

CLIPPINGS FOR FRIDAY, JANUARY 05, 2024

A. SEC. FTL Jr. QUOTED

PHILIPPINE DAILY INQUIRER

More to come: Agri reshuffling

THE PHILIPPINE STAR

Sebastian also quitting DA after downgrade

MANILA BULLETIN

Laurel revamps DA; Sebastian named adviser

THE MANILA TIMES

Agri chief reshuffles undersecretaries

PH rice imports lower in 2023- DA

MALAYA BUSINESS INSIGHT

PH records lower rice imports in '23

BUSINESS MIRROR

DA reorganization to cover bureaus, regl field offices, too

ABANTE TONITE

Mga agri contractor, supplier babalatan sa korapisyon

PEOPLE'S JOURNAL

DA to unveil game plan on modernizing agriculture

B. DA FAMILY

PHILIPPINE DAILY INQUIRER

Rice still above P50/Kilo

Dearth of information at the DA

THE MANILA TIMES

Sowing the seeds to success

BUSINESS WORLD

Agri export growth hindered by funding, capacity constraints

Rice imports hit 3.48 million MT as of late December

BUSINESS MIRROR

High global prices, low stock pull down PHL rice imports

ABANTE TONITE

Bigas sumipa uli presyo, lagpas P50 per Kilo

PEOPLE'S JOURNAL

BFAR to provide diversification of livelihood for fisherfolk in 2024

C. AGRI-RELATED STORY

MANILA BULLETIN

'Replacing chef Chico' does a great job of highlighting Filipino ingredients

THE MANILA TIMES

Consumer food sales to rise 10%

BUSINESS WORLD

Shopee to offer halal products

PILIPINO STAR NGAYON

Act Agri-Kaagapay, itinatag

D. FOREIGN STORY

MALAYA BUSINESS INSIGHT

Indonesia estimates rice output to drop 46%

Soybeans slide; wheat up



More to come: Agri reshuffling

BIZ BUZZ



After the reassignment of some of its key officials, it seems that the reshuffling at the Department of Agriculture (DA) is far from over. "Further changes in the DA leadership are likely given the temporary nature of certain appointments and the additional workload placed on the shoulder of certain officials," the DA said.

Arnel de Mesa, DA spokesperson, said the agency would also make changes not only at the central office but also at its bureaus and regional offices.

But in a radio interview, De Mesa noted that the retirement of DA Senior Undersecretary **Domingo Panganiban**

last Dec. 31 is the latter's personal decision.

"There are no issues—none at all. He stepped down from his post as a courtesy because we have a new administration," he said.

President Marcos has yet to appoint a replacement for Panganiban.

Earlier, the agency announced that DA Undersecretary **Leocadio Sebastian** is now part of the technical advisory group of Agriculture Secretary **Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr.**

Sebastian had turned over his multiple roles to **U-Nichols Manalo**, now the director of the DA's National Rice Program, aside from being officer in charge (OIC) and director of DA field operations service and the National Corn Program director.

B3

BIZ BUZZ: MORE TO COME: AGRI RESHUFFLING

FROM B1 **Mercedita Som-billa** is undersecretary for DA bureaus while **Agnes Catherine Miranda** is undersecretary for attached agencies and corporations.

Thelma Tolentino was appointed undersecretary designate for finance in concurrent capacity as chief administrative officer and OIC-director of DA's financial and management service.

Drusila Esther Bayate, currently the undersecretary for fisheries, is also handling the policy, planning and regulations unit.

Roger Navarro, as OIC undersecretary, is assigned as OIC at the Office of the Undersecretary for Rice Industry Development; Office of the National Project Director; Philippine Rural Development Project; and Office of the Assistant Secretary for Operations.

Amid the leadership changes, the DA formed a team—led by Manalo—that will address concerns and requests and facilitate document submissions to the Office of the President-Presidential Management Staff. —**JORDEENE B. LAGARE**

'Modernized' agri sector
The DA started its year with yet another promise of "modernizing" the sector and boosting farm production capacity and contribution to the domestic economy.

Agriculture Secretary Laurel made the fresh commitment on Tuesday, urging his employees to "focus on the challenge of producing more food for Filipinos" ahead of the El Niño dry spell phenomenon.

But perhaps it is also an effort to boost his image.

During the DA's flag ceremony, Laurel said 2024 "will be a very challenging year."

"As I told you last time, all eyes are trained on us, more on me probably, because I'm the new agriculture secretary," he said. "The entire country expects that we could feed them and that we will try to bring

commodity prices down."

Since Laurel replaced President Marcos at the helm of the DA in November, the agency said it had inaugurated new irrigation facilities and consulted stakeholders "to determine a better course of action and father support to achieve [the President's] vision."

The agriculture chief also hinted at a new program coming in the next 10 days that is expected to provide "more timely" farm and market statistics.

As Laurel himself said, all eyes are on the DA—or him, actually—to see whether these projects will come to life and improve the country's agriculture sector, which is among the industries that may suffer the most during El Niño. —**MEG J. ADONIS INQ**



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Sebastian also quitting DA after downgrade

By **BELLA CARIASO**

Another senior official of the Department of Agriculture (DA) opted to retire amid the ongoing major reshuffle being implemented by Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr.

DA spokesperson Arnel de Mesa confirmed yesterday that Agriculture Undersecretary Leocadio Sebastian will retire effective Feb. 1 after he was replaced as undersecretary for rice industry development by officer-in-charge Roger Navarro.

Laurel issued Special Order No. 1 downgrading the position of Sebastian to a member of the secretary's technical advisory group.

Former agriculture senior undersecretary Domingo Panganiban also chose to retire from government service amid

the reorganization at the DA. His retirement took effect on Jan. 1.

De Mesa maintained that the retirement of both Panganiban and Sebastian was their own decision.

"It was their own decision to retire,"
Turn to Page 4



TAN. CS, 2024

PAGE: 124

Sebastian From Page 1

nothing (controversial, rift with the DA), there is nothing. This is (a normal course) since we have a new administration, so this is part of courtesy and others are (part) of the decision of the Secretary," he said.

De Mesa said that the reorganization is part of efforts to ensure an efficient operation and management of the DA.

"We expect additional movement not only in the central office but also the bureaus and regional offices," he added.

According to De Mesa, it is up to President Marcos if he will appoint another senior undersecretary after the retirement of Panganiban, but Laurel can recommend.

De Mesa said that at present, there are six remaining undersecretaries of the DA following the retirement of Panganiban and Sebastian.

Laurel has also formed a team at the DA that is solely authorized to prepare communications with the Office of the President (OP).

SO 8 appointed Field Operation Service OIC director U-Nichols Manalo as team leader of the OP-Presidential Management Staff Concerns with Michael Sollera as co-team leader.

De Mesa assured the public of improved services of the DA.

"Definitely you can expect changes in the policy towards the goal of improvement in our response and the implementation of various programs," he said.

Rice prices up

The retail price of rice has further increased in the latter part of December 2023 as the upward trend in the cost of the staple food is expected to persist this 2024, according to De Mesa.

He added that imported rice continues to go up in the international market as it reached more than \$600 per metric ton (MT).

