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## Laurel continues DA revamp

More new officials of the Department of Agriculture (DA) have been named as Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. continues to reorganize the department.

Laurel issued Special Order 92 designating Christopher Bañas as executive director of the DA-Mimaropa office, replacing Maria Christine Inting.

"All officials and employees of the department, including its bureaus, attached agencies and corporations as well as DA regional field offices are advised of this designation and directed to give their full support and cooperation to Bañas in the performance of his duties and responsibilities," the order read.

Bañas served as chief of the DA's management audit division.

Laurel appointed Inting as technical adviser to the undersecretary for operations.

Under Special Order 87, Laurel designated Jerome Oliveros as undersecretary for special concerns and official development assistance-foreign aid and grants.

Laurel said the reorganization is necessary to help him pursue President Marcos' order to modernize the farm sector, increase food production and improve the lives of Filipino farmers and fishermen.

Laurel had earlier replaced Leocardio Sebastian as undersecretary for rice industry

development, the flagship program of the DA.

Roger Navarro replaced Sebastian.

Laurel also issued Special Order 3, appointing Navarro as officer-in-charge of the Office of the National Project Director, Philippine Rural Development Project and Office of the Assistant Secretary for Operations.

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

Assistant Secretary Arnel de Mesa was replaced as assistant secretary for operations. He was appointed as full-time DA spokesperson.

Laurel issued Special Order 5 appointing Undersecretary Mercedita Sombilla as undersecretary for DA bureaus, replacing her as undersecretary for policy, planning and regulations.

Drusila Esther Bayate was appointed to Sombilla's previous post.

Laurel also issued special orders appointing U-Nichols Manalo as National Rice Program director and Telma Tolentino as undersecretary-designate for finance, replacing Undersecretary Agnes Catherine Miranda.

The revamp of DA officials came after former senior undersecretary Domingo Panganiban opted to retire from government service.

Panganiban, who took his oath on Aug. 12, 2022, retired effective last Jan. 1.

— Bella Cariaso





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## Highland farmers to enjoy guaranteed market—DA

By Othel V. Campos

HIGHLAND farmers are assured of guaranteed market for their produce as the Department of Agriculture facilitates farmer's access through the Kadiwa's Veggie Connect and other market linkage programs.

Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. said the DA will extend market support to close to 100 farmers to prevent potential food wastage and provide consumers access to cheaper food.

"A total 163,189 kilograms [of vegetables] were sold and will be sold until Jan. 26, 2024, assisting 93 farmers from the provinces of Mt. Province, Benguet and Ifugao," said DA-Cordillera Administrative Region officer-in-charge Jennilyn Dawayan.

"We will continue to provide Kadiwa services to farmers as may

be needed," she added.

Dawayan said the Kadiwa Veggie Connect started as a collaboration with the Cordillera Association of Regional Executives to help DA monitor vegetable supply and amount of unsold vegetables, particularly cabbages and Chinese cabbage whose prices have fallen due to a supply glut.

The national government offices in Baguio City and neighboring areas bought unsold vegetables from various trading posts totaling 11 tons between Jan. 5 and 6.

From Jan. 8 to 14, farmers sold 44 tons, followed by 105.6 tons a week later at prices ranging from P10 to P15 per kilo.

Some vegetable farmers in the Cordilleras usually opt to dump older inventory to prevent prices of vegetables from falling further when new harvests arrive at trading posts.



# Bicol rice retail prices hit P75/kilo

By BELLA CARIASO

**Retail prices of rice in Bicol have reached P75 per kilo, according to watchdog group Bantay Bigas.**

The spokesperson for the group, Cathy Estavillo, cited monitoring which showed that rice prices in the region ranged between P60 to P75 per kilo.

Estavillo said the increase in rice prices continues despite a report by the Philippine Statistics Authority that palay production in 2023 increased to 20.05 million metric tons compared to 19.75 million MT in 2022.

She said con-

sumers do not feel the increase in palay production, noting that retail prices of rice in 2023 were the highest in 14 years.

