14 provinces now free of bird flu - DA

B. DA FAMILY

PHILIPPINE DAILY INQUIRER
Gov't eyes direct sugar purchases from farmers
Maguindanao del Sur, Isabela declared free from Avian Flu
P250M sought to extend lifespan of Magat dam
How to make our agri products fit for export

THE MANILA TIMES
SRA eyes direct sugar purchases

PEOPLE'S JOURNAL
Gov't mulls buying sugar from farmers

C. AGRI-RELATED STORY

BUSINESS MIRROR
Searca leads in workshop on carbon farming
Fiesta unveils researches, technologies on pili in Bicol

THE PHILIPPINE STAR
Food for thought: A sustainable Christmas

THE MANILA TIMES
Biogas for Zero-waste agriculture

D. FOREIGN STORY

THE MANILA TIMES
Global dairy trade to contract in 2023



14 provinces now free of bird flu - DA

By DANESSA RIVERA and BELLA CARIASO

Two more provinces have been declared free of avian influenza, bringing the total to 14.

In separate memorandum circulars, the Department of Agriculture (DA) said Isabela and Maguindanao del Sur no longer have cases of bird flu.

DA Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel said more than 90 days have lapsed since cleaning and disinfection ended, adding that surveillance activities yielded negative test results.

Camarines Sur, Davao del Sur, Rizal, South Cotabato, Ilocos Sur, Batangas, Capiz, Quezon, Aurora, Ilocos Norte, Pangasinan and Cotabato had earlier been declared free of bird flu.

The DA said Isabela had recorded three cases of the highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) subtype H5N1.

These were detected during

testing of chicken layer, duck, gamefowl, pigeon and native chicken in Cauayan City and the towns of Alicia and Gamu on April 21, May 23 and Nov. 7, 2022.

Maguindanao del Sur recorded three cases of HPAI subtype H5N1, which were detected in ducks in Ampatuan on April 8 and May 27, 2022.

The provincial government of Isabela coordinated with the DA-Cagayan Valley regional field office while the Maguindanao del Sur provincial government coordinated with the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Agrarian Reform and Bureau of Animal Industry (BAI) to address the situation.

Disease investigation, immediate depopulation, clean-

ing and disinfection as well as movement restrictions and surveillance in the affected areas were conducted.

The DA said continued disease monitoring and surveillance surrounding the affected farms yielded negative test results for influenza type A virus for more than 90 days, which led to the issuance of the circulars.

As of Dec. 15, BAI data showed that seven regions, 12 provinces, 70 towns and 158 barangays remained affected by avian influenza.

Balanga City in Bataan and Concepcion, Tarlac have ongoing bird flu cases affecting ducks.

To help affected areas recover from bird flu, the DA issued a memorandum circular in November, allowing the commercial use of vaccines to avoid substantial economic losses.

Under the vaccination program, the two types of jabs are protective emergency and preventive vaccination.

Only vector, killed or inactivated and recombinant vaccines are allowed under the program.

The DA said commercial layer chicken, layer breeder, broiler breeder, colored or free-range breeder, grandparent broiler breeder, small-hold layer or native chicken, duck, game fowl, turkey and goose are eligible for vaccination.

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

It said bird flu viruses do not normally infect humans. However, sporadic human infections with avian influenza viruses have occurred.



Gov't eyes direct sugar purchases from farmers

By Jordeene B. Lagare
and Carla Gomez
@Team_Inquirer

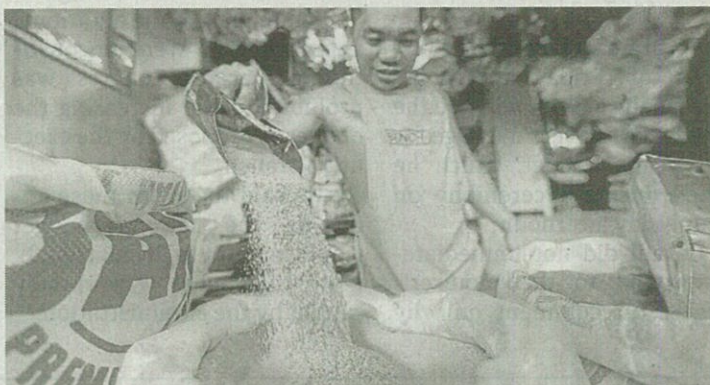
The government is planning to directly buy sugar from local farmers in a bid to stabilize declining farm-gate prices although the retail prices of sugar in Metro Manila remained high.