"The regular (milled rice) ranged between P50 and P53 (per kilo). Same with well-milled rice, it is also increasing," De Mesa said.

He admitted that the arrival of 495,000 MT of imported rice will not help bring down the

retail cost of the grains because the existing price in the international market is also high.

Based on monitoring of the DA in Metro Manila markets, the retail price of local regular milled rice was sold as high as P53 per kilo; local well-milled rice, P56 per kilo; local premium rice, P62 per kilo; local special rice, P68 per kilo; imported well-milled rice, P56 per kilo; imported premium rice, P61 per kilo and imported special rice, P65 per kilo.

De Mesa, however, gave assurance of enough supply despite the high retail price of rice.

"With the arrival of 3.5 million MT, plus the local harvest of more than 20 million MT, we have about 80 to 90 days inventory after December," he said.

He added that about 100,000 MT of the total have already arrived.

Latest data from the Bureau of Plant Industry showed that a total of 3.48 million MT of rice imports arrived in the country last year, as of Dec. 28.

This is lower than the 3.826 million MT imported in 2022.

De Mesa added that the country needs to secure the rice stocks amid the possible impact of the El Niño phenomenon.

"We know that we will have El Niño. We have additional challenges in our level of productivity and we need to ensure we have enough supply during the El Niño," he noted.

At the same time, De Mesa said that the P30.8 billion additional funds earmarked for the DA will help minimize the impact of El Niño.

"Definitely, it will be a big help as it will provide additional direct assistance to the farmers in terms of inputs, fertilizers, seeds and machineries. This is on top of the regular Rice Competitiveness Enhancement Fund of P10 billion every year plus the excess collection that can be given directly to the farmers," he said.

The P30.8 billion was allotted to the National Rice Program of the DA under the 2024 General Appropriations Act.

- With Catherine Talavera



Date: JAN. 05, 2024 Page: 1 of 10

Laurel revamps DA; Sebastian named adviser

By GABRIEL CHRISTEL GALANG

Two months after assuming his post, Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. instituted a major revamp at the Department of Agriculture (DA) in a bid to align the agency more closely with President Marcos' directive to enhance its

operations.

On Thursday, Jan. 4, Laurel issued a statement announcing the reorganization at the DA.

Earlier this week, Laurel issued a series of special orders to reassign key DA officials, aiming to optimize their skills and extensive expertise.

►10

Laurel revamps DA; Sebastian named adviser 1◀

Notably, senior Agriculture Undersecretary Leocadio Sebastian was appointed as a member of the Secretary's Technical Advisory Group to utilize his extensive knowledge of the agriculture sector, particularly in rice production.

In February 2023, Sebastian was appointed as undersecretary for the Rice Industry Development Program.

He also served on the board of the Philippine Rice Research Institute, participated in the National Food Authority Council, and acted as a trustee on the boards of the National Irrigation Administration and the International Rice Research Institute.

"Sebastian will have to give up those multiple roles following his appointment as adviser to Secretary Tiu Laurel Jr.," the DA said.

In his place, Agriculture U. Nichols Manalo was appointed as the director of the national rice program, which he will hold concurrently with his roles as director IV, officer-in-charge-director of field operations service, and director of the national corn program.

Meanwhile, Agriculture Assistant Secretary Arnel de Mesa was designated as full-time spokesman of the DA.

OIC-Undersecretary for Operations Roger Navarro, an engineer, will serve as OIC-Undersecretary for Rice Industry Development, OIC-national project director of the Philippine Rural Development Project, and OIC-Assistant Secretary for Operations.

Agriculture Undersecretary for Fisheries Drusila Esther Bayate was appointed as undersecretary for Policy, Planning and Regulations concurrently.

Agriculture Undersecretary Mercedita Sombilla, meanwhile, was tasked with overseeing operations and coordinating programs of the DA Bureaus.

Chief Administrative Officer and OIC director for financial and management service Thelma Tolentino was designated as Undersecretary-designate for Finance.

Agriculture Undersecretary Agnes Catherine Miranda was assigned to

supervise operations and coordinate programs of DA attached agencies and corporations.

Laurel Jr. also created a team to address concerns, requests, and facilitate submissions of the DA to the Office of the President-Presidential Management Staff.

"Further changes in the DA leadership are likely, given the temporary nature of certain appointments and the additional work load placed on the shoulder of certain officials," the DA said.

New game plan

Laurel had earlier said that there would be a new strategy to modernize agriculture.

He said the plan would benefit the local economy, enhance the livelihoods of farmers and fisherfolk, and potentially inspire more individuals to pursue careers in agriculture.

He admitted that the year 2024, with the looming threat of the El Niño phenomenon, will be "a very challenging year."

"As I told you last time, all eyes are trained on us, more on me probably because I'm the new agriculture secretary," Laurel told employees at the DA.

He also said that full cooperation is a must in addressing the food production challenge, especially as the El Niño phenomenon approaches in the first quarter of 2024.

"The entire country expects that we could feed them and that we will try to bring commodity prices down," he added.

The DA is also expected to achieve food security and lessen food production imports.

Since the beginning of his term in November, Laurel has met with various agriculture officials, farmers, fisherfolk, and stakeholders, as well as inaugurated new irrigation and other facilities.

"[This] determines a better course of action and gathers support to achieve President Ferdinand Marcos' vision of a modern farm sector and better lives for farmers and fishermen,"

DA reported.

Subsequently, the agriculture chief emphasized the need for timely farm and market statistics and other modern technologies like enhancing farm mechanization.

"Very soon, we will have that program – possibly in the next 10 days – that we will cascade to everyone," he said.

"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 Marcos. And we also have to change the perception of Filipinos that we can produce more food for our country," the DA chief added.

The increased local production would bring money to the pockets of Filipino farmers and fisherfolk instead of relying on commodities sourced abroad.

The agriculture chief believes, "this would fuel investment in the agriculture sector that employs four in every 10 Filipinos."



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Agri chief reshuffles undersecretaries

BY JANINE ALEXIS MIGUEL

AGRICULTURE Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel has reassigned key officials of the agency in a major reshuffle.

Laurel said the reassignments were "meant to more efficiently carry out President Ferdinand Marcos Jr.'s marching orders."

Director U-Nichols Manalo was named director of the national rice program, replacing Senior Undersecretary Leocadio Sebastian, who was appointed as member of the Secretary's Technical Advisory Group.

In February last year, Sebastian was appointed undersecretary for the Rice Industry Development Program. He also headed the steering committee of the Rice Competitiveness Enhancement Fund Program, was in the board of the Philippine Rice Research

Institute, participated in the National Food Authority Council; and was trustee in the boards of the National Irrigation Administration and the International Rice Research Institute.

Manalo will now hold these positions, concurrently as Director 4 and officer in charge (OIC)-director of field operations service, and director of the national corn program.

Undersecretary for Operations Roger Navarro will be the OIC-Undersecretary for Rice Industry Development, OIC-national project director of the Philippine Rural Development Project, and OIC-Assistant Secretary for Operations.

Undersecretary Mercedita Sombilla was assigned to oversee operations and coordinate programs of the DA bureaus. She previously oversees the policy, planning and regulations of the department.