"This means that the palliative measures of the government like extending tariff on imported rice, distribution of food stamps and implementation of subsidy did not help as the spike in rice prices continues," Estavillo said.

Bantay Bigas had earlier issued a warning on the increase in hunger incidence amid the continued spike in retail prices of rice.

Estavillo said retailers have noted a drop in the volume of rice that consumers buy in the market.

"As far as the supply is concerned, we have a lot of supply (of rice) in the mar-

kets. The problem is the high retail prices. The lowest retail price in Metro Manila markets is P54 per kilo," she said.

Monitoring by the Department of Agriculture showed that the retail price of local regular milled rice has increased to P53 per kilo; local well-milled rice, P55; local premium rice, P60; local special rice, P68; imported well-milled rice, P56; imported premium rice, P62, and imported special rice, P65.

Estavillo blamed Republic Act 11203 or the Rice Tariffication Law for price manipulation and hoarding.

"Our farmers also experience involuntary hunger. The free distribution of farms, and support services for farmers are necessary to boost the local palay production," she said.





## NEWS BRIEF

### Import ban sa sibuyas palalawigin

Inihayag ng Department of Agriculture (DA) na palalawigin nito ang pagbabawal sa importasyon ng sibuyas hanggang Hulyo.

Sinabi ito ni DA Assistant Secretary at Spokesperson Arnel de Mesa sa isang panayam matapos ang pulong ng National Price Coordination Council sa Department of Trade and Industry kahapon.

Inirereklamo ng mga magsasaka ang pagbagsak ng presyo ng sibuyas dahil sa mga imported.

Ayon sa Federation of Free Farmers (FFF), sumadsad na ang presyo ng sibuyas sa P10 hanggang P50 per kilo sa Bayambang, ang major producer ng sibuyas sa Pangasinan.

Sinisisi ng FFF ang pagbagsak ng presyo ng sibuyas sa pambabarat ng mga trader sa mga magsasaka dahil nahuli ang pagdating ng imported na sibuyas.

Sabi ng FFF, pinabibigat pa ng pagbawas sa irigasyon ang kanilang problema at pinepeste pa ng harabas o army worms ang kanilang tanim.

"Why were onion imports allowed entry after December 2023? This violated the DA's rules that are intended to protect Filipino producers during the harvesting period from January to April," ayon kay FFF national president Leonardo Montemayor. **(Eileen Mencias)**

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## BAJO DE MASINLOC INCIDENT

# DEFENSE CHIEF SCORES HARASSMENT OF PINOY FISHERS

By Nestor Corrales  
@NCorralesINQ

Defense Secretary Gilberto Teodoro Jr. on Tuesday night again condemned China's latest act of aggression against Filipino fishermen in the resource-rich Scarborough Shoal, locally known as Bajo de Masinloc, which is within Manila's 270-kilometer exclusive economic zone.

Speaking at the defense forum of the Manila Overseas Press Club in Makati City, Teodoro said China "has no business harassing Filipino fishermen" after a video showed local fisherfolk being driven away by the Chinese coast guard.

He also pointed out the importance of filing a diplomatic protest every time Beijing harasses Filipinos in the West Philippine Sea.

"We need to do those protests so as not to acquiesce and we have several measures that we are doing on a sustainable basis that we can manage," Teodoro said.

According to the defense chief, the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources has a program to organize Filipino fishermen and "provide them needed sea services and actually to even increase their capacity."

The Armed Forces of the Philippines is also embarking

on a new defense concept called the "comprehensive archipelagic defense concept," he added.

"So rather than an inward-looking defense concept, we are evolving into a defense concept, which projects our power into areas where we must, by constitutional fiat and duty, protect and preserve our resources," Teodoro said.

He noted that while the Philippines does not want a fight with China, the latter must abide by international laws if it wants to be respected as a superpower.

"It cannot be based on formless dialogue where one party does not cease to expand its area of influence illegally

to the detriment of a smaller country," Teodoro said.