Sugar Regulatory Administration (SRA) chief Pablo Luis Azcona said the government was "seriously thinking about or already planning" to buy locally produced sugar at a higher price and sell the same "at a better retail price."

"This way, we will give the farmers a better farm-gate [price]. At the same time, the consumers and the farmers as well will get a better retail price," Azcona said in a virtual interview on Friday.

But, Azcona said, there were no plans to import more sugar as the country has enough supply.

"Based on the current demand figures, there is no apparent need to import any sugar," he said, adding that authorities have observed a significant spread between the farm-gate price and the retail price of sugar, suggesting manipulation somewhere along the supply chain.



PRICEY SWEETENER A vendor at Marikina Public Market displays bags of sugar. The price of the sweetener has remained high despite low farm-gate prices. —FILE PHOTO

Sugar industry leaders have attributed the drop in farm-gate prices to P2,500 per bag and below from an expected P3,000 per bag to an oversupply of imported sugar.

Prices still high

But Azcona dismissed the claim, saying "if there is really an oversupply of sugar, its retail prices should have dropped also."

At the same time, Azcona said producers and traders who have volunteered to provide the sugar to fill a US sugar quota allocation granted to the Philippines, so he wrote to the US Department of Agriculture to request that the Philippines

be included in its sugar quota.

But based on the SRA's monitoring as of Dec. 3, sugar prices declined by 23.48 percent to P2,486.28 per 50-kilo bag from P3,249.16 per 50-kilo bag in the same period a year ago.

The SRA earlier said the ideal farm-gate price of sugar should be around P3,000 per 50-kilo bag to allow retailers to sell refined sugar at P85 per kilogram.

However, selling prices of sugar in Metro Manila markets remain high. According to the Department of Agriculture's price monitoring, refined sugar is sold from as low as P75 per kg to as high as P100 per kg as of Friday.

The prevailing retail price

is almost similar to the P95 per kg level recorded in the same period last year.

Gov't intervention

The Sugar Council, comprising of three industry federations that produce more than half of national sugar output, on Tuesday reiterated their call for timely government intervention amid the drop in sugar prices.

Negros Occidental Gov. Eugenio Jose Lacson believed the government should put on hold any sugar importation in the future.

"I hope the downward trend in (millgate sugar) prices stops and starts to go up. I'm afraid many small farmers will be in the red if the prices continue to go down," he said.

Lacson pointed out that the cost of sugar production has gone up with the rise in the costs of fertilizer, labor and fuel.

"Everything is more expensive now, even labor cost," he said.

Concerned government agencies are fleshing out the mechanics of the planned procurement. Azcona said the agency will serve as a conduit since the law prohibits the SRA from engaging in marketing and determining the pricing of sugar. **INQ**



POULTRY DISEASE

MAGUINDANAO DEL SUR, ISABELA DECLARED FREE FROM AVIAN FLU

By **Jordeene B. Lagare**
@jordeenelagare

A total of 14 provinces have fully recovered from bird flu after the Department of Agriculture (DA) declared that Maguindanao del Sur and Isabela are now free of avian influenza.

The DA made the declaration in separate issuances many months after local authorities reported bird flu outbreaks in the two provinces.

According to the DA, latest tests yielded negative results more than 90 days since the end of cleaning and disinfection operations and surveillance activities.

Prior to this, the agency said these provinces had fully recovered from highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI): Camarines Sur; Davao del Sur; Rizal; South Cotabato; Ilocos Sur; Batangas; Capiz; Quezon; Aurora; Ilocos Norte; Pangasinan; and Cotabato.

The World Organization for Animal Health's terrestrial animal health code states a previously free country or zone may regain its avian-influenza-free status at least 28 days after completing a stamping-out policy and disinfecting the last affected establishment, and that ensuing surveillance

demonstrated the absence of infection.

Earlier, Maguindanao del Sur recorded three confirmed cases of HPAI subtype H5N1. These were detected in ducks from the municipality of Ampatuan on April 8 and May 27, 2022.