Undersecretary Drusila Esther Bayate was named Undersecretary for Policy, Planning and Regulations, from her position as undersecretary for fisheries.

Chief Administrative Officer and OIC director for financial and management service Thelma Tolentino was appointed in current capacity as undersecretary-designate for Finance.

Undersecretary Agnes Catherine Miranda will now oversee the department's attached agencies, bureaus and corporations.

Assistant Secretary Arnel de Mesa remains as the full time spokesman of the DA.

Laurel also ordered the creation of a team which will address the concerns, requests, and facilitate

submissions of DA to the Office of the President-Presidential Management Staff (OP-PMS).

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

He also designated Alvin John Balagbag as head executive assistant and chief of staff, replacing Rex Estoperez.

Senior Undersecretary Domingo Panganiban opted to retire after more than a year of his appointment in August 2022.

He also served as the Agriculture chief under Presidents Joseph Estrada and Gloria Macapagal Arroyo.

The DA said further changes in the department's leadership "are likely given the temporary nature of certain appointments and the additional work load placed on the shoulder of certain officials."



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PH rice imports lower in 2023 – DA

RICE imports just before the end of 2023 were down on an annual basis and the full-year volume most likely ended lower, the Department of Agriculture (DA) said on Thursday.

Data from the DA's Bureau of Plant Industry (BPI) showed inbound shipments at 3.48 million metric tons (MT) as of December 28, down 8.96 percent from the 3.82 million MT of the same period in 2022.

For December alone, however, rice imports totaled 387,208.86 MT, much higher than the 299,714.868 MT a year earlier. This was still well below the 2023 peak of 516,895.173 MT in April.

DA spokesman Arnel de Mesa told reporters that the volume would still change but the "difference is not [expected to be] that big."

The BPI said that Vietnam remained the country's top source of rice, having shipped 2.93 million MT or 84.26 percent of total imports.

Thailand followed with 297,198.10 MT, Myanmar with 143,913 MT and Pakistan with 86,100.71 MT. India also shipped 13,758.79 MT of rice to the country.

The remaining volume, 6,963.12 MT, was shared by Cambodia, China, Japan, Taiwan, Italy and Spain.

In September, the United States Department of Agriculture named the Philippines as the world's top rice importer. It projected the country's rice imports to reach 3.8 million MT for the 2023-2024 marketing, surpassing China's 3.5 million MT.

The DA announced last Friday that about 450,000 MT of rice imported by the private sector was due to arrive between December 2023 and early February as part of an agreement between Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. and traders.

Of the expected volume, around 100,000 MT was said to have already arrived in the country.

With the arrival of imported rice and local harvests of more than 20 million MT, de Mesa said the country would have sufficient supplies of the staple until the next harvest season in March.

► Lower B3

■ LOWER FROM B1

PH rice

"[W]hat will happen is that we have about 80 to 90 days of national inventory after December," he added.

De Mesa also noted that high international prices and the impact of the El Niño weather pattern remained a concern.

"We really need to secure the supply ... there will be additional challenges on our level of productivity," he added.

JANINE ALEXIS MIGUEL



SRP MULLED

PH records lower rice imports in '23

BY JED MACAPAGAL

AS much as 3.48 million metric tons (MT) of imported rice have arrived in the country as of Dec. 28, 2023, data from the Bureau of Plant Industry's National Plant Quarantine Services Division showed.

The volume is 9 percent lower compared to the 3.83 million MT recorded in full year 2022.

Vietnam remains the top supplier of rice imports at 2.94 million MT or 84 percent of all arrivals for the period.

In 2022, Vietnam supplied the Philippines with 3.18 million MT equivalent to 83 percent of all imported rice that arrived in the country for the year.

Other top suppliers of imported rice to the Philippines last year are: Myanmar, 244,738.18 MT, 6.4 percent; Pakistan, 198,912.68 MT, 5.2 percent and; Thailand, 183,230.38 MT, 4.79 percent.

The Department of Agriculture (DA) earlier said 495,000 MT of rice imported by the private sector were due to arrive between December 2023 and early February 2024 in compliance with the

agreement between Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. and holders of import permits.

The DA said 76,000 MT of rice from Taiwan and India are also scheduled to arrive until this month.

National rice consumption is around 36,000 MT per day or around 1.08 million MT per month.

Based on DA's monitoring of public markets in the National Capital Region, the price as of yesterday of local well-milled rice was P40 to P55 per kg and regular milled, P50 to P53 per kg.

The price of imported well milled rice was at P51 to P56 per kg.

Imported rice ranges from P58 to P65 for the special variety and P54 to P62 for premium.

For local rice, the special variety costs P54 to P68 per kg and premium, P50 to P62 per kg.

Meanwhile, DA spokesman Arnel de Mesa said the agency will consult with stakeholders on whether or not a suggested retail price on rice should be imposed.

Laurel issued earlier this week a series of special orders reassigning certain key DA officials which he said will "better harness their

talents and vast experience."

Senior Agriculture Undersecretary Leocadio Sebastian will now serve as adviser to Laurel.

Sebastian will relinquish his multiple roles including as undersecretary for the rice industry development program, which allowed him to head the steering committee of the rice competitiveness enhancement fund program; a seat in the board of the Philippine Rice Research Institute; participation in the National Food Authority Council; and as a trustee in the boards of the National Irrigation Administration and the International Rice Research Institute.

DA director U-Nichols Manalo was named director of the national rice program, a position that he will hold concurrent to his position as director IV and officer-in-charge-director of field operations service and director of the national corn program.

De Mesa was also designated as full-time spokesman of the DA.

Officer-in-charge (OIC) undersecretary for operations Roger Navarro will also act as OIC-undersecretary for rice industry development program, OIC-national

project director of the Philippine rural development project and OIC-assistant secretary for operations.

Undersecretary for fisheries Drusila Esther Bayate was named undersecretary for policy, planning and regulations in a concurrent capacity while undersecretary Mercedita Sombilla was assigned to oversee operations and coordinate programs of the DA bureaus.

Chief administrative officer and OIC-director for financial and management service Thelma Tolentino was appointed in current capacity as undersecretary-designate for finance as undersecretary Agnes Catherine Miranda was tasked to supervise, oversee operations and coordinate programs of DA attached agencies and corporations.

Laurel also created a team that will address concerns and requests and facilitate submissions of the DA to the Office of the President-Presidential Management Staff.

Laurel said further changes in the DA leadership will have to be made given the temporary nature of certain appointments and the additional work load placed on the shoulder of certain officials.

Date: JAN. 05, 2024 Page: A2



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DA reorganization to cover bureaus, regl field offices, too

By JASPER EMMANUEL Y. ARCALAS

@jearcalas

THE revamp at the Department of Agriculture (DA)—involving key heads of its bureaus and regional field offices—will continue in the near future as it seeks to create a more “efficient” management team aimed at improving policy and project deliveries.

Agriculture Assistant Secretary and Spokesperson Arnel De Mesa said the reorganization that Agriculture Secretary Francisco P. Tiñ Laurel Jr. at the DA is not only confined within its central office.

“May mga additional pa pong paggalaw. Hindi lamang po sa central office kung hindi hanggang sa bureaus at regional offices,” De

Mesa said in a radio interview on Thursday.