"If we do not stand up to the illegal and unilateral encroachment of these resources through a distorted nine- or 10-dash line, which nobody in the world accepts, then we will be guilty of acquiescence and we can be open to a rewriting of international law through constant practice by a stronger power, which the Marcos administration has sworn not to do," he added.

"I do hope that there is some sanity and some sincerity behind the word of peaceful intent to avoid an armed conflict," Teodoro said. INQ





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## Sardines, soap, milk SRP rise – DTI

By KHRISCIELLE YALAO

The Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) announced on Wednesday, Jan. 24, that nine items included in the Suggested Retail Price (SRP) bulletin—four canned sardines, one powdered milk, and four toilet soap brands—have increased their prices.

In a press conference of the National Price Coordinating Council (NPCC), DTI Assistant Secretary Amanda Nograles of the Consumer Protection Group said the new price adjustments were approved on Jan. 17.

Four out of 15 stock-keeping units (SKUs) of canned sardines increased their prices by ₱2.69 to ₱2.73.

The price of one out of five SKUs of powdered milk rose by ₱6, and four out of 10 SKUs of toilet soap inched up by ₱1.50.

Last Jan. 17, DTI released the first official SRP Bulletin for 2024 as of Jan. 12, where prices of three SKUs of coffee and six SKUs of salt were adjusted.

Another SRP Bulletin is expected to be released in March, to reflect the complete price adjustments agreed upon and approved by ► 4

## Sardines, soap, milk SRP rise – DTI 1◀

the agency and the manufacturer involved.

The pending requests for the price adjustments from other manufacturers are still in “status quo,” said Nograles, meaning it remains in the process of review.

Trade Secretary Alfredo Pascual noted that, currently, DTI is not the

sole agency involved in the vetting process for the price of commodities.

He mentioned other agencies, such as the Department of Energy (DOE) for liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) products, Department of Agriculture (DA) for some of the prime commodities, and the Department

of Justice (DOJ) who enforce anti-competitive actions.

Pascual also said that discussions were also held on the benchmarking of Philippine prices compared to other countries, which will help the country evaluate the price differences and similarities in the region.



## SRA assures stable sugar prices despite El Niño

By GABRIELLE CHRISTEL GALANG

Despite ongoing dry spell in parts of Negros Occidental and Batangas, the Sugar Regulatory Administration (SRA) has assured the public that retail sugar prices will not increase.

In an interview with SRA Administrator Pablo Azcona, he acknowledged the concerns of farmers regarding the drop in production in some large plantations affected by the El Niño phenomenon.

Despite the effects of the hot weather, the SRA chief assured there is sufficient buffer stock for sugar, effectively preventing any

imminent steep price increases.

Sugar production fell short of its 1.85 million metric ton (MT) target, reaching only 1.75 million MT. However, the industry managed to maintain a buffer stock of approximately 200,000 MT.

"We've actually hit one million metric tons [in harvest] last Jan. 15," Azcona told reporters. "Based on the initial estimate, [that is] around 60 percent."

Recently, the SRA chief shared that President Marcos approved the budget to purchase sugar directly from farmers via the Philippine International Trading Corp. (PITC).

The total budget for procure-

ment is ₱5 billion, which could buy 50 kilograms of sugar from the farmers at ₱2,700 to ₱2,800.

Moreover, the allotted budget would take 10 to 15 percent of the remaining raw sugar production in the Philippines, assisting farmers directly.

Meanwhile, the SRA is also seeking suggestions from farmer groups to determine which course of action the agriculture department can take concerning sugar purchasing.

"[We are] sending out letters to farmer groups, requesting initial recommendations because we are tasked to do it as quickly as we can," Azcona said.





# Technology on rice planting suggested

THE Philippine Rice Research Institute (PhilRice) has encouraged farmers to use technology to ensure rice get enough nutrients and attain good yields and income.

In a statement, PhilRice nutrients specialist Wilfredo Collado said that it is important to implement proper intervention in rice farming such as ensuring the element, amount and proper timing of providing nutrients to the crop to avoid duplication of costs.

