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DA chief implements major reshuffle as year begins

By **BELLA CARIASO**

Department of Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. reshuffled ranking officials of the DA as he issued various special orders on the first working day of 2024.

Laurel issued Special Order No. 5 appointing Undersecretary Mercedita Sombilla as undersecretary for DA bureaus from her previous position of undersecretary for policy, planning and regulations.

He also issued SO 4, designating Undersecretary Drusila Esther Bayate as undersecretary for policy, planning and regulations, replacing Sombilla.

Bayate previously occupied the position of undersecretary for fisheries.

Laurel appointed Undersecretary Roger Navarro as officer-in-charge of the office of the undersecretary for rice industry development, replacing Leocadio Sebastian.

Laurel issued SO 1 downgrading the position of Sebastian as a member of the Secretary's Technical Advisory Group.

The DA chief issued SO 3 also appointing Navarro as OIC of various key offices at the department, including the Office of the National Project Director, Philippine Rural Development Project and the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Operations.

Laurel previously appointed Navarro as OIC of the Office of Undersecretary for Operations in December 2023.

Navarro served as special assistant to National Food Authority Administrator Roderico Bioco.

Navarro also replaced Assistant Secretary Arnel de Mesa as assistant secretary for operations as Laurel appointed De Mesa as the full-time spokesman of the DA.

Laurel issued SO 2 appointing U-Nichols Manalo as National Rice Program director. Manalo is also the OIC-Director of the Field Operations Service and National Corn Program director.

On the other hand, Laurel issued SO 6 appointing Telma Tolentino as undersecretary-designate for finance, replacing Undersecretary Agnes Catherine Miranda.

The ongoing revamp of high officials of the DA came after former agriculture senior undersecretary Domingo Panganiban opted to retire from government service more than a year after he returned to the DA and more than a month after President Marcos appointed Laurel.

Panganiban took his oath on Aug. 12, 2022 and his retirement took effect on Jan. 1. He chose to retire amid the ongoing reorganization at the DA.

Laurel had earlier appointed lawyer Genevieve Velicaria-Guevarra as head of the DA's Consumer Affairs, previously occupied by former DA assistant secretary Kristine Evangelista.

He also signed Special Order 1360 designating lawyer Alvin John Balagbag as head executive assistant and chief of staff.

Balagbag replaced Agriculture Assistant Secretary Rex Estoperez as chief of staff. Estoperez also opted to retire effective Jan. 1.

—With Catherine Talavera

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EDITORIAL

Wasting food

The new secretary of the Department of Agriculture faces his first full year in the post with farmers in Benguet giving away their carrots for free. This came after the farmgate price of the highland vegetable plummeted to just P1 a kilo. Farmers blamed a flood of imports for the price plunge, during a holiday period when demand for carrots is traditionally high.

Imports ensure supply and stabilize prices, which consumers naturally appreciate. For long-term food security, however, domestic farmers should be given sufficient support to boost their production. The challenge for new Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu-Laurel is to deliver on the promises given ages ago to local producers for farm support services to make their livelihoods sustainable.

The woes of carrot producers came on the heels of Cordillera farmers dumping their tomatoes in early December as a glut pulled farmgate prices down to as low as P5 per kilo.

Authorities should consider such waste of food unacceptable in a country where millions of people are going hungry, and where malnutrition and undernutrition are stunting physical and mental development of children from poor households.

Agriculture industry players have long pointed out that such waste, which is not uncommon across the

country, can be prevented or minimized if there are sufficient cold storage facilities. Farmers, especially the small-scale ones who make up the majority in the agriculture sector, also need better access to markets, without being at the mercy of middlemen.

Promises of reforms in the food value chain, however, have yet to go beyond political rhetoric. The government has yet to provide an accurate inventory of crop production and scientific estimates of national demand. These are not in the realm of science fiction; for some years now, certain countries have been using technology including drones for maintaining a reliable record of agricultural production and demand.

Connecting small-scale farmers and livestock growers with institutional buyers in the food industry can also prevent the waste of agricultural commodities. This is being done on a limited scale in the case of broiler chickens. Both tomatoes and carrots can be processed into juice or incorporated into snacks and pasta. Carrots in different cuts can be sold frozen. Tomatoes are processed into paste and ketchup.

Unlike President Marcos, the new secretary of agriculture has no other major post to handle. Secretary Francisco Tiu-Laurel can focus wholly on agriculture, and the delivery of long-promised reforms to boost national food security.



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Exportable agri commodities focus of new DA dev't plan

THE Department of Agriculture (DA) said it is seeking to expand agricultural and fisheries exports and has set into motion the drafting of the Philippine Agricultural Export Development Plan (PAEDP).

According to a special order signed by Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel, Jr., the DA will create a national steering committee and technical working group to prepare the plan.

The DA said the national steering committee will set the policy direction that the plan will then flesh out.

It added that a technical working group will help create the mechanisms to facilitate exports and ensure that activities and programs are aligned with the Philippine Export Development Plan (2023-2028).

"Member agencies shall create their respective core group that will (assist in) the creation of the PAEDP and provide technical assistance on matters related to export development," the DA said.

The DA added that the technical working group will seek to identify priority commodities with the strongest export potential.

The steering committee will be headed by Mr. Laurel with all DA undersecretaries as members, while Assistant Secretary for Policy Research and Development Noel A. Padre will head the technical working group.

Agricultural exports declined 13.3% to \$1.61 billion during the third quarter of 2023, accounting for 8.2% of total exports, according to the Philippine Statistics Authority.

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

Among the top five exported commodities were animal and vegetable fats; preparations of vegetables, fruit, nuts or other parts of plants; tobacco and manufactured substitutes; and preparations of meat of fish, crustacean, mollusks and other aquatic invertebrates.

President Ferdinand R. Marcos, Jr. has said that the government is focusing on increasing exports of agricultural products to make the economy more competitive. — **Adrian H. Halili**



Laurel reshuffles senior agriculture officials

By JASPER EMMANUEL Y. ARCALAS

[@jearcalas](#)

THE Department of Agriculture (DA) welcomed 2024 by reshuffling its senior officials and key directors, as Agriculture Secretary Francisco P. Tiu Laurel Jr. continued with the reorganization of the agency.

Exactly two months after he was appointed as agriculture chief, Laurel issued seven Special Orders (SO) regarding the designation of several officials, mostly undersecretaries, at the DA.

SO 1 series of 2024 indicated that Undersecretary Leocadio S.

Sebastian will join the Secretary's Technical Advisory Group (STAG).

With the new designation, Sebastian, who is a Career Executive Service officer (CESO) I, is no longer Undersecretary for Rice Industry and Development. Sebastian returned to the DA towards the

end of the Duterte administration under the leadership of former Agriculture Secretary William D. Dar.

The STAG was created by Dar in 2019 to provide policy and program recommendations to address the major issues and challenges affecting the country's agriculture sector. The STAG is composed of industry and academic representatives coming from various quarters of the agriculture sector.

In his SO 2 series of 2024, Laurel designated long-time DA director U-Nichols A. Manalo as the National Rice Program (NRP) Director. The DA's NRP is one of its flagship programs for developing and modernizing the country's agriculture sector.

Manalo will now oversee the utilization of over P30 billion in funding dedicated to the development of the country's rice sector, comprising various programs

... ranging from seeds, fertilizers, pesticide assistance, among others.

Corn industry leader Roger V. Navarro, who has been serving as OIC for Agriculture Undersecretary for Operations since Laurel assumed office, would now oversee three more offices as stipulated under SO 3 series of 2024.

Navarro would also serve as the OIC of the Office of the Undersecretary for Rice Industry Development, which was earlier held by Sebastian, and the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Operations.

He was designated as OIC of the Office of the National Project Director for the Philippine Rural Development Project.

Meanwhile, Drusila Esther E. Bayate has been handed the position of Undersecretary for Policy, Planning and Regulations, replacing Undersecretary Mercedita A.

Sombilla who will now serve as the Undersecretary for DA Bureaus.

Bayate joined the DA in early 2023 after being appointed as the Undersecretary for Fisheries. Bayate was former assistant director at the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources from 2014 to 2022.

Laurel also created a new designation under SO 5 series of 2024—the Office of the Undersecretary for DA Bureaus, which would be headed by Sombilla.

Sombilla is tasked to advise and assist Laurel in the promulgation of issuances to the DA bureaus and exercise supervision over the attached bureaus of the department in the execution of their functions.

Sombilla will also represent Laurel in meetings and official engagements concerning the DA bureaus and will also undertake review and evaluation of the plans,

projects, and activities of the bureaus. The DA website indicated that the department has a total of 9 bureaus.

Laurel, through SO 6 series of 2024, designated Telma C. Tolentino as the Undersecretary-designate for Finance in the latter's concurrent capacity as the OIC Director of Financial and Management Services

The DA chief has also named Agnes Catherine T. Miranda, a CESO III, as Undersecretary for DA Attached Agencies and Corporations, a new position. Miranda's responsibilities are similar to Sombilla's but she will oversee 16 attached DA agencies and corporations.