(There will be additional movements. Not only at the central office but also across the bureaus and the regional offices)

De Mesa explained that the reorganization being undertaken by Laurel is meant to make the department's delivery of programs

Date: JAN. 05, 2024 Page: A2



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and policies "more effective and efficient."

In a separate statement, the DA confirmed that there would be "further changes" in its leadership given the "temporary" nature of certain appointments and the "additional work load placed on the shoulder of certain officials."

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. (Related story: <https://businessmirror.com.ph/2024/01/03/laurel-reshuffles-senior-agriculture-officials/>)

Retirement, no other issues

DE MESA explained that the reshuffling at the DA was not caused by any issues that are being faced by any officials at its leadership. He noted that the reorganization is purely administrative in the part of the DA's new leadership under Laurel.

For one, De Mesa disclosed that Agriculture Undersecretary Leocadio S. Sebastian is set to retire at the end of the month. With his impending retirement, Laurel decided to appoint Sebastian as part of the secre-

tary's technical advisory group or STAG.

With the movements at the DA leadership, De Mesa said farmers and the public could expect better policies aimed at modernizing the agriculture sector toward a more food secure country.

"Definitely you can expect changes in our policies toward the goal of improving our responses and implementation of programs. You can expect improvements in our programs, policies, and guidelines," he said.

Laurel earlier disclosed that the DA, under his leadership, would unveil a new "game plan" that would "modernize" the country's food production systems.

"Very soon, we will have that program—possibly in the next 10 days—that we will cascade to everyone," he said last January 2.

"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 Marcos. And we also have to change the perception of Filipinos that we can produce more food for our country," he added.



Mga agri contractor, supplier babalatan sa korupsiyon

Bumuo ng isang komite si Department of Agriculture (DA) Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. na susuri sa mga mga consultant, suppliers, at contractors at magsisilbing 'blacklisting body' ng kagawaran.

Sa DA Special Order No. 11 na pinirmahan nitong Enero 4, 2024 (Biyernes), bumuo ng dalawang grupo si Laurel.

Isang grupo ang tututok sa mga reklamo na isasampa habang nasa pro-

curement stage pa lamang ang bidding. Tututukan naman ng isa pang grupo ang mga reklamo kapag nasa contract implementation na ang bidding.

Parehong pamumunuan ni Atty. Willie Ann M. Angsiy, na director ng Legal Service ng DA, ang dalawang grupo. Pareho rin ang vice chairperson nito na si Atty. Melinda D.

Deyton na hepe ng Procurement Division ng DA.

Tungkulin ng komite na timbangin at suriin ang mga reklamo at alamin kung may sapat na dahilan para sa blacklisting. Trabaho rin nilang mangalap ng ebidensiyang magpapatunay sa mga reklamo at magsagawa ng pagdinig.

Titimbangin din ng

komite kung may sapat na dahilan para irekomenda ang suspensiyon, pagbawi ng kontrata o pag-forfeit ng bid security.

Obligado ang komite na maglabas ng resolusyon kung saan ilalagay ang findings at rekomendasyon nito sa loob ng 30 araw pagkatanggap ng reklamo. **(Eileen Mencias)**



DA to unveil game plan on modernizing agriculture

THE Department of Agriculture is set to unveil next week its strategy to modernize agriculture and boost the farm sector's production capacity and contribution to the domestic economy, especially in improving the lives of farmers and fisherfolk as well as creating more jobs, Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. announced on Tuesday.

Speaking at the agency's weekly flag ceremony, Laurel rallied

the DA employees to focus on the challenge of producing more food for Filipinos even as the country faces a prolonged dry spell in the first part of the year.

"2024 is a new year and it will be a very challenging year. As I told you last time, all eyes are trained on us, more on me probably because I'm the new agriculture secretary," Tiu Laurel said. "The entire country expects that we could feed them

and that we will try to bring commodity prices down."

Tiu Laurel enjoined DA employees to stay focused on the goal of modernizing the country's agriculture sector to achieve food security and lessen agricultural imports. "We can do this. But I need your help, I need your full cooperation for the DA to achieve its goals."

Since taking the helm of the agriculture portfolio in November,

Tiu Laurel has visited various DA offices around the country. He broke ground and inaugurated new irrigation and other facilities, and consulted local officials, farmers, fisherfolk and other agriculture stakeholders to determine a better course of action and gather support to achieve President Ferdinand Marcos' vision of a modern farm sector and better lives for farmers and fishermen.



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DA CITES GLOBAL MARKET PRICE

RICE STILL ABOVE P50/KILO LEVELS; NO DIP IN SIGHT

By **Jordeene B. Lagare**
@jordeenelagare

year ago, based on the department's price monitoring.

Rice is still being sold for more than P50 per kilo since November last year, and the Department of Agriculture (DA) is not expecting retail prices of the staple to go down anytime soon.

In an interview on Thursday, DA spokesperson Arnel de Mesa said that since prices in the global market remained high at about \$600 per metric ton, "We cannot expect that the price will significantly decrease."

"Hopefully, we can source rice from abroad at cheaper prices because imports from Vietnam and Thailand are quite expensive," De Mesa added.

But he explained that the DA was monitoring the situation and exerting efforts to ensure sufficient supply that can tide the country over in view of the El Niño phenomenon.

Metro Manila monitoring

"As of now, what we are expecting ... we're in the lean season from January to mid-February. We're waiting for the rice to be harvested between March and April," the DA official said.

The upcoming harvest and the arrival of fresh imports should temper price spikes, De Mesa added.

In Metro Manila as of Thursday, public markets are selling local regular milled rice from P50 to P53 per kilo, higher than P34 to P40 per kilo a

Farm-gate price

Locally produced well-milled rice is priced from P40 to P55 per kilo, also higher than previous range of P38 to P44 per kilo.

Imported regular milled rice is currently not available in the metropolis, but last year it was sold from P37 to P38 per kilo.

Imported well-milled rice ranged from P51 to P56 per kilo, compared to P40 to P44 per kilo last year.

The retail price of rice is usually at least double the farm-gate price (or the selling price between farmers and traders) of palay, or the unhusked grain. The farm-gate price is largely influenced by traders.

Mostly from Vietnam

For years, the Philippines has heavily relied on importation to fill the supply gap, as local production could not meet the country's full requirements.

De Mesa said the local supply of rice mostly comes from farmers who sell at P19 to P22 per kilo.

Last year, the country imported rice amounting to 3.5 million MT (as of Dec. 28), based on the figures from the Bureau of Plant Industry.

The majority came from Vietnam, accounting for 2.9 million MT of the total, while Thailand and Myanmar supplied 297,198.10 MT and 143,913 MT, respectively. INQ



Dearth of information at the DA

Without the relevant and necessary information, our agriculture industry is destined to continue its precipitous decline. Looking at the first three quarters of the last two years, we have had no agriculture growth. For 2022 and 2023, growth was only at 0.23 percent and 0.16 percent, respectively.

There is a dearth of good agriculture-related information. In 1997, the Agriculture and Fisheries Modernization Act legally mandated the creation of a marketing information network. After more than 20 years, this aspect of the law has not been complied with.