He noted that among the nutrients that the crop needs are nitrogen, which helps it grow quickly; and potassium, which improves root development.

Collado said during the dry cropping season, palay (unmilled rice) needs more nutrients because of the sunlight it gets and those coming from the soil, irrigation water and microorganisms.

"Nutrients are sufficient if crop growth and panicle development are uniform leading to the attainment of the crop yield potential," he added.

Rice plant lacks nutrients when it has slow growth, fewer tillers, panicles, and seeds and low grain weight while excess nutrients in plants often cause easy attacks by pests and soil pollution.

PhilRice then advised farmers to take steps in knowing the nutrient adequacy of crops, including making sure there are no symptoms of nutrient deficiency or excess from



**NITROGEN CHECKER** One of the technologies that farmers should be familiar with is the use of a four-color measuring device called leaf color chart, which is used to check the nitrogen status of palay leaves through color comparison, or a mobile app that takes digital photos of leaves. Nitrogen is a natural element which helps plants, including palay, to grow quickly. CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

tillering to early panicle initiation and flowering.

As for the technology, PhilRice said farmers must familiarize themselves with the nutrients needed by crops based on the physical appearance and results of diagnostic tools such as minus-one element technique (MOET), leaf color chart (LCC), nutrient-omission-plot technique (NOPT) and rice crop manager (RCM).

MOET is a soil nutrient diag-

nostic technology that uses a pot experiment complemented by a mobile app to determine nutrients lacking in the soil and the amount of fertilizer needed in the field.

LCC, on the other hand, can be used to check the nitrogen status of rice plants using a four-color ruler for leaf color comparison or a mobile app that takes digital photos of leaves.

Meanwhile, NOPT can be used to assess nutrient supply and serve as a

basis for fertilizer recommendations while RCM is management commonly used by extension workers and rice specialists who assist farmers in determining recommendations for the use of nutrients and technology in rice farming management.

"By ensuring adequate plant nutrition, high yields and profits can be ensured, as well as damage or pollution to the environment can be reduced," Collado said.

JERRY M. HERNANDEZ





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# Seed coop, DA launch Kadiwa store in Cagayan

BY LEANDER C. DOMINGO

**I**N a move to help boost the marketing reach of farmers in the region, the Cagayan Seed Producers Multipurpose Cooperative (CSPMPC), in partnership with the Department of Agriculture (DA)-Region 2 (Cagayan Valley) office, launched a Kadiwa store in Tuguegarao City.

Kadiwa stands for "Katuwang sa Diwa at Gawa para sa Masaganang Ani at Mataas na Kita," a marketing strategy of the government that directly connects food producers to consumers, making products less costly.

Launched on January 18 at the Cagayan Valley Development Cooperative in San Gabriel village, the Kadiwa store is expected to help farmers widen their marketing reach for potential customers

in the area and its neighboring communities also to reduce produce wastage.

"This momentous occasion marks a significant milestone to promote sustainable agriculture, empower local farmers and provide our community with access to fresh and affordable produce thus strengthening our commitment to fostering a vibrant community," said Roberto Claro Busania, DA-Region 2 technical director for

operations and extension.

The Kadiwa store offers premium rice, vegetables, fruits, processed products and condiments to the public at reasonable and affordable prices.

Busania said the Kadiwa initiative is here "to help solve the marketing issues our producers are experiencing, eliminate intermediaries and avoid dumping of vegetables."

CSPMPC Chairman Nestor Bautista thanked Rose Mary Aquino, the DA-Region 2 office officer in charge director, for considering the cooperative as recipient of the Kadiwa program.

CSPMPC is one of the clusters assisted by the DA-Region 2 office's Rice and Farm and Fisheries Clustering and Consolidation Program.

"We are grateful for the trust of

the DAR-RFO2 (Regional Field Office 2) in our ability to properly implement the project like the previous programs given to us," Bautista said.