All the SOs were signed and issued by Laurel on January 2, the first working day of 2024. The DA website now shows that it has 8 undersecretaries and 9 assistant secretaries.



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DA to unveil agri devt strategy

BY JANINE ALEXIS MIGUEL

THE Department of Agriculture (DA) is set to unveil its strategy to modernize the country's agriculture sector and boost its contribution to the domestic economy.

Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. said on Wednesday that they will launch next week the department's plan to elevate the agriculture sector, increase the industry's production and generate more jobs for farmers and fisherfolk.

"As I told you last time, all eyes are trained on us, more on me probably because I'm the new Agriculture secretary," Laurel said, adding that 2024 will be a very challenging year.

"The entire country expects that we could feed them and that we

will try to bring commodity prices down," he added.

The Agriculture chief also urged a focus on local production, noting that by producing more locally, the country's agricultural trade deficit could be narrowed. In 2022, this amounted to \$11.8 billion or around P660 billion.

"Basically, a lot of things need to be done. We need to do this with a sense of urgency because there are only four years left in the administration of President [Ferdinand] Marcos [Jr.]. And we also have to change the perception of Filipinos

that we can produce more food for our country," he said.

Laurel also urged DA employees to do their part and reiterated his goal to modernize the country's agriculture sector, achieve food security, and in turn, lessen agricultural imports.

"We can do this. But I need your help, I need your full cooperation for the DA to achieve its goals," he added.

The Agriculture department said that money paid by consumers for imported agricultural commodities could go instead to

the pockets of Filipino farmers and fisherfolk, and fuel investment in the agriculture sector that employs four in every 10 Filipinos.

Laurel also expressed the need for more timely farm and market statistics, adoption of new technologies and farm mechanization.

"Very soon, we will have that program — possibly in the next 10 days — that we will cascade to everyone," he said, reminding the whole DA to work with urgency, especially with the impending El Niño phenomenon this year.

Laurel was appointed Agriculture secretary in November 2023. Since then, he has visited various DA offices around the country and broke ground or inaugurated facilities to support agricultural production including irrigation systems.

He also consulted local officials, farmers, fisherfolk and other agriculture stakeholders to determine a better course of action and gather support to achieve the government's vision of a modern farm sector and better lives for farmers and fisherfolk.



EDITORIAL

Lesser reliance on rice imports

To minimize the adverse effects of the El Niño phenomenon on the country's rice production, the Department of Agriculture (DA) announced last week that some 500,000 metric tons (MT) of rice from Taiwan and India will arrive in the Philippines this month and in February.

Based on data from the Bureau of Plant Industry, as of Dec. 14 last year, the country imported 3.22 million MT of rice. The bulk of that importation, or 2.8 million MT, came from Vietnam, and the rest was sourced from India and other countries.

The government resorts to rice importation due to the inability of local farmers to meet domestic demand that, according to the DA, is approximately 36,000 MT per day or 1.08 million MT a month.

Without that supply from foreign sources, the price of rice here could reach a level that majority of Filipinos, especially those in the D and E sectors, may not be able to afford.

Note that whenever the price of rice goes up, that spike tends to also influence other basic commodities. And the inflation rate follows suit.

A political or gut issue

Rice is food that Filipinos cannot do without in their daily life. Its filling effect in the stomach makes up for the scarcity of other food items that usually accompany daily meals.

The national food staple is more than an economic (or for those who can afford it, a nutritional) issue. It is a political or gut issue that, if not timely and properly managed, could make or unmake the political fortunes of whoever holds the reins of government.

In times past, photos of people waiting in line for hours to be able to buy less expensive rice or rushing delivery trucks before their rice cargo can be unloaded influenced the results of national elections.

It was therefore prudent for the government to import rice ahead of the expected shortage of the local produce due to El Niño and the strong typhoons that hit the country last year that destroyed hectares of almost ready-to-harvest rice seedlings.

It takes eight to 12 months from the time the order is made for imported rice to be delivered to the Philippines by the exporting countries. The relative ease by which rice had been sourced from Taiwan, Vietnam, and India may be attributed to the Philippines' good relations with them.

Next time around, however, it may no longer be that easy (even price-wise) in light of the expected demand for that commodity by other countries whose rice production may suffer serious damage from El Niño.

At the end of the day, the law of supply and demand will decide which country gets priority in rice importation and at what cost.

Full rice self-sufficiency

In the short term, the importation of rice to augment the country's rice stocks may be considered a deft political and economic move. It would help mitigate public dissatisfaction and bring down the inflation rate at more manageable levels.

But that action should not evolve as a national policy or be looked at as the go-to solution in meeting the country's rice requirements which are expected to increase with the growth of our population, which, to date, is at 117 million and counting.

Although full rice self-sufficiency is a pipe dream (or as some economists say, impractical to aspire for in light of globalization), it is essential that the country be as productive as humanly possible in this economic activity. There is a limit to the amount of foreign exchange the country can spend to pay for rice importations.

Besides, there is no assurance that the usual sources of imported rice would continue to set aside parts of their harvests for export, as India had done several months ago when it restricted the export of their grains to some countries.

Modern farming techniques

Given these circumstances, it behooves the government to invest more in infrastructure projects and activities that can increase rice production which include the construction of additional irrigation facilities, reduction of the cost of fertilizer, promotion of modern farming techniques, and maintenance of strategically located warehouses and cold chains.

But the task of lessening dependence on rice importation through increased local production does not rest on the government alone. It needs the participation of the private sector by way of, as pointed out by Sen. Imee Marcos, value-adding, processing, and distribution of rice harvests.

Meantime, let's refrain from asking our young to sing the song that starts with the words "planting rice is never fun." It sends the wrong message to the people who stand to be most adversely affected if the country continues to depend on other countries to meet its rice requirements.



BFAR's Panatag visit to give fishers livelihood

The Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) will visit Panatag (Scarborough) Shoal as part of continuing government efforts to provide livelihood assistance to fisherfolk in the West Philippine Sea, the agency's spokesman said.

"This year, we will have additional floating assets for the West Philippine Sea and if I am not mistaken, we are scheduled to have another voyage in Scarborough Shoal. There will be onboard livelihood training for fishermen," Nazario Briguera said during the Bagong Pilipinas Ngayon briefing yesterday.

Briguera said at least P80-million initial funding was released during the expedition of *BRP Francisco Dagohoy* to Pag-asa Island on June 12, 2023 wherein various assistance were given to residents and fisherfolk.

The visit coincided with the Philippines' celebration of its 125th Independence Day anniversary.

"The LAYAG-WPS or Livelihood Activities to Enhance Fisheries Yields and Economic Gains from the West Philippine Sea program was launched last year. We had a soft launch last June 12, where we traveled to Pag-asa Island to broaden the livelihood opportunities and productivity of fishers in the West Philippine Sea, where we have an initial funding of P80 million," he said.

Briguera added that there are at least 385,000 fisherfolk around the West Philippine Sea.

He said fishery production in the West Philippine Sea has dropped by seven percent between 2021 and 2022 despite being one of the richest fishing grounds in the archipelago.

He noted that based on Philippine Statistics Authority data, production was down to 275,872 metric tons of fish in 2022, from 295,332 MT the previous year.

— **Bella Cariaso, Michael Punongbayan**



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DA: P30.8 B to help farmers cope with El Niño

By DELON PORCALLA

The government has earmarked P30.8 billion in additional funds to the Department of Agriculture (DA) to support palay producers and stabilize the price of rice amid the El Niño phenomenon expected this year.

The amount was allotted to the National Rice Program (NRP) of the DA under the 2024 General Appropriations Act (GAA), which is up by more than half a billion pesos from P30.2 billion in 2023, according to Rep. Brian Raymund

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Yamsuan.

"We're confident that not only the DA, but other agencies across all other concerned sectors would be fully prepared for this prolonged dry spell to ensure that our rice farmers get all the support they need to continue improving their productivity and incomes amid this challenge," Yamsuan said.

The NRP fund, according to him, is "on top of the allocations for other national programs" related to rice production and locally funded projects to benefit palay producers, adding rice producers are also "assured of cash aid" amounting to more than P15 billion.

The P15 billion is sourced from the 2023 tariff collections from rice imports. Under the law, rice import tariff collections in excess of P10 billion will go directly to farmers tilling two hectares of land and below – in the form of cash grants.

"As of November 2023, the Bureau of Customs has already collected P25.55 billion, which means a surplus of at least P15.5 billion that will go to small rice planters this year," Yamsuan revealed.

Under the NRP, the budget for production support services rose by over P1 billion, from P22.87 billion in 2023 to P24.11 billion this year.

These services include community seed banks, support to Regional Integrated Agricultural Research Centers, buffer seed stocking, insurance coverage for disaster response and pest control measures.

Yamsuan also pointed out that irrigation network services under the NRP received a significant increase of 40 percent, from P721.25 million in 2023 to P1 billion in 2024, in anticipation of the dry spell arising from the El Niño.

The drought is expected to last until the first half of 2024, according to projections by the Department of Science and Technology.