For 2023, the information budget originally submitted by the Department of Agriculture's (DA) Agribusiness and Marketing Assistance Service (AMAS) was only 0.7 percent of the industry's total budget.

When an Alyansa Agrikultura leader objected, the DA doubled the amount, albeit for a measly P10 million. Think about this if the agriculture budget is already P160 billion!

For 2024, DA-AMAS increased this to only P33 million. This shows the lack of appreciation and understanding of the critical need for good information.

But what is worse is that when this information is available, it is sometimes withheld from decision makers. In the end, corruption will always win.

A look into the 21 DA-approved agriculture subsector road maps showed a lack of market information about these subsectors. This alone already inhibits good planning.

Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. has consistently pointed out this lack of information in other

COMMENTARY

ERNESTO M. ORDOÑEZ

agriculture-related areas. He is now taking concrete steps to correct such deficiency.

Info gap

Two examples show the significant impact of undisclosed information.

Since the practice of providing a complete list of DA-funded projects to the regions for private sector monitoring by the Agriculture and Fisheries Councils (AFCs) was stopped, massive corruption flourished.

And in the last three years, the Commission on Audit has consistently reported unliquidated and unexplained expenses in the DA amounting to one-third of its total budget.

So far, this practice has not been restored, despite being highlighted as a conditionality of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) based on a Feb. 7 document.

Another example relates to the committee against smuggling (that allowed the private sector to access import information), which successfully reduced the smuggling rate by 25 percent in the past.

Because it was too successful as it was able to catch the "big fish," it was eventually abolished.

As expected, smuggling increased the next year by 105 percent. The restoration of this committee, also an RCEP conditionality, has also not been actualized.

Force multipliers

Last Jan. 3, Elias Jose Inciong, president of the United Broiler Raisers Association, mentioned

that the military concept of "force multiplier" is applicable to our information crisis.

ChatGPT states that this is "a factor that increases the effectiveness of a force or effect. It can be a technology, strategy, or any element that enhances the overall impact."

It had already been shown that releasing the complete list of DA-funded projects for private sector monitoring decreased corruption. In addition, creative ideas from the private sector improved efficiency in the budget use.

If we now use technology, strategy and the element of community as "force multipliers," the benefit of information will be greatly enhanced.

Using internet and technology, including social media, information on DA-funded projects will be easily accessible. Using the strategy of distributing this not only to selected AFCs but also to all affected municipalities will achieve widespread accessibility. And by using the element of community, different nongovernment organizations, such as rotary clubs and church-supported groups, can all monitor DA budget use.

With the force multipliers of technology, strategy and community, the information will have the enhanced impact of influencing decisions and preventing corruption.

Our agriculture development will now have a better chance of succeeding. **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.



KEVIN WAYNE BAGA AND ANA CRISTINA GUIANG Owners KA-Bukid Propagation Farm

Sowing the seeds to success





Agriculturists-couple leave jobs to start profitable seedling production

BY LEILANIE ADRIANO

TWO young farmers in Batac City, Ilocos Norte, now find fulfillment in being engaged in farming after leaving their respective jobs in 2022.

Kevin Wayne Baga, 27, and his girlfriend, Ana Cristina Guiang, 26, are owners of KA-Bukid Propagation Farm, which produces seedlings for local farmers to grow. Both are licensed agriculturists who believe that farmers need quality seedlings to maximize the potential of their produce.

Located just a few meters along the Manila North Road in Sitio Nagabaan, the farm won in the 2021 Young Farmers Challenge Fund program of the Department of Agriculture. Using their P100,000 grand prize as startup capital, the two set up the seedling nursery within a 2,000-square-meter agricultural lot owned by Baga's grandmother.

Baga used to work in a private seed company and agri-machinery firm, while Guiang taught short-term agriculture courses offered by the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority.

As both realized seedling propagation needs tender loving care, they took a risk and quit their jobs

to pursue a livelihood in agriculture.

"We never regret our decision because we love our job, and we are happy helping our fellow farmers," Baga and Guiang said.

Like in any enterprise, Guiang said one must be "hands on" to make it work.

"You need to focus and think of ways to make it a profitable venture," she added.

Aside from serving walk-in clients or joining agri-trade fairs to establish a network with clients, the KA-Bukid Farm is also active on social media where they post their ready-to-plant seedlings such as tomatoes, eggplant, sweet and hot pepper, papaya, fruit-bearing trees and ornamentals, among others.

They are also open for reservation, pickup and delivery as they propagate high-value seedlings all year round. To date, the nursery has a capacity of 1,600 trays. Each tray is sold at P250.

"It is a good business because you

just don't earn for money, you can help farmers, too, by ensuring that the seedlings they are planting are free from pests and diseases," Guiang said, as cited that the farm has also become a source of sustainable livelihood to their elderly kin Norma Rayosa, 65, and Romula Clemente, 60.

"Seedling propagation is quite an easy and fulfilling job even for seniors like us," said Lola Norma, as she went about her work in the nursery.

Both she and Clemente sometimes help in harvesting vegetables at the production area as they grow high-value crops.

With a high demand for quality seedlings among Ilocos farmers, the KA-Bukid Farm plans to expand the nursery to cater to more clients in nearby provinces like Ilocos Sur, Cagayan and Apayao.

The farm is also being eyed as a learning site for practical agriculture. The process of accreditation with the Agricultural Training Institute is ongoing.



YOUNG FARMERS Kevin Wayne Baga and his girlfriend, Ana Cristina Guiang, at their KA-Bukid Propagation Farm in Batac City, Ilocos Norte. They specialize in seedling production for local farmers to grow. PHOTO BY LEILANIE G. ADRIANO

The Manila Times®

Date: JAN. 05, 2024 Page: B8



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We
never regret
our decision
because
we love our
job, and we
are happy
helping
our fellow
farmers.”



Agri export growth hindered by funding, capacity constraints

By Adrian H. Halili
Reporter

AGRICULTURAL EXPORT growth will continue to be constrained by limited output and funding to develop the high-value crop sector, farmers said.

"Our problem with exports goes back to our problems in producing high-quality and competitively priced products on a consistent and sustainable basis, and in a way that is profitable for our farmers and market players," Federation of Free Farmers National Manager Raul Q. Montemayor said in a Viber message.

Former Agriculture Undersecretary Fermin D. Adriano blamed the lack of funds allocated for high-value crops, as against the attention paid to rice production.

The Department of Agriculture (DA) has set aside about P31 billion in 2024 to improve rice production.

"For as long as research and development and extension services receive a pittance, and the DA does not properly play its role of training our agri-exporters on (sanitary and phytosanitary) standards of the various rich importing countries, export growth potential will be constrained," Mr. Adriano said in a Viber message.

The DA has announced the preparation of a Philippine Agricultural Export Development Plan to increase exports of agriculture and fisheries products.

"Despite all the supposed concessions we gained from trade negotiations, our agricultural trade deficit has continued to increase, especially since our competitors are racing far ahead of us," Mr. Montemayor added.

Agricultural exports declined 13.3% to \$1.61 billion

during the third quarter, accounting for 8.2% of total exports, according to the Philippine Statistics Authority.

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

He said that the DA needs to identify products to focus on for export while setting up a support system covering the process from production to domestic and international markets.