On the other hand, Isabela had three confirmed cases of HPAI subtype H5N1 detected in chicken layer, duck, gamefowl, pigeon and native chicken from Cauayan City and towns of Alicia and Gamu on April 21, May 23 and Nov. 7 last year.

Immediately, the provincial governments of Maguindanao del Sur and Isabela, in coordina-

tion with the DA's regional field offices and the Bureau of Animal Industry, conducted disease investigation, immediate depopulation, cleaning and disinfection, movement restrictions and surveillance in the affected areas.

Continued disease monitoring and surveillance in the 1-kilometer and 7-km surveillance zones surrounding the affected farms yielded negative test results for influenza type A virus.

Even before confirming the first case of H5N1 in these areas, Maguindanao del Sur and Isabela had been free from avian influenza in poultry. **INQ**

Date: 23 DEC 2023 Page: A9



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FUND FOR FEASIBILITY STUDIES

P250 M SOUGHT TO EXTEND LIFESPAN OF MAGAT DAM

RAMON, ISABELA—The 41-year-old Magat Dam here will need at least P250 million to fund feasibility studies to ensure its viability as a major source of irrigation and power, an official of the National Irrigation Administration (NIA) said.

In an interview with local reporters this week, Gileu Michael Dimoloy, the NIA Magat River Irrigation System department manager, said the agency had submitted the fund proposal to the National Economic and Development Authority for approval. The NIA, he said, also sought funding assistance from the Japan International Cooperation Agency in the form of a grant so the government could save on costs.

The feasibility studies would include an assessment to determine if dredging and mitigating the risks of natural disasters would be necessary to improve the capacity and service life of the reservoir, Dimoloy said.

Built in the mid-1970s and opened in October 1982 during the administration of then President Ferdinand Marcos Sr., Magat Dam had undergone retrofitting in April. The scope of work included its spillway, bridge,

spillway short lock and drainage galleries.

Urgency

Dimoloy noted the urgency of feasibility studies and retrofitting as the dam's lifespan "is nearly reached."

Considered one of the largest water reservoirs in the country, Magat Dam is the major source of irrigation for about 85,000 hectares of farmland, data from the NIA showed. It also generates 540 megawatts of hydroelectric power, supplying electricity to the entire Isabela and northern Luzon grids.

Massive siltation, sedimentation, slash-and-burn farming, illegal logging and fish caging resulted in the deterioration of the dam's watershed, Dimoloy noted.

He said the 1990 Luzon earthquake could have also contributed to the increased siltation in the reservoir.

Regular repairs made to the dam continue to help the dam's structural strength endure natural calamities like earthquakes and typhoons, Dimoloy said, adding that feasibility studies would "ensure the integrity and stability" of the facility. —VILLAMOR

VISAYA JR. INQ

Date: 23 DEC 2023 Page: A10

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How to make our agri products fit for export

COMMENTARY

ERNESTO M. ORDOÑEZ

Structure must follow strategy. That is, the strategy of improving our agriculture exports—already disastrous at this point—will fail, unless the Department of Agriculture (DA) immediately installs the appropriate structure.

Last Dec. 20, Trade Undersecretary Allan Gepty stated that our total negative trade balance in goods deteriorated from \$42.2 billion in 2021 to \$58.2 billion in 2022. In an earlier meeting of the public-private Philippine Council of Agriculture and Fisheries' committee on international trade, it was noted how the number of exporters were cut by more than half from 8,575 in 2018 to 4,619 in 2022.

Agriculture exports

For agriculture exports alone, the picture is more bleak. Our agriculture trade balance worsened last year by 33 percent to \$11.8 billion. Though agriculture contributed only 10

percent to our gross domestic product, it contributed 20 percent to our trade deficit.

Furthermore, our agriculture exports of \$71 billion was disturbingly low, compared to our neighbors in the region, such as Thailand (\$42.3 billion), Malaysia (\$33.4 billion) and Vietnam (\$29.1 billion). These countries trailed far behind us before.

In addition, the government-approved Philippine Export Development Plan is targeting only \$8 billion in 2028. This is extremely disappointing, and shows why we are so far behind Thailand. If we had given the same attention that Thailand gave their agriculture, we would be on a par with their \$42.7 billion in agriculture

exports last year. The figure is far greater than the \$36.1-billion remittances that the Philippines needs to prop up the economy. There would then be no need to pay the high price of disrupting our family and social relationships.