2025 budget call

Just as the new year has started, the Department of Budget and Management (DBM) is asking government agencies to start preparing their proposals for a record P6.12-trillion budget for 2025.

This comes after Budget Secretary Amenah Pangandaman issued National Budget Memorandum 149 containing the national budget call for fiscal year 2025.

Next year's planned budget is 6.1 percent higher than the 2024 appropriation of P5.768 trillion, which was approved in mid-December of last year.

Pangandaman emphasized that the proposed national budget will be anchored on the government's commitment to achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development that supports the objectives of the Philippine Development Plan and the Ambisyon Natin 2040.

"There is a need to accelerate the progress or reverse the negative trends to achieve the global goals of establishing a transformative vision towards economic, social and environmental sustainability," she said.

The 2025 budget aims to continuously address various socioeconomic issues such as high food and fuel prices and pandemic scars, as well as support infrastructure investments.

Next year's budget also targets to adapt to emerging global trends on digital transformation and harmonize linkages between local and national concerns.

Amid the country's debt burden and competing demands of state agencies, Pangandaman said budget allocation will be optimized. – With Louise Maureen Simeon

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BFAR eyes more assistance for West PH Sea fishermen in 2024

By TRIKKE ROSEL

The Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) will be increasing the livelihood and other assistance package to fishermen in the West Philippine Sea (WPS) this year.

BFAR Spokesperson Nazario Briguera said the increase in assistance package will cover fuel subsidies, new fishing tools and postharvest equipment under the Livelihood Activities to Enhance Fisheries Yield and Economic Gains from the West Philippine Sea (Layag WPS).

"Inilunsad ang proyektong ito sa layunin na mas mapalawak ang livelihood opportunities at productivity ng mga mangangisda sa West Philippine Sea at nagkaroon ito ng initial na ₱80 million na pondo at this year ay magkakaroon pa ng mga livelihood programs (This project was launched with the goal of enhancing the livelihood opportunities and productivity of fishermen in the West Philippine Sea. It started with an ₱80-million fund, and further livelihood programs would be implemented this year)," he said in a televised media briefing on Wednesday, Jan. 3.

Briguera noted that Layag WPS is expected to boost the

Philippines' fish coffers.

Based on the BFAR data, there are around 373,700 Filipino fishermen in the WPS.

In 2022, Layag WPS contributed merely six percent of the nation's fisheries yield, primarily benefiting Philippine-occupied Pag-asa Island in Kalayaan.

He said that ₱5 million worth of fishing equipment supported the livelihood of Pag-asa fishermen.

According to the BFAR official, fishermen will be receiving postharvest equipment for them to have the capability to preserve their catch and potentially begin preserving food.

"Ang mandato natin pag dating sa West Philippine Sea ay masiguro na nabibigyan ng tamang suporta ang ating mga mangangisda dahil ito ay direktiba ng ating Pangulo (Marcos) at direktiba ng ating kalihim (Department of Secretary (Francisco Tiu Laurel) na hindi mapabayaan ang ating mga mangangisda sa WPS (Our mandate in terms of the West Philippine Sea is to ensure that our fishermen receive the proper assistance, as our President and Secretary have ordered that we must meet the needs of our fishermen in the WPS)," he said.



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Gov't allocates P31B to improve rice production

By John Victor D. Ordoñez
Reporter

THE PHILIPPINE government has allocated about P31 billion in the 2024 national budget to aid farmers in implementing projects to boost rice production, ahead of expected episodes of drought and dry spells from El Niño, a congressman said on Wednesday.

"We are confident that not only the agriculture department, but other agencies across all other concerned sectors would be fully prepared for this prolonged dry spell to ensure that our rice farmers get all the support they need to continue improving their productivity and incomes amid this challenge," Party-List Rep. Brian Raymund S. Yamsuan said in a statement.

He added that the budget would include more than P15 billion in cash aid for small rice producers from tariff collections from rice imports last year.

Rice import tariffs collected that go over P10 billion go directly to farmers tilling two hectares of land and below in the form of cash grants.

Mr. Yamsuan noted that the Bureau of Customs (BoC) had already collected P25.55 billion in rice tariff imports.

Production of *palay* or unmilled rice is expected to come in at 7.32 million metric tons (MT) during the fourth quarter, according to the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA).

The Department of Agriculture (DA) has projected *palay* production for the entirety of last year to be at 20 million MT.

Part-list Rep. Elizaldy S. Co earlier said lawmakers increased the allocation for irrigation projects under the National Irrigation Administration by at least P40 billion.

An additional P25 billion had also been granted to boost agriculture subsectors, with at least P10 billion to be used for free irrigation, seeds, fertilizer and other agricultural products for farmers.

Meanwhile, the government allotted about P7.5 billion to upgrade at least 22 airports this year, including the Ninoy Aquino International Airport (NAIA) and the Pag-asa Island New Manila International Airport, according to Makati City Rep. Luis Campos, Jr.

Mr. Campos said NAIA would receive the biggest funding for upgrades with P1.64 bil-

lion for a new communications, navigation, and surveillance-air traffic management system.

This year's budget will also include P1.5 billion to upgrade and expand an airport in Thitu Island, which the Philippines calls Pag-asa Island.

The Kalibo International Airport in Boracay will see P581 million in upgrades, while the Laoag International Airport will have P500 million.

The budget has P320 million earmarked for infrastructure upgrades for the Bukidnon Airport and P300 million for the Puerto Princesa Airport.

The New Manila International Airport is set to receive P200 million in new infrastructure spending.

"The spending is meant to sustain the modernization and expansion of the country's aviation hubs in time for the projected full recovery of global air traffic in 2025," Mr. Campos said.

"Of course, we are also counting on the spending to enhance the overall travel experience of passengers."

The Philippines logged 5.45 million international arrivals in 2023, breaching the country's 4.8 million target in arrivals for the year, the Department of Tourism reported on Tuesday.



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DA sets P73M for fisheries rehab

THE DEPARTMENT of Agriculture (DA) has allocated P73.62 million as rehabilitation funds for damaged fisheries equipment due to flash floods from the shear line and wind convergence in Northern Mindanao.

In a statement, the DA said that rehabilitation and the distribution of fishing equipment will be handled by the regional office of the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) after the signing of a memorandum of agreement on rehabilitation projects.

Funds have been allotted for 1,259 units of motorized boats with multiple fishing gear amounting to P71.16 million, 58 units of netting gear, and two *payao* fish aggregating devices.

The agency also handed out catfish, *tilapia*, and milkfish (*bangus*) fingerlings amounting to P379,000. — **Adrian H. Halili**

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BFAR bares new govt tack to boost fishery production

By SAMUEL P. MEDENILLA

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TEACH a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime, but introduce him to agriculture and new modern equipment and he can start earning more and with minimal work-related risk.

The Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) said Tuesday this is the thrust of the Marcos administration to help boost the productivity of local fishermen. "We will provide them with modern equipment so even if the would fish further [from the coast],

we will not worry for their safety because the boats they will use will be more durable and bigger," BFAR spokesperson Nazario Briguera said in Filipino during a television interview on Wednesday.

He said they are also considering expanding the local aquaculture, which can provide higher profits to fishermen compared to fishing in open waters.

Last year, BFAR reported it was able to produce 22 units of 62-footer fishing boats, which is larger than what is being used by most fisherfolk.

The attached agency of the Department of Agriculture (DA) also noted its aquaculture initiative with its partner fishermen resulted in the production

of 293 million fingerlings last year.

Local aquaculture, Briguera said, can produce tilapia and other high value fishes like lapu-lapu (groupers) and pampano.

These will be on top of the ongoing P11-billion Philippine Fisheries and Coastal Resiliency Project, which was launched last year to build infrastructures like cold storage facilities and climate resilient technology in 24 provinces and 11 regions.

"So that is our direction," Briguera said.

Currently, he said fishermen earn about P10,000 to P15,000 a month.

Based on BFAR data, there are at least 2 million registered fisherfolk nationwide.



Farmers to get P30B from NG under DA's natl rice program

BY JOVEE MARIE N. DELA CRUZ

[@joveemarie](#)

A LAWMAKER on Wednesday said rice farmers would receive substantial support totaling at least P30 billion from the national government (NG) through the 2024 General Appropriations Act (GAA).

With this support, Bicol Saro Party-list Rep. Brian Raymund Yamsuan is optimistic that the country's rice production will further improve this year despite a prolonged dry spell.

The 2024 GAA allocates P30,889,904,000 for the National Rice Program (NRP) under the Department of Agriculture (DA).

Yamsuan said the NRP budget is in addition to funds allocated for other national programs related to rice production and locally funded projects specified in the 2024 GAA.

"We are confident that not only the agriculture department but other agencies across all other concerned sectors will be fully prepared for this prolonged dry spell to ensure that our rice farmers get all the support they

need to continue improving their productivity and incomes amid this challenge," said Yamsuan.

Under the NRP, the budget for production support services rose by over P1 billion, from P22.87 billion in 2023 to P24.11 billion in 2024.

These services include establishing community seed banks, providing support to regional integrated agricultural research centers, buffer seed stocking, providing insurance coverage for disaster response, and implementing pest control measures.