"*Malaking trabaho* (It's a big job) but there are many success stories, which we just need to promote and expand," Mr. Montemayor added.

Meanwhile, Roy S. Kempis, a retired Pampanga State Agricultural University professor, said that agriculture products like mango, avocado, and durian are on demand in global markets but can benefit from further support.

"Philippine mango is preferred for its sweetness, texture and appropriate amount of fiber both in the export and domestic markets," Mr. Kempis said in a Viber message, citing the potential for expanding the crop.

He added that the government could increase farmland dedicated to avocado and durian.

Mr. Kempis said technical and management training is needed by producers and exporters.

He said increasing the planting area, improving pest management and irrigation systems, and building community processing areas, will support the growth of such exportable crops, as will more access to credit.

"Exporting and financial literacy are two other areas that agriculture and food producers and exporters could be trained in," he added.



Rice imports hit 3.48 million MT as of late December

THE PHILIPPINES imported 3.48 million metric tons (MT) of rice in 2023 as of late December, according to the Bureau of Plant Industry (BPI).

Rice imports in December up to the 28th of the month totaled 387.21 thousand MT, up 29.19% from a year earlier.

The Department of Agriculture (DA) said for the entirety of 2023, imports are expected to total 3.65 million MT, or below the 3.8 million MT projected by the US Department of Agriculture.

The DA has said that about 500,000 MT of rice are expected

to arrive in December and January as the government seeks to build reserves for the peak of El Niño.

El Niño is expected to intensify between January and May, affecting about 63 provinces with droughts and dry spells, according to the government weather service, known as PAGASA (Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration).

The BPI reported that Vietnam remained the Philippines' top supplier of rice with 84.27% of total imports. Shipments from

Vietnam are expected to hit 2.94 million MT.

Thailand supplied 297.2 thousand MT and Myanmar 143.92 thousand MT.

The DA said that 75 thousand MT of rice was set to arrive from India by early January, part of a 295,00 MT rice allocation India granted the Philippines in October.

The Indian government issued the quota for non-basmati white rice to the Philippines. It had earlier banned all exports of non-basmati white rice to stabilize its domestic supply.

Arrivals from India have amounted to 13,758 MT, as of Dec. 28.

Meanwhile, the BPI has issued 824 sanitary and phytosanitary import clearances (SPSICs) for December covering the import of about 660.01 thousand MT of rice.

Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel, Jr. said he has instructed traders to use up their SPSICs for an additional 1 million MT of rice. The DA has imposed a 30-day deadline for traders to use their permits. —

Adrian H. Halili



High global prices, low stock pull down PHL rice imports

By JASPER EMMANUEL Y. ARCALAS @jearcalas

THE Philippines's rice imports in 2023 declined by nearly 9 percent on an annual basis to nearly 3.5 million metric tons (MMT) due to volatile global market conditions such as higher prices and lower supply.

Latest Bureau of Plant Industry (BPI) data showed that the country imported 3.483 MMT of rice last year, compared to the record-high 3.826 MMT volume in 2022.

Despite the 343,000 MT difference, the Philippines's rice imports last year was its second biggest volume in history, especially given the liberalized rice trade regime era that began in 2019.

BPI data showed that 143 eligible private traders and importers brought in 3.483 MMT of rice last year, led by Bly Agri Venture Trading with a total import volume of 262,248 MT.

The entity was followed by Orion Free Enterprise Inc. and Davao Solar Best Corp., which imported 230,271.88 MT and 222,768 MT of rice, respectively.

As always, Vietnam remained as the country's top rice supplier, cornering about 84 percent of the total import volume or about 2.935 MMT, based on BPI data.

It was followed by Thailand at 297,198.1 MT and Myanmar at 143,913 MT, BPI data showed.

BPI data also showed the Philippines imported rice from these countries: Pakistan (86,100.71 MT), India (13,758.79 MT), Cambodia (3,615 MT), China (1,560 MT), Taiwan (1,250 MT), Japan (524.8 MT), Italy (12.36 MT) and Spain (0.96 MT).

High prices over volume

PUNDITS have emphasized that higher global rice prices were one of, if not the primary reason behind the fall in the country's rice imports last year.

The global rice market was shocked by India's imposition of an export ban on non-Basmati rice varieties, sending average quotations for the grain through the roof.

Nonetheless, the Philippines imported above 3 MMT of rice for the second time in history. The United States Department of Agriculture

(USDA) earlier projected that the Philippines would import 3.8 MMT in 2023.

However, agriculture officials were confident that the country's total rice imports last year won't hit 3.8 MMT primarily because of the higher global rice prices.

"Despite this [import volume] we still had a rice crisis last August to September, which indicates that the local deficit is actually increasing and imports are being tempered only because of high international prices," Federation of Free Farmers National Manager Raul Q. Montemayor told the BUSINESSMIRROR.

Montemayor said the growth of the local rice output has been lackluster to meet the country's growing needs for the staple.

"Population growth is outstripping production growth. So the deficit is increasing every year. And based on our studies of [Philippine Statistics Authority] data, even the claims of DA of improved production are overstated," he said.

Philippine Chamber of Agriculture and Food Inc. President Danilo V. Fausto noted that the "slight" improvement in domestic rice output contributed also to the decline in the country's overall rice imports last year.

Nevertheless, Fausto cautioned that the 3.5 MMT of imported rice would "only ensure" the country has sufficient stocks of staple food but would not guarantee cheaper prices as the global rice prices remain elevated.

No immediate reprieve

AGRICULTURE Assistant Secretary and Spokesperson Arnel De Mesa said the DA does not see rice prices declining drastically in the immediate future amid persisting local and global market conditions.

De Mesa noted that the price of rice abroad remains pricey at around \$600 per metric ton, while local rice production is threatened by the El Niño phenomenon.

"The rice prices will not decline as much as we can expect because existing prices in the international market remain high," he said on Thursday.

De Mesa disclosed that the trade of locally-produced rice is now ongoing between traders since the wet harvest season is already done.

De Mesa added that the country has about 80 to 90 days of national rice inventory since the start of 2024, brought about by the recent palay harvest and entry of imports.

"We need to secure supplies because we will have additional challenges because of El Niño. We need to ensure first our supply," he said.

The DA earlier disclosed that it expects the entry of 571,000 MT of rice between December until February, with most of the volume coming in through private traders, as the country braces for the adverse effects of El Niño. **(Related story: <https://BUSINESSMIRROR.com.ph/2023/12/28/phl-expects-571mt-rice-to-come-in-till-february>)**



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Bigas sumipa uli presyo, lagpas ₱50 per kilo

Umaakyat muli ang presyo ng bigas sa National Capital Region (NCR).

Ayon sa Bantay Presyo ng Department of Agriculture (DA) nasa ₱51 hanggang ₱56 per kilo na ang halaga ng imported well-milled rice at nasa ₱40-₱55 naman ang local well-milled rice.

Walang regular milled rice na

imported samantalang ₱50 hanggang ₱53 per kilo naman ang local na regular milled rice kahapon.

Noong Disyembre 26, 2023, nasa ₱38 hanggang ₱52 per kilo pa ang presyo ng regular milled rice at ₱40 hanggang ₱56 per kilo naman ang local na well-milled rice.