Meanwhile, CSPMPC manager Dumon Mabborang also expressed gratitude to the agencies that extended support to the cooperative.

"We thank the DA, LandBank (Land Bank of the Philippines) and the Cooperative Development Authority for always being there for us in our endeavors," he said.

Also thanking the DA and CSPMPC, village chief Joseph Salagan of host Barangay San Gabriel assured the barangay council's support to the operation of Kadiwa.

"We also commit to help ensure its sustenance since it will benefit both our farmers and residents," Salagan said.





# Target sugar output unlikely to be hit – SRA

BY JANINE ALEXIS MIGUEL

**T**HE target local production for raw sugar is unlikely to be attained this cropping year due to the impact of the El Niño weather disturbance, the **Sugar Regulatory Administration (SRA)** said.

SRA head Pablo Luis Azcona told reporters that as of January 15, the ongoing harvest reached a 60-percent completion or equivalent to 1 million metric tons (MT) of raw sugar.

"I don't think we can hit 1.85 million MT the way it's going now," Azcona said. "What's alarming also is a lot of our farmers and our progressive farmers are

complaining of a lower yield this year due to the weather patterns."

He added that some major sugar producing provinces are already experiencing dry spells due to the El Niño such as the South of Negros, which has been suffering drought in the last two to three months.

"In the Bukidnon area, some sugarcane are early maturing. So, most of our farmer friends here are

recording a drop," said Azcona.

The SRA official also said that millers have estimated total yield to reach 1.746 million MT once harvest is completed, but this is yet to be verified.

The cropping season for 2023-2024 is anticipated to conclude in May, possibly wrapping up sooner if the set target isn't achieved, Azcona said.

Sugar Order 1 issued by the SRA in August last year stated that there will be an estimated drop in production of 10 percent to 15 percent depending on the severity of the anticipated El Niño phenomenon.

The SRA also said that there was a 20-percent drop seen in the local demand for sugar during the last months of 2023, which might have

affected lower farmgate prices of the commodity.

"Actually, we're thinking that the manufacturers are finding alternatives to sugar [and] if you look at it, demand for almost all of the commodities dropped," said Azcona.

In relation to the declining farmgate price of raw sugar, which ranges between P2,400 and P2,500 per 50-kilogram bag, the government has given the green light for an initial funding of P5 billion to directly purchase sugar from farmers.

The Philippine International Trading Corp. will be the agency to directly purchase sugar from farmers while the SRA will be the conduit and will incorporate stakeholders' suggestions and recommendations.





## PCA seeks registration of 15K Antique farmers

THE Philippine Coconut Authority (PCA) targets to reach 15,000 unregistered coconut farmers living in the mountainous areas of Antique this year.

"We would like the farmers to avail of the assistance from the PCA, but they need to be registered first," PCA Antique head Gregory

Teñoso 3rd said.

He said they have registered 30,402 farmers with the National Coconut Farmers Registry System as of September 2023.

Teñoso added 34,200 coconut seed nuts and 12,600 seedlings are waiting for distribution to registered farmers who could avail of

up to 143 seedlings for every hectare of plantation.

They can also avail of fertilizers and technical assistance.

"Farmers could coordinate with their Municipal Agriculture Offices, barangay officials or their federations so we could schedule our agriculturists to come to

their areas for registration if they could not personally visit our provincial office in San Jose de Buenavista," he said.

Antique has 30,367 hectares planted with 3.045 million coconut trees, of which almost 1.7 million are in their fruit-bearing stage.

TMT





## Sugar output likely to fall



**Milling over soon.** Some districts with estimated production of 390,000 MT of sugar have milled 312,000 MT.

**BY JED MACAPAGAL**

THE Sugar Regulatory Administration (SRA) may lower its earlier projection of 1.85 million metric tons (MT) local production for crop year 2023-2024 to 1.75 million MT due to El Niño.

Pablo Azcona, SRA administrator, told reporters in a briefing on Monday reiterated El Niño may pull down sugar output by 10 to 15 percent.