Only four specific products contribute more than 50 percent of our exports. Instead of leading our export drive, all are losing except one. Consider the table below:

Today, the DA is more focused

on the production of basic commodities, with little being done to promote exports. The department must therefore immediately set up a structure to reverse this disastrous decline in exports using three necessary components.

Leadership

The first is to appoint a high-ranking, experienced official reporting directly to the agriculture secretary. Someone has to be in charge, and be held responsible and accountable.

The second is to form a full-time task force to address the neglected issue of export industry development. They would not only formulate and implement a credible global export marketing plan. More importantly, they would focus on developing the priority export industries that are now losing their global competitiveness because of inadequate government support. How can you effectively market products when the same products are not competitive?

The third is to create an interagency committee just for agriculture exports. It will be chaired by the agriculture secretary to give the committee the necessary clout. There should be coordination, synergy and unity in our export drive. Unnecessary and burdensome regulations will have to immediately be addressed.

The culture will then transform from harassing to supporting our exporters. Our agriculture attaches say that they

are dismayed at how we harass our exporters, while host countries show them the opposite.

Our agriculture export performance is a disaster. To state that our official target is to increase our agriculture export target from \$7.1 billion last year to only \$8 billion after five long years is equally disheartening, especially when our competitors are growing at such a fast pace.

We must reverse this trend. We can start by setting up the structure to support a credible agriculture export strategy. Without this structure, our agriculture exports will remain in the doldrums. **INQ**



The author is Agriwatch chair, former secretary of presidential flagship programs and projects, and former undersecretary of the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Trade and Industry. Contact is agriwatch_phil@yahoo.com

RANK	PRODUCT	USD	GROWTH RATE (% 2022 / 2021)
1	Coconut Oil (Crude & Refined)	2,099.07	46.7
2	Bananas (Fresh)	1,096.91	-3.7
3	Processed Food and Beverages	848.71	-4.5
4	Pineapple and Pineapple Products	756.01	-1.6
5	Processed Tropical Fruits	455.05	-2.0
6	Tuna (Fresh, frozen, preserved)	380.33	0.5
7	Desiccated Coconut	370.13	-6.6

SOURCE: DEPARTMENT OF TRADE AND INDUSTRY

INQ GRAPHICS



SRA eyes direct sugar purchases

THE Sugar Regulatory Administration (SRA) is considering direct sugar purchases from farmers to address dropping farmgate prices.

SRA Administrator Pablo Azcona said on Friday that the government was "seriously planning" the move, which will also allow for better market prices.

"So this way, we will give the farmers a better farmgate [price]. At the same time, the consumers and the farmers as well, will get a better retail price," said Azcona.

From the ideal price of P3,000 per bag at the start of the crop year in August, prices have slipped to P2,390 to P2,500 per 50-kilo bag in the past weeks.

Azcona said a fair farmgate price of sugar would range from P2,700 to P3,000 per 50-kilo bag.

Certain agencies, meanwhile, will be allowed to conduct sugar trading.

"We will be the conduit. These agencies, we will connect them with the farmer associations so they can buy the sugar directly from the farmer associations," Azcona said.

"So hopefully, we can get the P85 (per kilo) of sugar that we're pushing even in the supermarket," he added.

The SRA chief also said that demand for raw sugar had dropped by around 20 percent, while that for refined sugar was down about 11.5 percent.

"As to why the demand dropped is something that I do not know at this time. We are studying it. It might be economic, it might be just purely on the business side," he said.

"But because of this, and because of the drop in demand, I feel and as of now, there are no plans of any sugar importation."

The Philippine Sugar Millers' Association Inc. (PSMA) said it supported the view that there was no need to import sugar.

"Demand withdrawals have been slow since the start of the season," PSMA Executive Director Jesus Barrera said.

"Based on the latest figures of SRA, as of Dec. 3, 2023, raw sugar and refined sugar withdrawals are down 23 percent and 10 percent, respectively, year on year, he added.

The country, Barrera continued, has just started the milling season.

"Given sluggish demand and reduced prices, sugar producers see no justification for importing sugar, as any additional imports would worsen and prolong their current predicament," he said.