Sabi ni Samahang Industriya ng Agrikultura (SINAG) Executive

Director Jayson Gainglet, tumaas ang presyo ng mga imported rice at tapos na rin ang anihan kaya nasa millers at traders na ang mga palay.

Aniya, ang pagtaas ng presyo ng bigas sa pandaigdigang merkado ang dahilan kaya sumipa na rin ang halaga nito sa bansa. **(Eileen Mencias)**



BFAR to provide diversification of livelihood for fisherfolk in 2024

THE Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) is set to provide fisherfolk with different sources of livelihood this year as the implementation of the Philippine Fisheries and Coastal Resource Agency Project is in full swing.

The project, which cost P11 billion, was approved and launched last year. It was approved by the Board of Executive Directors of the World Bank on May 30, 2023.

"Magpapatayo po tayo ng mga infrastructures katulad ng mga cold storage facilities and, of course, iyong mga may climate resilient technology (We will build infrastructures like cold storage facilities and, of course, those

with climate resilient technology)," BFAR Fisherfolk Coordination Unit Head Nazario Briguera said in a Bagong Pilipinas Ngayon interview on Wednesday.

"Pakikinabangan po ito ng mahigit sa isang milyon na mga mangingisda sa (this will be beneficial to more than one million fisherfolks in) 24 provinces and 11 regions."

Briguera added that BFAR is centered on the Fisheries Life Development Project which is divided into capture fisheries, aquaculture, and post-harvest.

For capture fisheries, he reported that the national government was able to provide modern equipment — 22 units of 62-footer fishing boats — for municipal fisherfolk last year.

nicipal fisherfolk last year.

"Ang isang unit po nito ay puwedeng sumakay ang 30 na fisherfolk, na mga municipal fisherfolk. So, ang layunin po natin ay mas mabigyan natin ng kakayahan ang ating mga malilit na mangingisda na makapalaot sa mas malayo at mas makahul ng mas maraming isda (One unit can carry 30 fisherfolks. The goal is to capacitate our small fishermen to go farther and catch more fish)," he said.

Meantime, the country's aquaculture is focused on the provision of food security, Briguera said, even as he reported that 293 million fingerlings were produced last year.

This shows the increased

sufficiency level of sperms or fingerlings for fish farmers which results in continued fisheries production, he said.

Last year, 22 fully operational, community-based hatcheries were built. These facilities provide fish farmers enough access to fingerlings for bigger opportunities to increase fisheries production.

Currently, there are two million registered fisherfolks in the country.

On the average, a municipal fisherfolk earns PHP10,000 to PHP15,000 per month.

Briguera said this monthly income is subject to change depending on the season and situation of the seas. PNA



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'Replacing Chef Chico' does a great job of highlighting Filipino ingredients

I know I'm late to the party, but I finally had time to catch up on my TV shows during the last holiday break, and I've finally seen Project 8's *Replacing Chef Chico*, which stars Sam Milby as the titular Chef Chico, Alessandra de Rossi as his sous chef Ella, and Piolo Pascual as Raymond, a restaurant consultant hired by Chico's mother.

The eight-episode series revolves around the lives of the people who work in a Filipino heritage restaurant called Hain (shot in the distinctive Cafe Ysabel in San Juan), which Google says means "food set on the table," and some of the patrons who eat there. The restaurant's conceit is that it will tailor dishes upon request, and these special dishes is what the show revolves around.

Woven in between the drama is the story of Filipino ingredients and their role in local cuisine and in the lives of the people who produce them. Each episode centers on staff drama, customer drama, and one or a few local ingredients or dishes, and it is the latter that I want to talk about.

Episode two centers on pako (fiddlehead fern), a delicious salad ingredient that is famously impossible to cultivate and can only be foraged. Hain gets its pako from Pampanga, though there are restaurants in Manila that get theirs from other places such as Gubat in Quezon City, which sources they're from Baler. Siling labuyo is also mentioned, particularly how it is now often replaced with Taiwan chili. Hain sources their siling labuyo directly from farmers, ensuring that all profits go to them. The episode's main food conflict centers around the dessert tibok-tibok, named after bubbles that rise and pops as the pudding cooks that resemble the rhythm of a beating heart. It has to be made with carabao's milk, another Filipino staple that, like pako, is getting hard to find. The



AVANT GARDENER
YVETTE TAN

episode ends with Raymond asking Ella what she's learned from Chico and she replies, "food should not be wasted."

The third episode centers on the different ways we cook adobo, and how in the end, each one is distinctive on its own and cannot be compared to another type. It features sukan irok or sugar palm vinegar from Sta. Teresita in Batangas, made by mostly single moms and survivors of domestic violence who are part of a foundation that the restaurant regularly buys from, implying that local industries have the capability to help marginalized communities through gainful employment as well as the pride of continuing a traditional craft.

Episode four features Tinawan heirloom rice, which Ella explains is, "widely grown in the rice terraces. Grown only once a year, this heirloom rice is a big part of the Cordillera people's lives. It has been passed down from generation to generation."

The fifth-episode devotes a whole scene to Ella meeting a potential vegetable supplier who is assumed to be part of a farmer group that sells directly to customers. The supplier thanks Raymond for showing them that farmer groups can sell directly to buyers, thereby being able to earn more. The farmer also stated that he's added a bit more produce than what Raymond had ordered, a nod to the time-honored suki, or regular buyer relationship many Filipinos have with their favorite wet market stall owners.

Episode six featured laing cooked three ways, including the traditional way that uses one whole

taro leaf.

Incidentally, taro leaves are poisonous and should be prepared properly before cooking. If you've ever eaten laing and gotten a scratchy throat after, it's probably because the leaves weren't cleaned properly.

It also features asin tibuok from Albuquerque, Bohol shaved on top of a Filipino favorite, garlic fried rice. I've written about asin tibuok before, where we interviewed Zambaonga-based Monsignor Crisologo Manongas, the youngest sibling of the only family (though he mentioned that someone else has started production as well) that makes this dinosaur-egg shaped salt, which involves straining saltwater through coconut ash, resulting in a smokey flavor. Asin tibuok has been available in small quantities in the metro for a while, but prices have risen to more than double ever since the show came out. I hope that the rise in prices mean that the families producing the salt are earning more per piece, and not those unscrupulous middlemen are raising prices without benefit to the producers.

I feel that *Replacing Chef Chico* has done a lot to highlight traditional Filipino ingredients by making them the point of Hain, but not the point of the show. It's a good example of why representation is important, and how there is a delicate balance between showcasing something as cool (which the show managed to do) and trying hard. I hope more popular shows and movies feature traditional Filipino ingredients, because it's a surefire way to bring them into the limelight.



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Consumer food sales to rise 10%

THE United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) is projecting food service sales in the Philippines to increase by 10 percent in 2024, exceeding pre-pandemic levels as tourism recovers coupled with an increasing number of consumers.

In its latest Global Agricultural Information Network (GAIN) report, the agency predicts the country's consumer food service sales to hit \$14.045 billion this year, higher than the \$12.768 billion estimate in 2023.