"Doing a review, we noted a drop. The estimate will come out

soon but based on preliminary estimates and of millers, it (is) down to about 1.75 million MT," Azcona said.

The SRA added millers were asked to check their individual milling districts and verify the remaining volume of sugarcane standing crops especially that the 1 million MT milling mark was achieved last January 15.

He said milling may be over soon with some districts with estimated production of 390,000 MT of sugar have hit 312,000 MT.

The SRA saw increased production from September 1 to December 31 last year but it was due to ease of harvest and not because of improved yield per hectare.

Last October, the United States Department of Agriculture lowered its projected raw sugar production in the Philippines for the current crop year by 5 percent to 1.8 million MT from an earlier forecast of 1.9 million MT.

Actual sugar production in the Philippines in the previous crop year was at 1.79 million MT.



## Sugar harvest likely to come in under target

By Adrian H. Halili *Reporter*

THE Sugar Regulatory Administration (SRA) said the Philippines is unlikely to hit its sugar harvest target during the current crop year.

SRA Administrator Pablo Luis S. Azcona told reporters that the harvest is on pace to come in below the 1.85 million metric ton target set before the start of the milling season.

The regulator had projected a 10-15% decline in raw sugar production due to El Niño.

"What is alarming also is that a lot of our farmers are complaining of a lower yield this year due to the weather patterns, and the south of Negros has been very dry in the last two or three months. So, we already see the effects," Mr. Azcona said.

"I don't think we will hit 1.85 million MT, the way it is going now," he added.

The government weather service, known as PAGASA (Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration), said that the effects of El Niño may run until the second quarter. An estimated 63 provinces will experience droughts or dry spells.

He said the preliminary estimate for the sugar harvest is now 1.75 million MT.

"During the review, we noted a drop. The estimate will come out soon but based on preliminary estimates, and of millers (output will fall) to about 1.75 million MT," he added.





## El Niño seen cutting sugar output to 24-yr low

By JASPER EMMANUEL Y. ARCALAS

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**T**HE Philippines's raw sugar production in the current crop year could drop to 1.75 million metric tons (MMT), the lowest in 24 years, due to El Niño.

Sugar Regulatory Administration (SRA) Chief and CEO Pablo Luis S. Azcona said emerging estimates from the industry indicate that raw sugar production may miss the initial projection of 1.85 MMT.

Azcona said initial assessment made by the SRA and industry stakeholders point to El Niño as the main culprit behind the projected drop in raw sugar output.

However, he said the SRA is verifying the latest raw sugar production estimate.

The projected 1.75 MMT raw sugar output in crop year 2023-2024 would even be lower than the 1.799 MMT produced in crop year 2022-2023.

Historical SRA figures show that the latest production estimate could be the lowest in 24 years or

since crop year 1999-2000, when output fell to 1.619 MMT also due to El Niño.

"In the first sugar order, we mentioned that there is a possibility of a 10 percent to 15 percent drop in production depending on the severity of the forecasted El Niño. We are doing a review and noted a drop in the estimate. Based on preliminary estimates [of SRA] and of millers [production], it dropped to about 1.75 MMT," Azcona told reporters recently.

The latest emerging production estimate of 1.75 MMT is about 5.4 percent lower than the SRA's earlier projection of 1.85 MMT, well within its anticipated decline of 10 to 15 percent due to the dry spell.

Azcona said the final estimated production figures would be released by the SRA soon.

The SRA is checking on the remaining standing sugarcanes in individual milling districts to come up with the updated production estimate.

Nonetheless, Azcona said local raw sugar output has already hit 1 MMT as of January 15.



# BusinessMirror

A broader look at today's business

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He said the hotter and drier weather caused the crop to mature faster, but this resulted in smaller canes with higher sugar content. However, Azcona said sugarcanes lose the tonnage weight in the process, which results in overall lower raw sugar output.