Yamsuan also pointed out that irrigation network services under the NRP received a significant increase of 40 percent, from P721.25 million in 2023 to P1.01 billion in 2024, in anticipation of the dry spell arising from El Niño, which could last until the first half of 2024, according to projections by the Department of Science and Technology (DOST).

On top of the increase in the budget for the NRP's irrigation network services, Yamsuan also pointed out that the allocation for extension support, education, and training services

under the NRP grew from P1.26 billion in 2023 to P2.04 billion for this fiscal year.

These services will aid farmers in arming themselves with knowledge on sustainable agriculture practices and new planting technologies to increase production, Yamsuan said.

Aside from the NRP, other national programs, and locally funded projects, rice farmers also get a windfall of support under the Rice Competitiveness Enhancement Fund (RCEF), Yamsuan noted.

As of November 2023, the Bureau of Customs (BOC) had collected P25.55 billion, resulting in a surplus of at least P15.5 billion designated for small rice planters in the current year.

He said small rice producers could expect cash aid exceeding P15.5 billion from the 2023 tariff collections on rice imports.

Under the law, rice import tariff collections in excess of P10 billion should go directly to farmers tilling two hectares of land and below in the form of cash grants.

Half of the P10 billion goes to the

Philippine Center for Postharvest and Mechanization for the procurement of new equipment. The RCEF also invests P3 billion in the Philippine Rice Research Institute for the propagation of inbred seeds; P1 billion in state-owned banks to finance a credit facility for palay farmers and their cooperatives; and another P1 billion in various agencies to develop mechanisms for modern farming techniques and rice crop production.

As mandated under RA 11598, or the Cash Assistance for Filipino Farmers Act enacted in December 2021, tariff collections from rice importations in excess of P10 billion would be given directly to rice farmers as cash aid.

Yamsuan lauded the recent successful initial implementation of this law, which he said would be a big help for small farmers struggling to survive amid the rising prices of basic goods.

In 2022, excess rice tariff collections amounted to P12.7 billion, approved by President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. for distribution to over 2 million farmers cultivating two hectares of land or less. Each beneficiary received P5,000.

Executive Order No. 50, issued on December 22, extends reduced tariffs on rice and other food items until the end of 2024 to maintain price stability amid the impending El Niño threat.



'FDA directive fails to address problems posed by bird flu'

THE Food and Drug Administration's (FDA) latest directive on avian influenza (AI) vaccines does not directly address the problems posed by the disease as it is not "aligned" with the guidelines crafted by the Department of Agriculture (DA) and industry stakeholders, according to an expert.

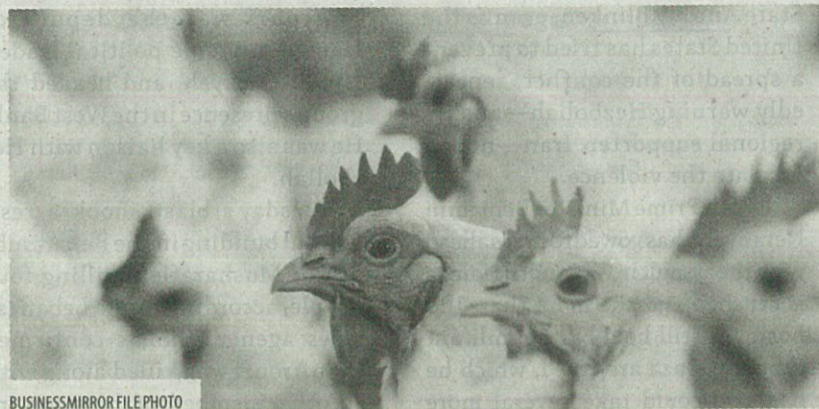
Dr. Jun Romo, the immediate past president of the Philippine College of Poultry Practitioners Inc. (PCPP), said the FDA did not approve the permit of the bird flu vaccines endorsed by the Bureau of Animal Industry (BAI) and the PCPP for wide-scale applications on targeted priority areas. Romo was part of the team that spearheaded the crafting of the country's bird flu vaccine guidelines.

Instead, he said the FDA granted only the field trials for "some" suppliers which would take six months to finish before the vaccine applicant may secure a Certificate of Product Registration (CPR) from the regulatory body.

"CPR applications can only happen once the field trials are done and results are submitted. In this case we are not addressing the danger the poultry industry is facing with the wild bird migration season. And not aligned with the DA approved AI Vaccination guidelines," Romo told the BUSINESSMIRROR.

Last week, the FDA launched Task Force Aletryon that would focus on the evaluation of bird flu vaccines to be used in the country.

The creation of the task force



BUSINESSMIRROR FILE PHOTO

came almost two months after the Department of Agriculture (DA) allowed the commercial use of bird flu vaccines in domestic poultry. (Related story: <https://businessmirror.com.ph/2023/11/08/phl-allows-commercial-use-of-ai-vaccine-for-domestic-poultry-industry/>)

In a statement, the FDA noted that vaccination would play a "crucial role" in addressing the country's bird flu outbreaks that have become more wide-scale in recent years.

The FDA said the task force would focus on a "streamlined" evaluation of applications for AI drugs and vaccines to ensure that they are "safe, efficacious and of good quality" to prevent and curb the spread of the transboundary animal disease locally.

The agency said it has not received a single application for CPR for bird flu vaccine to date. The CPR is a critical document being issued by the FDA to allow the commercial sale and use of a prod-

uct, including vaccines. Without a CPR, a vaccine cannot be used at a commercial scale locally.

"The Food and Drug Administration encourages the veterinary pharmaceutical industry to submit applications with complete requirements in support of the government's efforts to control Avian Flu infection," it said.

'Complementary tool'

THE wisdom of the vaccine guidelines approved by the DA in November last year was to facilitate a situation akin to the use of Covid-19 vaccines in the country wherein the state authorized the rollout of vaccines that have been proven effective and safe through field trials and evaluation by competent authorities abroad.

"Unlike ASF [African swine fever] vaccines, AI vaccines [the right ones which we are recommending with the BAI AI Technical Working Committee] are approved by WOA [World Organization for Animal

Health] as a complementary tool to combat HPAI [highly pathogenic avian influenza]," Romo said.

"FDA would like to repeat what we have done for a year that included experts."

Romo disclosed that PCPP had a sit-down meeting with BAI and FDA representatives to have an equal understanding regarding the country's directions on AI vaccine use.

"We thought we had a clear agreement that they will support the HPAI vaccination guidelines."

Philippine Chamber for Agriculture and Food Inc. (PCAFI) President Danilo V. Fausto lauded the FDA for "finally taking action on AI vaccines" but urged the agency to increase its manpower to ensure the efficient evaluation and approval of CPRs.

"It is good to know that the FDA is finally taking action on AI vaccines. They should increase their manpower and hope they will do the same to other products that have applied for CPR," Fausto told the BUSINESSMIRROR.

The urgency of allowing the use of vaccines came about when the country faced a resurgence of bird flu outbreaks in recent years. The disease spread faster and affected more areas.

The Philippines joined the growing number of countries worldwide that have adopted a vaccination policy to control the spread of bird flu that has killed at least 300 million of poultry globally. **Jasper Emmanuel Y. Arcalas**



Congress seen approving bamboo development bill this year

CONGRESS is expected to approve the Bamboo Industry Development bill, or the proposed Kawayan Act, this year.

Sponsored by Senator Mark A. Villar, Senate Bill (SB) 2513, "An Act Institutionalizing the Bamboo Industry Development of the Philippines," is now being finalized. It will be subjected to interpellation by senators possibly by the first quarter of 2024.

Bicameral discussions will then ensue to come up with a unified version of the bills from the Senate and House of Representatives prior to submission to the Office of the President for ratification.

"We have enough time until the third regular session to complete the whole process," said Lawyer Ken Sta. Rita, presiding officer at the Senate Committee on Trade, Commerce, and Entrepreneurship (SCTCE). Congress's third regular session begins in July 2024.

Department of Agriculture (DA) Undersecretary Deogracias Victor B. Savellano, who is the vice chairman of the Philippine Bamboo Industry Development Council, said the approval of the bamboo bill will enable realization of the vision of Executive Order 879.

"We will finally have a true 'Pinoy' industry that uses a green

material to promote industrialization and dollar generation," said Savellano.

He authored an early version of a House bill supporting the productive use of the climate-smart native plant ubiquitously grown nationwide.

Philippine Bamboo Industry Development Council (PBIDC) Executive Director Rene Madarang said the bamboo law as approved will finally institutionalize a counterpart PBIDC office that harmonizes the myriad bamboo programs of government.

"It will all be under one center so that the private sector knows where to go to for different kinds of assistance that will enable us to nurture our bamboo industry," said Madarang.

SB 2513 introduces incentives into the industry including making it an Investment Priorities Program product under the Board of Investments.

Bamboo plantations will be exempted from permits for tree cutting, harvesting and transport. Private plantations will be allowed to enjoy free rental of government lands. Plantations will also be accepted as collateral for government loans.