"As restaurant franchises open stores to comply with franchise agreements, more hotels open as the tourism industry improves, further boosting consumer food service sales, especially imported ingredients," said the USDA.

Limited-service restaurants, mostly fast-food restaurants, account for the majority or 55 percent of food service, which

offers opportunities for imported ingredients, especially chicken leg quarters.

The agency also noted the rapid expansion of street kiosks such as French fries and fruit beverages. At the same time, coffee stores have risen in number, increasing sales of roasted coffee and extracts.

"Online deliveries continue to grow in Metro Manila and other cities as food delivery providers expand coverage and include more food establishments," said the USDA.

Likewise, the food and beverage manufacturing sector is expected to grow in 2024.

Strong opportunities were specifically cited on wheat, soybeans, soybean meal, dairy products, meat products, poultry products, food preparations, and processed vegetables.

"Food manufacturers' capacity utilization surpasses pre-pandemic levels as companies address local demand and continue to minimize costs caused by inflation," said the USDA.

The USDA tagged the Philippines as "one of the world's fastest growing markets," which present export opportunities for US food and beverage products including poultry products, processed and fresh vegetables, fruits, and condiments among others.

"The Philippines economic expansion, driven by strong household spending and an improved hotel and restaurant industry, paved the way for US agricultural and related exports to reach a record \$3.56 billion in 2022, with more opportunities for other agricultural products in 2023," it said.

JANINE ALEXIS MIGUEL



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Shopee to offer halal products

THE Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) and e-commerce site Shopee have entered a partnership to feature halal food sellers on the platform.

"This initiative aims to support micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) and make halal products accessible online for sellers and consumers," Shopee said in a statement.

"It also helps Shopee's goals to empower niche businesses to grow their online presence and broaden their market," it added.

Under the partnership, Shopee will train potential sellers on selling on the e-commerce platform.

Shopee's onboarding sessions will cover product listing guidelines, user interface navigation, and taking advantage of business

insights generated from sales data.

"Our collaboration with the DTI to onboard halal food sellers aligns with our commitment to supporting MSMEs and providing diverse options for our users," according to Vincent Lee, head of Shopee Philippines.

The DTI's National Halal Strategy is counting on P230 billion in investment from the industry while generating 120,000 jobs over the next five years. The industry as defined in the plan encompasses halal-friendly travel and tourism, and halal fashion, pharmaceuticals and cosmetics.

The National Halal Strategy assumes a global halal ecosystem with a market value of \$7.7 trillion by 2025. — **Justine Irish D. Tabile**

Date: 05 JAN 2024 Page: 2



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Act Agri-Kaagapay, itinatag

Sa hangaring makatulong sa mas maraming mahihirap na Pilipino, itinatag ng negosyante, pilantropo at dating reporter na si Ms. Virginia Ledesma Rodriguez ang Act Agri Kaagapay.

Isang non-stock at non-profit organization, layunin ng Act Agri-Kaagapay na magkaloob ng welfare development programs sa mga pinakamahihirap na indibidwal at pamilya sa bansa.

Nagsimula ang operation ng Act Agri Kaagapay noong nakalipas na taon sa San Nicolas, Binondo, Maynila na umabot ang serbisyo sa iba't-ibang panig ng Metro Manila hanggang sa Visayas at Mindanao.

Si Rodriguez ang author ng librong "Leave Nobody Hungry" na ngayon ay ginagamit na reference ng mga agricultural student at mga magsasaka hinggil sa pagpapalaganap ng organic farming sa bansa.

"Looking back to all that has happened in 2023, we still have the same issues in life, particularly on how the Philippines struggle to fight food security and high prices in basic commodities especially in the agricultural sector," pahayag niya.

Ito ang nag-udyok sa kanya para itatag ang organization na magpopokus sa pagtulong sa "troubled sector" lalo na sa milyon-milyong magsasaka sa bansa. (Mer Layson)



Indonesia estimates rice output to drop 46%

JAKARTA- Indonesia's rice output in January and February this year is estimated at 2.25 million metric tons, agriculture ministry data showed on Wednesday, a 46.3 percent drop from the same period a year ago as El Nino hits harvests.

A prolonged drought driven by the El Nino weather event is expected to reduce Indonesia's rice output by 2 percent in 2023, while planting for this year's main harvest season has been delayed.

Indonesia's meteorological agency BMKG forecast El Nino would remain in early 2024 and gradually neutralize by April.

January's rice harvest is expected to produce 930,000 tons, with February's estimated to produce 1.32 million tons, against monthly consumption of 2.54 million tons.

"If we only rely on domestic production in January, it will be a deficit, however we have a carry over stock from December," agriculture ministry director Inti Pertiwi told a weekly coordination meeting on inflation.

Data from Indonesia's National Food Agency (NFA) shows the country's rice stock at end of 2023 stood at 7.46 million tons, including stock held by households and wholesalers.

"The stock would be sufficient up to March, while the main harvest may be delayed until April, May," NFA senior official Sarwo Edhy told the meeting.

Indonesia has set a target to produce 32 million tons of rice



A farmer collecting paddy during harvest day at a rice field in Candipuro district, Lumajang, East Java province. (Reuters Photo)

in 2024, up 3.56 percent from an estimated 30.9 million last year.

As the rainy season has started, Indonesia expects to plant 1.7 million hectares (4.2 million acres) of rice in January and 1.4 million hectares in February, President Joko Widodo said on Wednesday.

Indonesia's trade surplus narrowed in November to \$2.41 billion as imports increased more than expected, while exports extended their weakening trend, data from the statistics bureau showed.

Southeast Asia's biggest econo-

my has seen its shipments declining by value in the past months due to falling commodity prices and slowing global demand.

In November, exports fell 8.56 percent on a yearly basis to \$22 billion versus expectations of 9.36 percent drop in a Reuters poll.

Shipment of Indonesia's coal and palm oil, which are its top commodities, were down 34.25 percent and 12.60 percent on an annual basis, respectively, as prices continued to weaken in November.

Total volume of coal and crude

palm oil exports in November were at 33.9 million metric tons and 2.5 million metric tons, respectively.

Imports, on the other hand, were up 3.29 percent on a yearly basis to \$19.59 billion, much higher than the prediction in the poll for only a 0.20 percent increase.

The imports were boosted by rising purchases of consumer and capital goods, up 19.82 percent and 13.66 percent, respectively. Meanwhile, imports of raw materials were down 1.05 percent. - Reuters



Soybeans slide; wheat up

SINGAPORE- Chicago soybean futures slid on Thursday, with the market dropping for four of five sessions as beneficial rains in top exporter Brazil weighed on prices.

Wheat rose for the first time in four sessions, while corn prices eased.

"There are rains in Brazil which have improved crop prospects," said one Singapore-based trader. "Overall, we don't see any major supply issue from South America this year."

The most-active soybean contract on the Chicago Board of Trade (CBOT) was down 0.2 percent at 12.74-3/4 a bushel, after dropping to its lowest since October on Wednesday.

Wheat gained 0.4 percent at \$6.02-3/4 a bushel, while corn dipped 0.1 percent to \$4.65 a bushel.

Rains are likely to benefit crops in northern Brazil this week, forecasters said, after hot, dry weather prompted analysts to slash production estimates. - Reuters