"What's alarming also is a lot of our farmers and our progressive farmers are complaining of a lower yield this year due to the weather patterns. If you look at the sugarcanes in Negros, they

weigh lighter," he said, noting that around 60 percent of the country's sugarcanes have already been harvested.

Azcona said he expects the harvest to be completed in the next three to four months.

Philippine Sugar Millers Association President Pablo Lobregat estimated that total raw sugar output in the current crop year would be close to 1.75 MMT.

"It could be higher by 100,000 MT so it would be around 1.8

MMT. So it is something like last year around 1.799 MMT. It would not be far from last year's output," Lobregat told the BusinessMirror.

"El Niño is still ongoing, we are still in the middle of it. But a 10 percent drop [from 1.85 MMT earlier projection by the SRA] would be huge already."

## Procurement program

THE Sugar Council, which is composed of major industry federations nationwide, threw its support behind the national government's plan to purchase P5 billion worth of raw sugar from sugarcane planters.

The state's plan is part of its efforts to lift the farmgate prices of sugarcane that have been declining in recent weeks.

"We appreciate the action taken by President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. and Agriculture Secretary Francisco P. Tiu Laurel Jr. in allocating funds for the direct purchase of sugar from local producers," the group said in a recent statement.

"We hope that with this timely government intervention, prices

can improve in the remaining months of the crop year."

The Sugar Council said there is a need to raise the prevailing prices of raw sugar, which currently averages P2,400 per 50-kilogram bag, to allow planters to "recover" costs and sustain production in the next crop year.

The group also cautioned against "hoarding" of sugar quedans in anticipation of the higher prices that the government would offer.

"In discussions with industry stakeholders, it was stressed that this direct buying should only apply to newly-milled sugar covered by an SRA Sugar Order, and not to past weeks' production," the Sugar Council said.

"This is consistent with the government's intent to ensure fair treatment for all, especially the small sugar farmers who cannot afford to hold on to their quedans to wait for better prices. The program cannot allow the better-financed producers to benefit more than those with fewer resources."





## Palawan to attain rice self-sufficiency

THE province of Palawan is expected to attain rice sufficiency in the next 11 months despite the threat of El Niño, the Office of the Provincial Agriculturist (OPA).

Provincial agriculturist Romeo Cabungcal said that the combined inventory from traders' stock and farmers' production of 160,880 metric tons (MT) of rice will be enough to meet Palawan's monthly consumption of 13,739 MT.

"This is based on the record submitted by our municipal agricultur-

ists and inventory; it can reach about 11.71 months. Based on the record, we will not have a shortage," he said partly in the vernacular.

As of January, Palawan has a standing crop of 30,182 hectares (ha) which could produce 126,764 MT of unmilled rice, or palay. The harvest on Sept. 15, 2023 covered 48,181 ha with a production of 190,546.10 MT.

In the farming calendar, March 16 to September 15 is the wet season, while September

16 to March 15 is the dry season.

OPA's inventory to local traders in the first week of January showed 54,500 bags of palay, equivalent to 2,725 MT. With 60 percent milling recovery, it will produce 635 MT of rice. The inventory has not yet included the volume of imported bags of rice by traders.

"When I visited traders, they had a lot of palay there. To think also, because there are traders importing — because of the trade liberalization in the Rice Tar-

iffication Law, he said.

Even though supplies can be sufficient, OPA still needs to assess the drought-affected areas in Palawan and implement mitigating measures through the Provincial Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council.

OPA is collaborating with its municipal counterparts to have an intensive information campaign on the impacts of climate change and ways to conserve water in agriculture.

TMT





## SMC expands urban farming initiative

THE Backyard Bukid program of San Miguel Corp. (SMC), started in 2021 to assist its service personnel during the pandemic, has grown into a vibrant urban farm at the company's head office complex, now cultivating 39 varieties of flowering plants and vegetables.

Covering 750 square meters, the space now includes a plant nursery, 80 garden plots, and also functions as a center for employee wellness, volunteerism and training.

Replicated in several SMC facilities by the San Miguel Foundation, the project has recently been expanded through a partnership with Urban Farmers PH, enhancing the farm's diversity and variety of produce.