Private sector players have also been pushing for incentives and policies that will encourage investments into the sector foreseen to gross \$92 billion globally by end-2030.



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Drought looms in 17 provinces

BY ARLIE O. CALALO

AT least 17 provinces in Luzon will experience drought by the end of January due to the effects of the El Niño phenomenon, the Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration (Pagasa) said on Wednesday.

"This may adversely affect the different climate-sensitive sectors such as the water resources, agriculture, energy, health, public safety and other key sectors," Pagasa Officer in Charge Nathaniel Servando told *The Manila Times* on Wednesday.

Servando said a strong El Niño is present in the tropical Pacific, showing signs

►ProvincesA8



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■ PROVINCES FROM A1

Drought looms in 17 provinces

of further intensification in the coming months as sea surface temperatures reach more than 1.5 degrees Celsius.

The El Niño increases the likelihood of way below to below-normal rainfall conditions, which could bring dry spells and drought to some areas of the country until the first quarter or up to the second quarter of 2024.

He said the provinces to be likely hit by drought were Benguet, Ifugao, Kalinga, Apayao, Mountain Province, Ilocos Sur, LaUnion, Pangasinan, Cagayan, Nueva Ecija, Nueva Vizcaya, Pampanga, Tarlac,

Batangas, Cavite, Oriental Mindoro and Palawan.

Servando added that a dry condition might prevail over the Spratly Islands, while a dry spell will be likely over Abra, Ilocos Norte, Isabela, Quirino, Bataan, Bulacan, Zambales, Aurora, Occidental Mindoro and Metro Manila.

A dry spell is characterized by three consecutive months of below-normal rainfall or a 21 to 60 percent drop in average rainfall.

A dry condition, on the other hand, is characterized by two consecutive months of below-normal rainfall or a 21 to 60 percent reduc-

tion in average rainfall.

Drought refers to five consecutive months of below-normal rainfall conditions or three consecutive months of way below-normal rainfall conditions (more than 60 percent reduction from average), Pagasa said.

Rice program gets more funds

The Department of Agriculture (DA) said that the National Rice Program (NRP) will get more funds this year to cushion the effects of El Niño.

The DA said in a statement that a total of P30,889,904,000 was allocated for the NRP's implementation in 2024, over half a billion pesos more than the P30,296,993,000 it received in 2023.

Bicol Saro party-list Rep. Brian Raymund Yamsuan said the budget for NRP was prioritized to soften the effect of the El Niño phenomenon on the country's food production.

"We are confident that not only the Agriculture department but other agencies across all other concerned sectors would be fully

prepared for this prolonged dry spell to ensure that our rice farmers get all the support they need to continue improving their productivity and incomes amid this challenge," he said.

Small rice producers are also assured of cash aid of over P15 billion from the 2023 tariff collections from rice imports, Yamsuan said.

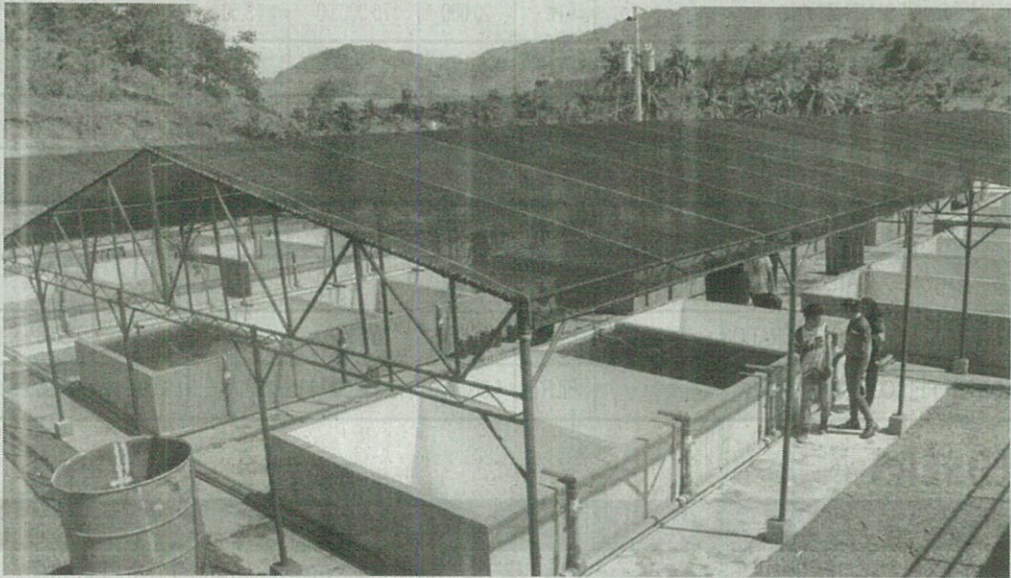
Under the law, rice import tariff collections in excess of P10 billion should go directly to farmers tilling land of two hectares and below in the form of cash grants. As of November 2023, the Bureau of Customs has collected P25.55 billion, which means a surplus of at least P15.5 billion that will go to small rice planters this year, he added.

Under the NRP, the budget for production support services rose to P24.22 billion in 2024 from P22.87 billion in 2023. The statement read that these services include establishing community seed banks, support to Regional Integrated Agricultural Research Centers, buffer seed stocking, insurance coverage for disaster response, and pest control measures.

Yamsuan said that irrigation network services under the NRP received a significant increase of 40 percent to P1.01 billion in 2024 from P721.25 million in 2023, in anticipation of the dry spell arising from El Niño, which could last until the first half of 2024, according to projections by the Department of Science and Technology.

WITH REINA C. TOLENTINO

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**BOOSTING
AQUACULTURE IN
MINDANAO**

The Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources office in Northern Mindanao has inaugurated a multispecies marine hatchery in Barangay Koreo in Sultan Naga Dimaporo, Lanao del Norte, that was established through the initiative of former Lanao del Norte representative Abdullah Dimaporo and Sen. Cynthia Villar, the Senate Agriculture and Food Committee chairman. The hatchery aims to produce 25 million milkfish fry annually that can benefit the aquaculture sector of the province and other areas in Northern Mindanao. PHOTO FROM BFAR



My wish list for 2024

AS 2024 unfolds, let us be more conscious of the need to make the local and global food system more efficient, productive and sustainable, especially with the three Cs still affecting agriculture.

With the three Cs — lingering effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, climate change and geopolitical conflicts — we can no longer approach agriculture with a “business-as-usual” attitude. If we still insist on that approach, we will surely see a drastic decline in food production in the near future, and more people driven to poverty, or worse, hunger.

The global population also continues to increase, according to the United Nations, which will necessitate an accompanying increase in food production. In 2022, the global population hit the 8-billion mark. The UN said that by 2030, the global population will reach 8.5 billion and 9.7 billion by 2050.

Meanwhile, the Commission on Population and Development said the population of the Philippines may reach 115 million by the end of 2023, while the Philippine Statistics Authority projects the country's population to reach 140 million by 2040. These facts should prompt or alert all of us to increase our food production efficiently and sustainably.

And we must start now!

So, for 2024, let us start taking concrete and concerted action to make Philippine agriculture a powerhouse for food production and a major contributor to national economic growth.

And here is my wish list for the country's agri-fishery industry for 2024 also comprised of solutions that will have an impact beyond this year: Regenerative farming practices become mainstream in Philippine agriculture; more farmers and agribusiness companies adopt digitalization; Philippine agricultural exports will recover and expand; more farm clustering including cooperatives development will be undertaken; rice self-sufficiency level will increase.

No strong storm will hit the Philippines; we will be more prepared for the upcoming El Niño; smuggling will come to an end; Congress will give bigger budget for agriculture in 2025; and the bigger budget for agriculture be spent wisely.



MOVING FORWARD

WILLIAM D. DAR

Regenerative agriculture and digitalization

I have stated many times in my columns the need for the country to shift to regenerative agriculture as we no longer have finite soil and water resources to grow crops. Also, a growing population will result in more lands converted to non-agriculture use and increased freshwater consumption outside of food production.

Regenerative agriculture's main objective is to make growing crops more harmonized with nature and the ecosystem and to lessen or eliminate its contribution to greenhouse gas emissions.

To make regenerative agriculture more adaptable to the current generation of farmers, strategies such as balanced fertilization or the use of organic and chemical inputs can be included in the options to make farming less harmful to the environment.

As for conserving water to grow food, there are a number of options like utilizing the latest technologies like drip irrigation or the alternate wetting and drying method in cultivating rice.

The possibilities can be endless for regenerative agriculture, and the overall objective is to make food production less harmful to the environment, sustainable and efficient over the long term.

As for digitalization, this can be applied to numerous aspects of agriculture, from improving food production to marketing produce, which ultimately benefits consumers.

When it comes to growing crops, farmers can use several apps to access data to help optimize yields. One good example is Fieldview by Climate LLC, a unit under Bayer Crop Science, that utilizes artificial intelligence to collect at least 250 layers of high-definition data that farmers can use to make more informed decisions in growing crops.