JANINE ALEXIS MIGUEL



Gov't mulls buying sugar from farmers

THE national government is seriously looking into buying sugar directly from farmers early next year to prop up farmgate prices and lower retail prices at the same time, the top official of the Sugar Regulatory Administration (SRA) said Thursday.

"As an intervention, we have long been planning this. The government is looking at the idea of once again purchasing sugar like what we did before with the National Food Authority," SRA Ad-

ministrator Pablo Luis Azcona said in a press briefing here.

"It will come in and buy sugar directly from the farmers in an effort to boost the price, start a spark. They have a temporary funding allocated for it," he added.

Azcona shared the development as the country's sugar producers' federations sought intervention from President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. and Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr.

amid the plummeting farmgate prices of sugar.

While the price of P3,000 per 50-kilo bag is considered a fair market price, farmgate sugar prices are just about P2,500 in Negros while in Bukidnon, it is even lower at the P2,300-level in recent weeks.

According to the United Sugar Producers Federation, the biggest producers' sugar association, these prices are way below the price levels of P3,200 for

the same period last year.

Azcona said however, that the SRA itself cannot participate in any marketing or pricing activity.

"We have been working on it, spearheaded by the Department of Agriculture. We are checking the legalities of the agencies involved. Can they do it, where to bring the sugar, what will we do with the sugar they will buy? Possible agencies are those involved in trading," he said.



Searca leads in workshop on carbon farming

LOS BAÑOS, Laguna—Agriculture, including rice farming, emits greenhouse gases (GHG) that contributes to global warming. To provide information on the available platforms on carbon emission and carbon farming, the Southeast Asian Regional Center for Graduate Study and Research in Agriculture (Searca) conducted the second installment of the training-workshop on Carbon Wise Rice-based Farming.

It was in collaboration with Newfields Consulting Ltd. (NFC) and Macon Ltd., and was held at Searca headquarters in Los Baños, Laguna, on November 21 and 22, said Searca's Kim Louise Pataginan and Ma. Christina Corales.

The training-workshop was attended by 28 participants from the Provincial and Municipal Agricultural Offices of Laguna, faculty and researchers from the University of the Philippines Los Baños, Central Luzon State University, and the private sector.

The activity provided an in-depth discussion on the importance of the available platforms for monitoring, reporting and verification (MRV) of carbon emissions.

It introduced the Carbon Wise Rice Information Management System (CWRIMS), a web-based application that allows farm-level data collection of carbon emissions.

In their messages, Searca Director Dr. Glenn Gregorio and NFC Managing Director Dr. Eero Nissila emphasized the significance of carbon credits and green funds, highlighting the Southeast Asian initiatives advocating carbon farming practices.

They also highlighted the importance of disseminating climate-smart agriculture technologies at the grassroots level.

In his presentation on the principles of carbon-wise farming systems, Nissila expounded on the potential of out-grower co-op systems and consolidation of farms



THE resource persons, participants and facilitators during the two-day training-workshop on Carbon Wise Rice-based Farming that was led by Searca at its headquarters in Los Baños, Laguna, on November 21 and 22. SEARCA PHOTO

to increase access to financing, processing, marketing resources, technologies, and training.

He also introduced the Carbon Wise Information Management System, a general platform for managing various carbon emission data applications.

The system aims to streamline data collection, facilitating the transition to decarbonization, enhancing profitability and aligning with the objectives of the Paris Agreement on climate change.

Atty. Eric Reynoso, program head of Searca's Emerging Innovation for Growth Department, presented the center's current initiatives on carbon emission measurement and reduction.

These include implementing a program on carbon farming as one of the nature-based solutions to reduce GHG emissions in agriculture.

The program is currently benchmarking policies and methodologies related to carbon farming in selected Southeast Asian countries.

Reynoso also shared the Carbon Footprint Project of Searca, which intends to measure the Center's baseline carbon footprint and develop a carbon footprint calculator to estimate the carbon footprint for succeeding years.

Macon Ltd. CEO Mikko Ahokas and Sanna Taskila discussed the transformative potential of bio- and circular economy in community development.

They emphasized its significant

contribution to environmental sustainability, economic growth and innovation, social benefits, and cultural integration.

They also established an interlink between the two economies, encompassing standard measures for enhancing energy efficiency, decreasing dependence on fossil fuels, implementing climate-related initiatives, and exerting influence through urban planning, land use policies, and support for renewable energy initiatives.