Digitalization can also be applied in marketing produce, making it quicker for farmers and fishers to sell their products directly to wholesalers, retailers or consumers.

Exports and clustering

Last year, the Philippines successfully concluded trade deals for the export of Haas avocado and durian to South Korea and China, respectively. And I wish to see more of such deals this year.

I also wish that the country would be able to ship abroad more of its traditional farm exports like mangoes, bananas, pineapple, tuna, cocoa and coconut in both raw or semi-processed or processed form.

Besides the government and the private sector promoting Philippine agricultural exports, there is also a need to improve the production of both raw, semi-processed and processed food products through massive investment by both the government and private sector.

As for farmers, they must be clustered and organized into cooperatives so they can attain economies of scale and partner with major agribusiness companies and eventually market their products in the international markets.

The Cooperative Development Authority must also be given more funding, personnel, logistics and training to accelerate the organization of millions of farmers and fishers into cooperatives and to capacitate cooperatives to become viable business enterprises.

Higher rice self-sufficiency

I have high hopes that the Masagana Rice Industry Development Program will be able to attain a 95- to 97-percent rice self-sufficiency level for the Philippines by 2028, or the end of the term of President Ferdinand Marcos Jr.

And with the Department of Agriculture (DA) allocating P30 billion this year for the rice industry, or double the P15 billion during my watch at the DA, I am optimistic that the country will attain a higher rice self-sufficiency level this year or a little above 90 percent.

Weather conditions

In 2023, I prayed that no strong storm, or those with the magnitude of Typhoon “Odette,” that caused P13 billion in damages to agriculture in December 2021, would hit the Philippines. And my prayers were answered, and I greatly thank God for that. I also pray that for this year, no powerful storm will hit the country this year and cause huge damage to agriculture.

Also, I wish that the upcoming El Niño will be weaker than expected. Science Secretary Renato Solidum Jr. has said that at least 65 provinces, or 77 percent of the country's provinces, are forecast to experience drought by the end of May 2024 due to a “strong” El Niño.

I also wish that the DA and other government agencies are well-prepared to deal with the El Niño, and that includes giving cash assistance to those who will be directly hit by the extreme weather disturbance.

The last three items on my wish list are very doable, and these are smuggling will come to an end, Congress will give a bigger budget for agriculture in 2025, and the DA and the National Irrigation Administration (NIA) will spend their budgets wisely.

On smuggling, Congress has given more teeth to Republic Act 10845, or the “Anti-Agricultural Smuggling Act,” by increasing the penalty for smugglers of agricultural products to life imprisonment. I hope that the measure will be signed into law early this year, and law enforcement agencies along with the DA and the Bureau of Customs will undertake a more concerted crackdown on smuggling this year.

On the budget for agriculture, Congress has given the DA and NIA higher budgets in 2023 and for this year, or P184.1 billion budget and P197.84 billion, respectively. This is much higher than the P102.5 billion allocated for 2022.

And my last wish is simple — that the much bigger budget for agriculture this year be spent wisely by the DA and its attached agencies.

Again, Happy New Year to all! Let's start making the country's agriculture sector a powerhouse that can ensure our food security and contribute more to national economic development.



Produksyon ng bigas sisipa

KUMPIYANSA si Bicol Saro party-list Rep. Brian Raymund Yamsuan na dadi ang produksyon ng bigas sa bansa sa tulong ng mga programa ng gobyerno sa kabila ng epekto ng El Niño phenomenon na inaasahang magtatagal hanggang sa unang semestre ng taon.

Para sa 2024, sinabi ni Yamsuan na naglaan ang Kongreso ng P30.889 bilyon sa National Rice Program (NRP) ng Department of Agriculture (DA), mas mataas sa P30.296 bilyon na nakalaan sa programa noong 2023.

Ayon kay Yamsuan ito ay bukod pa sa alokasyon sa ibang programa ng gobyerno na naglalayong tulu-

ngan ang mga magsasaka ng bigas.

Sinabi ni Yamsuan na ang irrigation network services sa ilalim ng NRP ay tumaas ng 40% o mula P721.25 milyon noong 2023 ay ginawang P1.01 bilyon ngayong 2024.

Ang production support services ng NRP ay umakyat naman sa P24.11 bilyon mula sa P22.87 bilyon. Kasama rito ang pagtatayo ng mga community seed bank, suporta sa Regional Integrated Agricultural Research Centers, buffer seed stocking, insurance coverage para sa disaster response, at pest control measures, ayon sa kongresista. (Billy Begas/Eralyn Prado)



Ekonomiya ng Pinas, handa na matagalan at matiis ang epekto ng El Niño - DoF

SINABI ng Department of Finance (DOF) na handa ang ekonomiya ng Pilipinas na matagalan at matiis ang anomang potensiyal na negatibong epekto ng El Niño phenomenon ngayong taon.

Sa isang kalatas, sinabi ng DOF na ang 2024 gross domestic product (GDP) target ng national government ay 6.5% hanggang 7.5%, kinokonsidera ang panganib na iniuugnay sa magtatagal na dry spell.

Ang paliwanag ng DOF, ang paglago sa 2024 ay pagaalabin ng private consumption, inaasahan na ang inflation ay magbabalik sa target range na 2.0% hanggang 4.0 percent.

Noong nakaraang linggo, sinimulan na ng Department of Agriculture at iba pang ahensiya na bawasan ang epekto ng "long dry spell" sa food production.

Minaliit naman ni National Economic and Development Authority Secretary Arsenio Balisacan ang potensiyal na negatibong epekto ng El Niño sa ekonomiya subalit inamin na may posibilidad na tumaas ang presyo ng mga pangunahing bilihin.

Tinukoy ni Balisacan ang kahalagahan ng pagkakaiba ng malalang El Niño noong 1997-1998, sinabi nito na ang "current relative share of agriculture in the economy is much smaller, at around 10%."

Dagdag pa sa El Niño, tinuran ng DOF na ang ekonomiya ay may kakayahan na matagalan ang global economic slowdown, ibang natural disasters, at maging ang geopolitical at trade tensions.

Tinukoy ng DOF ang "favorable factors" na magdadala sa paglago ng ekonomiya ngayong taon.

"These include declining oil prices, strong public spending, increased investments attracted by the country's solid macroeconomic fundamentals and investment-grade credit ratings, the implementation of structural reforms, and rising demand for Philippine exports as supply chain bottlenecks ease," ayon sa DoF.

"A broad-based expansion in all major sectors of the economy led by services, and industry is expected to drive growth on the supply side," ang wika ng DOF.

"The passage of proposed legislative reforms will also help ensure the funding for the P5.77 trillion national government budget for 2024 and will allow the attainment of the deficit target of 5.1 percent of GDP in 2024," anito pa rin.

KRIS JOSE



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**Solon: Dry spell won't stunt
rice output growth** By Jester Manalastas

A neophyte lawmaker has expressed optimism that the country's rice production would further improve this year despite a prolonged dry spell, as palay producers are expected to get assistance from the national government.

Bicol Saro Party-list Representative Brian Raymund Yamsuan said this 2024 the palay producers will be receiving at least P31 billion in support from the national government under the 2024 General Appropriations Act (GAA).

A total of P30,889,904,000 has been allocated to the National Rice Program (NRP) of the Department of Agriculture (DA) under the 2004 GAA, up by more P500 million from last year's P30,296,993,000.

Yamsuan said the budget for the NRP is on top of the allocations for other national programs related to rice production and locally funded projects to benefit palay producers under the 2004 GAA.

Small rice producers are also

assured of cash aid of over P15 billion from the 2023 tariff collections from rice imports, Yamsuan said.

Under the NRP, the budget for production support services rose by over P1 billion from P22.87 billion in 2023 to P24.11 billion in 2024. These services include establishing community seed banks, support to Regional Integrated Agricultural Research Centers, buffer seed stocking, insurance coverage for disaster response, and pest control measures.

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Price plunge forces Benguet farmers to give away carrots

By BELLA CARIASO

Farmers in Benguet were forced to distribute for free carrots whose farmgate price dropped to P1 per kilo, as local dealers blamed the flooding of smuggled vegetables

for the slump in the cost of local highland vegetables.

In a radio interview, La Trinidad Vegetable Trading Post vegetable dealer Lorna Menzi said carrots were given away for free in Benguet, particularly in Baguio City.

"The medium and small sized (carrots) were released and given for free in different barangays," Menzi said.

"Since the flooding of smuggled carrots, this has been the scenario

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Price From Page 1

as consumers prefer big carrots," she added.

On social media, photos and videos showed residents and tourists picking up carrots after kilos of vegetables were left at Burnham Park in Baguio City.

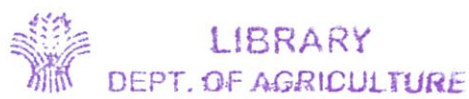
"We are not sure if these are fresh, as the carrots were placed in the container vans for a long time," Menzi said, warning the public of the dangers posed by

consuming smuggled carrots.

The proliferation of smuggled big carrots, she noted, has persisted in the last two years.

The dumping of highland vegetables could continue as peak harvest season starts this month, she added.

Despite the dumping of carrots, the retail price in Metro Manila markets remains high. Based on monitoring of the Department of Agriculture, the cost of the vegetable ranged between P80 and P160 per kilo.



PH fruit products exporter targets EU

SOUTH Cotabato-based fruit products exporter Kablon Farms is aiming to expand its reach to the European Union with the extension of the Generalized System of Preferences Plus (GSP+), the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) said on Wednesday.

"We would like to expand our product offering to the European Union ... The biggest challenge for us was relearning how to export other products to another country," Kablon Farms co-owner Leonor Pantua said in the DTI statement.

The company currently exports fruit-based products to Canada, Singapore, and several other countries, the Trade department said.

Based in Tupi, South Cotabato, Kablon Farms currently produces jams, jellies, tropical fruit purées, chocolate bars, juices, virgin coconut oil, and cacao butter, among others. It has three retail centers

in South Cotabato and a distribution outlet in Davao that employs a total of 105 full-time workers.

Approximately 90 percent of Kablon Farms' revenues come from domestic sales in supermarkets, retail shops, other food manufacturers or end-users and online sales, while 10 percent comes from exports.

Given strong demand overseas for Philippine fruits and flavors, Pantua said the firm was targeting increased exports of cacao and cacao-based products.

The extension of the GSP+ "opens opportunities for us to market a wider range of products," she added.

"The EU market seems particularly attracted to the distinctive flavor of single-origin Philippine cacao."

At the same time, she urged Philippine businesses to continue to avail of the GSP privileges and

expand exports and market access to the EU.

Last year, the European Commission had proposed the rollover of the current GSP+ program for another four years, lifting concerns that the Philippines could lose its trade privileges due to its failure to address a number of concerns.

The EU grants trade preferences to developing countries under the GSP facility to help grow trade, reduce poverty and support sustainable development via three schemes: Standard GSP, GSP+ and Everything But Arms or duty-free access for all goods except arms and ammunition.

The Philippines is covered by the GSP+ program, which involves having to comply with 27 international conventions relating to human rights and good governance, among others.

JENICA FAYE GARCIA



La Union fishers urged to register boats

MALASIQUI, Pangasinan: The City Agriculture Office of San Fernando City, La Union, is urging local fisherfolk to register or renew their boat licenses to avail of the gasoline subsidy, insurance and other future support services to the sector.

City agriculturist Mary Janie Alcedo said the annual registration of motorized and nonmotorized boats complies with the Coastal Management and Fishery Code of the local government unit.

"We are registering motorized and nonmotorized boats to know those operating in San Fernando City," she said partly in Filipino in a phone interview on Tuesday.

She added that registered fisherfolk are the priority in intervention programs by the city and other entities.

Alcedo said the latest intervention is the free gasoline assistance to the motorized boat owners, institutionalized

through City Ordinance 11, Series of 2021.

"The city is giving [a] free gasoline subsidy to the registered fisherfolk amounting to P6,000 to minimize the gasoline cost," she said.

Alcedo added that nonmotorized boat owners will benefit from fishing gear, while motorized and nonmotorized boat owners are entitled to insurance annually through the Philippine Crop Insurance Corp.

"Fisherfolk are somehow left behind when it comes to support services," she said.

Almost 500 motorized and 170 nonmotorized boats registered in the city in 2022.

Registration fees of P390 and P240 are required for motorized and nonmotorized boat owners, respectively.

Registration or renewal of boat licenses is from January 2-31. **PNA**



Agri sector in Southeast Asia faces challenges

BY LEANDER C. DOMINGO

THE agriculture sector in Southeast Asia (SEA) has a pivotal role in the socioeconomic transformation of the region but faces perils and challenges, various studies published in the December 2023 issue of the Asian Journal of Agriculture and Development (AJAD) showed.

AJAD is an international-refereed journal published by the Southeast Asian Regional Center for Graduate Study and Research in Agriculture (Searca) based in Los Banos, Laguna.

Searca Director Glenn Gregorio said the authors' collective optimism "provides a glimpse of hope for the continuing role of the region as a major global producer and exporter."

In his paper "Back in the Soup: Now What?," renowned food security expert and Harvard University emeritus C. Peter Timmer presents the outlook for the world rice market as of early September 2023. Timmer built on his AJAD article published a year earlier on managing an impending world food crisis, post-pandemic presenting a "series of steps designed to build confidence in the availability of supplies."

This time, Timmer's new paper analyzes the current concern about an impending rice crisis resulting from the attacks on the infrastructure of Ukrainian's food export ecosystem and the advent of a vigorous El Niño in Asian rice bowls.

Noting that an impending spike in rice prices will cause widespread hunger commonly caused by immense hoarding, Timmer suggests that governments should stabilize expectations to prevent a rice crisis with a reasonable interface with market players.

With an in-depth historical perspective, Timmer also analyzes past rice crises and how various states managed these, emphasizing that "the concern should be over the impact of higher rice prices on food security of the poor, not aggregate inflation."

Jose Ma Luis Montesclaros and Paul Teng of Nanyang Technological University Singapore, in their paper "Digital Technology Adoption and Potential in Southeast Asian Agriculture," gave a positive answer to a query about whether digital technologies can play a more prominent role in addressing the ongoing challenges faced by SEA's agriculture in serving as a key sector for food security, income, trade and employment in the region.

Montesclaros and Teng proposed a common framework to understand the nascent digital technology in agriculture, drawing insights on the state of adoption in the region, key challenges and policy opportunities for scaling up.

The authors found that the challenges commonly experienced across the region requiring path-breaking solutions arise from "climate change, degrading and declining land and freshwater resources, pests and diseases, declining crop productivity, high cost of inputs, declining rural labor force and aging farmers."

Role of youth in farming

In "Feeding the Future: Knowledge and Perceptions of the Filipino Youth Toward Agriculture," Kringle Marie Mercado and Henny Osbahr determine the Filipino youth's intention to enroll in agricultural degree programs.

Mercado and Osbahr said the youth has a critical role in sustaining, developing and building a sustainable, resilient and inclusive agriculture industry. Their case study of General Santos City in the Philippines revealed that "while the youth report high exposure to agricultural information, these have not been translated into inherent know-how."

"[The youths have] limited knowledge or familiarity with agricultural professions," the authors said expressing reservations in considering "if employment opportunities in the sector are profitable, if the society will hold them in high regard once they engage in the sector, and if they have the suitable skills and know-how to engage in the sector."

Mercado and Osbahr also noted that "intervention programs, starting early in the curriculums of the youth, along with social programs that highlight capacity building, are necessary to pique their interest toward the industry and entice them to engage in its professions."

Meanwhile, the paper "Transition from Agriculture to Non-Agriculture Occupations in West

Bengal, India: Causes and Way Forward" by Apurba Kumar Chattopadhyay and Raj Kumar Kundu shows that agriculture in West Bengal in India is "nonviable as a primary source of occupation for most agricultural households."

The authors said this leads people in the region to find jobs in the nonfarm sector, that is, outside of agriculture. However, the limited opportunities in rural areas leave them clinging to agriculture and that farm size makes "agriculture viable and sustainable."

They noted that the "average operational landholdings need to increase through reverse tenancy and/or cooperative farming, and through creating gainful employment opportunities in the rural nonfarm sector."

"This will help farm-households to transition from agricultural to nonagricultural occupations," the authors said.

Labor-intensive agriculture and crop conversion

Fayaz Ahmad Lone and co-authors' study titled "Economic and Profitability Analysis of Walnut Production in Kashmir Valley, India" shows that "walnut cultivation is highly labor-intensive as it incurs 80 percent of total production costs."

For Kashmir Valley, the cost-benefit ratio of 1:5.35 per hectare indicates better economic prospects.



The study's statistical analyses indicate ample scope for expanding walnut cultivation in the area. To boost walnut production in the region, the study called for policy intervention to improve access to extension services, credit and farmer training programs.

The paper by Jordan Calura and his co-authors titled "A Soil Analysis Approach to Assessing Potential Loss of Productive Lands Under Agricultural Land Conversion" assessed the "degree of productivity of the agricultural lands in Pura, Tarlac, in the Philippines, which are predisposed to agricultural land conversion."

Their soil surveys and composite soil sampling show that "the soil is only marginally suitable for producing rice and other crops but can be highly suitable for crop production with appropriate soil management."

They noted that Pura's entire tract of land has an index rating that corresponds to soil suitable for planting several crops with expected good results.

The authors also said that the results of the land suitability evaluation and soil productivity assessment further show that the land in Pura is productive and can benefit both agricultural production and agricultural land conversion.

Lastly, the commentary by Colorado State University professor emeritus Robert Zimdahl titled "Institutionalizing Agricultural Ethics," stated that the agricultural science curriculum lacks consideration and study of the effects of agriculture's ethical dilemmas on society.

"Agriculture, the essential human activity and the most widespread human interaction with the environment, needs a defined moral foundation," Zimdahl

said, cautioning that if all elements of the agricultural enterprise do not begin to recognize and address agriculture's ethical dilemmas, three unwelcome outcomes may follow.