Ten best practices of municipalities were presented, showcasing notable accomplishments, such as emission reduction, heightened energy efficiency, and positive community impacts.

Nikki Carumba, senior software engineer at NFC, introduced the CWRIMS, a web-based application developed by NFC. She presented its advantages in terms of MRV.

The participants shared their individual experiences, feedback, and suggestions on the web application's usability and functionality to enhance the web application.

Dr. Nur Azura Binti Adam, deputy director for programs, reiterated the crucial significance of collaboration among local government units, the academic community, and the private sector.

Nur announced the possibility of organizing the third training-workshop in 2024 to present the improved version of CWRIMS and explore the potential of implementing the app in field trials.



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THE proposed Pili Icon is unveiled during the 2023 Pili Fiesta opening ceremonies.

REINIER JOSEPH D. ABAGAT, ACD DOST-PCAARRD

Fiesta unveils researches, technologies on pili in Bicol



DIRECTOR Marita A. Carlos of the DOST-PCAARRD Applied Communication Division delivers the keynote message during the opening ceremony of 2023 Pili Fiesta.

REINIER JOSEPH D. ABAGAT, ACD DOST-PCAARRD



PILI nuts are displayed at the exhibit during the 2023 Pili Fiesta at the Proxy Convention Center in Legazpi City on December 18 and 19. GIAN CARLO D. CAMACHO, ACD DOST-PCAARRD

RESearches and technologies on pili production were focused during the 2023 Pili Farms and Industry Encounters through the Science and Technology Agenda (Fiesta) in Bicol on December 18 and 19.

Held at the Proxy Convention Center in Legazpi City, Albay, the activity touched base with farmers and the industry in promoting pili as a flagship commodity using science, technology and innovations in agriculture, aquatic and natural resources in the Bicol Region.

With the theme, "Celebrating Pili: People, Propagation, Processing and Mechanization," the event was led by the Bicol Consortium for Agriculture, Aquatic and Natural Resources Research and Development, and funded by the Department of Science and Technology's Philippine Council for Agriculture, Aquatic and Natural Resources Research and Development (DOST-PCAARRD).

"We hope that the 2023 Pili Fiesta will be able to inspire participation from local government units, investors, entrepreneurs and policy-makers with the goal of further improving the pili industry and achieving food security, which is also our goal at DOST-PCAARRD," said Director Marita A. Carlos of the DOST-PCAARRD Applied Communication Division in her keynote message.

Highlighted during the Pili Fiesta were the research and development outputs of the Pili R&D Center.

The Pili R&D Center is a three-year project of the Bicol University together with Central Bicol State University of Agriculture and Partido State University.

It was established through the Niche Centers in the Regions for R&D Program funded by the DOST and monitored by the PCAARRD.

Pili processing machines and various pili-based products were showcased through an exhibit during the activity.

Moreover, technology pitching and forum were also conducted to further promote pili technologies that are ready for commercialization.

A proposed Pili Icon for Bicol was also unveiled during the opening program of the Fiesta. It was designed by Architect Leo del Rosario, director of the Bicol University Institute of Design and Architecture.

Prior to the opening ceremony, the Pili Fiesta team has been conducting the Pili Roadshow in Sorsogon, Albay, and in Camarines Sur to promote and bring pili technologies to farmers and other major stakeholders.

Fiesta is an Intellectual Property Office-registered technology promotion and commercialization platform initiated by DOST-PCAARRD.

It aims to empower farmers and fisherfolk to improve on their livelihood as well as match technology generators to target adopters. *Gian Carlo D. Camacho/S&T Media Services*



FOOD FOR THOUGHT

CHIT U. JUAN

A sustainable Christmas

How will we be spending our Christmas with family this time? The pandemic is over, we are faced with a new world order but what has not changed is that we should celebrate Christmas.



For many people, it is the only time when the family gets together or makes it a point to have a reunion. For some, it may mean traveling with family to some far-away destination to be free from visitors and *aguinaldo* seekers, or to have the best private time possible.

For most of us, Christmas is about gift-giving and receiving all sorts of thoughtful presents – from special food to something as functional as coffee. Though it is not the time to preach about sustainability, healthy habits start with what you give each other during Christmas time.