Firstly, agriculture practitioners may find their justifications for their technology and production practices ignored; secondly, public unease and dissatisfaction with the known or perceived effects of agricultural technology and its adverse implications will result in increasing societal unrest and pressure for political action; and thirdly, the increasing concentration of food production in the hands of agribusiness companies will continue.

Zimdahl also warned that small farms, farmers and rural communities will gradually disappear.

With the editorial board headed by Cielito Habito, Searca said AJAD publishes articles resulting from empirical, policy-oriented or institutional development studies, as well as articles of perspectives on agriculture and development, political economy of rural development and trade issues.

Habito is a professor of economics at the Ateneo de Manila University and director of the Ateneo Center for Economic Research and Development.

A former Cabinet member of the Philippine government, he served as socioeconomic planning secretary and director general of the National Economic and Development Authority of the Philippines.

Searca said submissions are welcome all year round through <https://ajad.searca.org>, adding that all the new and past papers published in AJAD are available from the same site for free, while print copies are also available through subscription.



EXTENSION OF REDUCED TARIFF ON AGRI PRODUCTS TO HELP MANAGE INFLATION -- NEDA

THE extension of the reduced Most Favored Nation (MFN) tariff rates for key agricultural commodities will help keep prices of food stable, the National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA) said.

Executive Order (EO) 50, issued by President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. on Dec. 22, 2023, extended the reduced MFN tariff rates on pork, corn, and rice until Dec. 31, 2024.

Under the new EO, the tariff rates for pork will remain at 15 percent in-quota and 25 percent out-quota; corn will be at 5 percent in-quota and 15 percent out-quota; and rice at 35 percent for both in-quota and out-quota for the extended period.

NEDA Secretary Arsenio Balisacan said there is a need to diversify market sources to ensure sufficient and affordable food supply in the coun-

try.

Balisacan said this will help reduce the risks and alleviate the inflationary pressures caused by the onset of El Niño, the worsening effects of the African swine fever (ASF), and external pressures such as geopolitical tensions and export bans of some countries.

Balisacan said the reduction in tariff rates helped pull down corn inflation

and broaden sources for rice.

Additional meat importation also helped in reducing meat inflation.

Balisacan cited the importance of implementing programs that will enhance local food production and boost the productivity of farmers.

These crucial strategies include sustained investments in irrigation, flood control, supply chain logis-

tics, and climate change adaptation.

"Short-term and long-term interventions need to work together to protect the purchasing power of Filipino households and boost the productivity and income of local producers. Doing so will ensure equitable and sustainable development for the country," Balisacan said.

PNA



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Soy futures fall

CHICAGO- US soybean futures slid to their lowest level since June on the first trading day of the year, after rains hit dry areas of Brazil and forecasts called for more showers.

A rising dollar also weighed on agricultural markets as it makes US farm products less attractive to importers. Corn set a contract low in front-month futures, and wheat futures also declined.

Favorable Brazilian rains dragged down soybean futures because the country is the world's top supplier of the oilseed.

"We did get improvement in weather," said Don Roose, presi-

dent of brokerage US Commodities in Iowa.

"These dry areas shrunk. The forecast looks like we have more normalized weather for the next 10 days or so."

Hot, dry weather has previously hurt crops in northern growing areas and spurred analysts to lower their harvest forecasts. Agribusiness consultancy StoneX on Tuesday cut its estimate for Brazil's soy crop to 152.8 million metric ton from 161.9 million tons.

"Rains in northern areas are helping to slowly improve moisture and crop conditions," forecaster Maxar said. - Reuters

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Cocoa's biggest gain since 2008 is bad news for chocolate consumers

COCOA'S biggest annual gain in 15 years is bad news for chocolate consumers around the world.

The surge in prices is likely to hit shoppers even harder this year as chocolate makers run out of supplies purchased at lower levels and begin to account for the brunt of the rally. White sugar futures capped a fifth annual gain, adding to the inflation in the sweets aisle.

Relentless rain earlier in 2023 hampered cocoa crops in West Africa and promoted the spread of a pod-withering disease. To make matters worse, an annual windy stretch known as the harmattan has now started, adding to the production threats in the world's top growing region.

The supply worries sent the most-active contract in London up 70 percent to £3,506 a ton in 2023—the biggest yearly gain since 2008. The most-active contract traded as high as £3,588 on December 18.

Cocoa's supply concentration leaves little leeway for alternate growers to fill the gap. Some 60 percent of output comes from just two countries—Ivory Coast and Ghana. Others, like Brazil and Ecuador, are

seeking to expand, although it can take several years for new trees to bear pods.

The rally is also notable for bucking the downturn across other staple crops. The Bloomberg Agriculture Spot Index is down 14 percent in 2023, the most in a decade.

While the seasonal dusty winds setting in could help fieldwork progress, the weather pattern known as El Niño risks exacerbating the dry spell.

In the near-term, lower demand could help cool prices. Still, Rabobank has forecast London futures to stay above £3,000 a ton until the second half of 2024, a historically high level. Buyers in the European Union are also gearing up for new deforestation regulations that are set to add to costs throughout the supply chain.

Cocoa futures in New York are up more than 60 percent in 2023, heading for the biggest gain since 2001.

Analysts said the world's largest chocolate makers are yet to see the full impact of a rally that sent cocoa futures to a 46-year high last month.

Companies including Hershey Co. and Nestle SA usually buy cocoa well in advance.

As supplies run out and prices remain high, chocolate makers are being forced to pay up—a cost they will eventually pass on to consumers.

"It's the most extraordinary situation I've seen in my career," said Jonathan Parkman, the head of agricultural sales at Marex Group, who has followed the cocoa market for more than three decades. "I don't think we've seen the worst of the situation for consumers."

Chocolate prices have already surged 17 percent in the US over the past two years as commodity costs from cocoa to sugar jumped, according to consumer researcher Euromonitor International. And there's no relief in sight, with cocoa production in West Africa—accounting for almost 70 percent of supplies—turning out much worse than expected.

Global supplies are set to fall short of demand for a third year in the season that started in October. Bean deliveries to ports in top grower Ivory Coast are running significantly behind. And that's before dryness from an El Niño weather pattern starts to have an impact on the harvest, drying out the pods that contain the beans

ground for chocolate.

"The pod count coming out of Ivory Coast and Africa has been materially different than what people expected," Luca Zaramella, chief financial officer at Oreo cookies maker Mondelez International Inc., said during an earnings call last month. "There is pressure on cocoa."

Butter surge

TO make matters worse, the run-up in costs of cocoa products—products of bean processing—has been staggering. The price of butter, which accounts for about 20 percent of the weight of an average chocolate bar, has already hit a record, according to KnowledgeCharts, a unit of Commodities Risk Analysis. In top consumer Europe, prices are close to 9,600 euros a metric ton in December, almost 2.5 times the cost of cocoa futures.

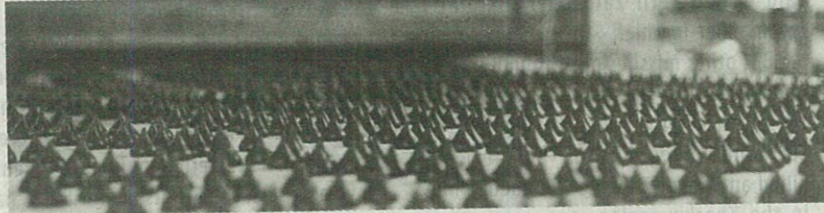
Producing treats including Hershey Kisses and Crunch bars takes months of planning. The butter that made up most of the chocolate sold at Halloween and Christmas was produced when prices were lower. The pressure is now on for Valentine's Day, with both Nestle and Mondelez having already warned they will

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HERSHEY Kisses chocolate candies move along a conveyor at the company's factory in Hershey, Pennsylvania, United States, on March 21, 2023. BLOOMBERG NEWS



need to increase prices again.

"Product prices—liquor and butter—are off the charts, so it's only now feeding to consumers," Parkman said.

Chocolate makers use the futures market to hedge risk, buying cocoa eight to nine months out. Prices are now so high that protection has gone down to six months, according to Marex. In the earnings call, Zaramella said Mondelez was covered for "a good portion" of the first half of 2024.

Lindt & Sprüngli Group raised prices by 9.3 percent on average in the first half of the year. Prices charged by Hershey's North American confectionery unit rose by 11 percent in the third quarter from a year earlier.

Price gains

THE cost increase for cocoa has been "so

significant that it outstrips the slight easing seen in some other raw materials," Lindt said in its half-year presentation.

Chocolate makers are also seeing costs including labor, processing, transporting and marketing increase, according to Carl Quash III, head of snacks and nutrition at Euromonitor. As a result, "we could see chocolate prices continue to grow for years to come," he said.

Cocoa prices are likely to stay high until the new crop arrives in October 2024, potentially cooling the market by almost 20 percent to \$3,500 a ton, said Megan Fisher, a researcher at Capital Economics. Some traders say relief may only come in 2025, when West African farmers will have had enough time to react to price increases.

Bloomberg News