Buy local. Thankfully, consumers now prefer local products to buying cheap imports engraved with the company's name or logo. Corporations choose locally-made and curated gift sets as part of their corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts and also their commitment to ESG. Individual consumers buy more of reusable materials and containers, too. There has been a "help your farmer" wave of campaigns where every other jam or chocolate is helping a farmer. And we hope these really reach the producers and make them want to plant cacao and coconut again.

No more plastics. Though online sellers still use a lot of bubble plastic wrap due to handling risks, many retailers now choose paper over plastic, and others demand you bring your own eco or reusable bag when shopping. There also is a rise in purchase, use and giving of reusable water bottles – both branded ones that really keep cold/hot and copies of brands which serve their purpose of being water containers.

Eating local and organic. There is more consciousness about food miles now. People shop at farmers' markets, weekend markets and even supermarkets are devoting space for organic produce and local produce like fruits and vegetables. Make sure your Christmas table has local fruits and not just the imported ones. Try to dig up local and heirloom recipes to serve for Christmas lunch and dinner.

Look for sustainable clothing. Even clothes are much in demand during Christmas. This time, choose linen or cotton instead of polyester or poly blends, which is like wearing a plastic shirt. Natural fabrics breathe and with today's increased ambient temperature due to the climate crisis, one should look for clothes that breathe and are comfortable to wear all day.

Buy food gifts. Please spare us from the canned goods and processed choices. Instead, look for locally-made products that help our MSMEs and with enough consumer trials, they can then be given a break to produce more and finally have access to more customers online and in pop up stores. Food gifts must also be the healthier choices – think of helping others avoid lifestyle diseases caused by higher intake of sugar and salt. Maybe you can give herbal teas, organically-grown coffee or local chocolate drinks.

Wrap them in natural weaves. I am so happy we are using more *banig*, *pandan*, *bariw*, coconut, abaca and other locally-sourced grass and leaves as packaging. Others use cotton or jute sacks which are reusable rather than single-use paper wrappers and bubble wrap. We also reuse old magazines to make them paper bags instead of using fresh paper which consumes more trees and more water. Reusable, eco or any microfiber bag will last longer than single-use paper or plastic bags.

Give a gift of service. Instead of useless tokens like plastic knick knacks, why not give a gift of service? Give a certificate for a spa or massage, a babysitting or tutoring session, a learning session on Udemy or Masterclass. Recently, we took an online class at UP Open University while our supervisors took classes at UP-Institute for Small Scale Industries (ISSI). The gift of learning can always be appreciated instead of yet another token gift that ends up in the trash bin in no time. Creative family members can give gifts like a "job jar" where you commit to doing household chores for each other.

Give inspiration. You can give a book, a real hard copy as there is nothing that compares to the smell and feel of a real book. It can be a prayer book, a spiritual tome or a children's book for the younger set. But give books that inspire people to be better versions of themselves. There are so many by Filipino authors as well as foreign ones which are even on sale, if you are lucky. These gifts can be read and passed on to other family members, too.

So, this Christmas, let us do something different. Let us be mindful of habits we need to keep doing and share them with our loved ones. If we all think of how gift-giving can affect Mother Nature, we would be more careful in choosing them. If we are mindful of what good eating habits we can share, we would give healthier choices of food.

Make this season a Green Christmas and think of imbibing new habits for the new year. Be more conscious of what you buy, wear, eat – in other words, live a sustainable lifestyle. As the New Year comes, we will get started on new habits and a new consciousness that we can share with family, community and even in our place of work.

May your Christmas celebration be filled with meaning and new discoveries. And may we not forget the reason for the season.

Happy Birthday Jesus! And Merry Christmas to all our readers. May you inspire others with your lives.





Biogas for zero-waste agriculture

BY LEANDER C. DOMINGO

A SIMPLE setup called an anaerobic digester which converts organic matter into biogas is key to the innovation that Muntinlupa City is showing as a way to turn farm waste into clean cooking fuel.

Along with composting machines, the city takes the path to zero-waste agriculture and a circular economy with this technology at the Environmental Sanitation Center (ESC) in Tunasan.

The ESC is committed to achieving a successful ecological solid waste management system by operating a citywide waste segregation project.

It encourages all stakeholders to purposefully sort out waste and utilize these as inputs to production, ultimately achieving a circular economy in the metropolis.

Glenn Gregorio, Southeast Asian Regional Center for Graduate Study and Research in Agriculture (Searca) director, noted that due to the potential of waste-to-energy benefits, a Searca team

conducted a study on the biogas digester technology. Searca initiated a field visit as part of an educational pursuit and awareness building on rice-straw-to-energy conversion.

"The undertaking will seek a wider reach and impact among farmers in Laguna and Nueva Ecija," Gregorio added.

The team, an implementer of the Rice Straw Biogas Hub (RSBH) project, promotes harnessing biogas technology to add value to a largely discarded or untapped agricultural resource which is the rice straw.

According to Searca, this Department of Science and Technology's biogas digester technology proved instrumental in achieving its purpose.

Searca biogas energy consultant



■ The anaerobic digester converts organic matter into biogas. CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Victor Luis Jr. and ESC division head Vincent Alon showed the process of converting biogas and compost generation from waste.

They explained that the sludge, which is a by-product of the biogas digester, is used for seeding or introducing bacteria before feeding fruit, vegetable and sawdust waste

into the composter.

The generated soil compost branded as "Muntinlupa" is used for the city's greening program while other trash materials from packaging are sewn into useful eco bags.

Luis said he envisions scaling up the management of rice straw residues through a centralized

biogas facility operated by private and public institutions.

Eric Reynoso, Searca's Emerging Innovation for Growth Department program head, added that "mechanisms, such as biogas digesters, would be instrumental in remote areas and farms where access to electricity is lacking."

The RSBH project team is set to conduct training on biogas technology during the first quarter of 2024. Searca invites individuals interested in the functions of a biogas digester and how it can be maximized using rice straw as an input. For inquiries, contact eigd@searca.org.



Global dairy trade to contract in 2023

Drop due to lower imports by the Philippines, China, Indonesia, and Bahrain, says FAO

BY JANINE ALEXIS MIGUEL

GLOBAL trade in dairy products such as butter is expected to contract this year due to drop in purchases by major dairy importing countries including the Philippines, the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) said.

In its latest dairy market review, the FAO forecast butter imports to hit 1.1 million metric tons (MT) in 2023, 2.0 percent lower from the recorded volume last year.

"Despite this anticipated fall,

export volumes are expected to remain above the 2020 and 2021 levels. The drop in trade reflects anticipated declines in imports by China, Indonesia, Bahrain and the Philippines," said FAO.

It noted that high inflation and slow economic growth in the Philippines would reduce consumer purchasing power and lower butter imports by 8.5 percent.

On the other hand, butter imports are forecast to increase in other countries such as the United States, Australia, Saudi Arabia and the Russian Federation.

Among the dairy products, FAO identified whey, whole milk powder and butter as the top products that would majorly affect the expected trade contraction.

Milk production, meanwhile, is expected to expand this year to 950

million MT, higher by 1.3 percent year on year.

The FAO attributed the faster growth from 2022's 0.6 percent to higher volume of milk production in Asia.

The region is seen to increase its milk output by 2.3 percent and generate about 431 million MT.

International trade of dairy products, meanwhile, is likely to contract by 1.0 percent this year.

The UN agency forecast international trade in dairy products to hit 84.0 MT (in milk equivalent), adding that the decline was slower than the -4.2 percent registered in 2022.

"The anticipated drop in world dairy trade in 2023 is primarily due to likely declines in imports by China, the Philippines, Indonesia and Malaysia," said FAO.

With contributing factors such as currency devaluation, FAO said that inbound shipment of dairy products is expected to drop by 15 percent to 2.38 million MT.

This figure is lower from last year's estimated import volume at 2.8 million MT.

Local dairy production, meanwhile, was estimated at 27,000 MT during the year, higher than 26,000 MT produced a year earlier.

Noting the potential of the dairy sector on economic growth, the Philippine Chamber of Agriculture and Food Inc. (PCAFI) has proposed a higher budget and support from the government for the local dairy industry.

Of the Agriculture department's P167.5-billion budget for next year, the dairy industry development program has been allocated P218.03 million.

PCAFI noted that the sector recorded the highest performance in the agriculture sector, posting 15.35-percent average growth the previous year.