Among the farmyard staples tomato, okra, ampalaya, the farm produces kale, romaine lettuce, and other salad greens.

"I am proud to see the progress of our Backyard Bukid project. Apart from promoting urban agriculture, it has also become a space for our support staff to collaborate and learn life-long skills that will help them become more resilient and self-sufficient," SMC President and Chief Executive Officer Ramon Ang said.

He added that SMC is grateful to its partner, Urban Farmers PH, for helping us expand the project.

Louie Gutierrez, Urban Farmers PH founder and farmer-in-chief, said that his group is excited connecting with companies like SMC.

"We hope this project inspires SMC employees and other companies to get into agriculture because this is the future of our food," Gutierrez said.

Urban Farmers PH was established in 2021 with the aim of converting underutilized public spaces into thriving urban farms. It has several ongoing projects, including urban farms in Taguig and Makati cities.

It is also a grand prize winner of the Copenhagen Business School's ImpaktWISE Awards, which recognizes organizations that offer solutions to social, environmental and economic challenges.

Currently, SMC's Backyard Bukid follows a harvest cycle of 20 to 35 days. Once the produce is harvested, it is distributed among members, who then sell it to employees.

Some of the harvest is also bought by SMC and donated to its Better World Tondo community center for its daily feeding program. The company also has plans to buy vegetables for the office canteen.

Support staff involved in the project dedicate an hour every morning and afternoon to tend to the farm. They also attend weekly plant care sessions with Urban Farmers PH.

As one of the biggest and most diversified conglomerates in the country, SMC has launched various initiatives that aim to promote agriculture and assist local farmers.

In July 2020, the company opened Better World Diliman, a community center that serves as a ready market for excess produce from all over Luzon. To date, Better World Diliman has rescued over 950,000 kilograms of produce and helped some 4,500 farmers — and in the process, has helped reduce food waste from local farms.

Furthermore, the company's food group recently launched an Agripreneurship Scholarship program in Davao and Bicol, which benefits scholars from SEED Philippines. The program's ultimate goal is to employ graduates on the company's farms in both provinces.

Earlier, SEED Philippines also helped SMC's packaging division create urban farms in their facilities in Manila and Cavite. **TMT**





## Time to scale up regenerative agriculture

First of 2 parts

**A**BOUT a decade ago, digitalization was almost an alien term in the country, with the local techie community only among the few groups knowing fully what digitalization was all about.

But today, digitalization has become a term millions of Filipinos have rolled in their tongues. Also, digitalization has become part of discussions in leveling up agriculture in the Philippines.

Moving forward, I wish that the term regenerative would start not sounding alien among actors and stakeholders in the country's agriculture sector, most specially among policy and decision-makers.

I say this because we should not waste time scaling up regenerative agriculture in the Philippines given the numerous challenges local food producers face locally and globally.

Also, we have to start shifting away from the "First Agricultural Revolution" that was characterized by expansion and exploitation, feeding people at the expense of forests, wildlife, water and soil. This also led to the destabilization of our climate.

If that trend continues, it would be impossible to grow



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FORWARD

WILLIAM  
D. DAR

enough food for the planet's growing world population.

On the other hand, the "Second Agricultural Revolution" that centers on regenerative agriculture is consistent with several of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. Its holistic approach to farming addresses a broad range of interconnected challenges, and its ideals and procedures provide significant advantages to the objectives, with a strong focus on sustainability, environmental stewardship, climate action and social well-being.

Regenerative agriculture also rehabilitates the entire ecosystem, strengthens resilience against climate change and blends sustainable innovation with tradition.

And here are the main pillars of regenerative agriculture:

**Biodiversity.** Increase plant and animal biodiversity above and below the ground;

**Soil and water management.** Balanced fertilization, biopesticides application, efficient irriga-

tion practices and promoting soil organic matter;

**Diversified cropping.** Promotes optimal resource use;

**Livestock integration.** Moving livestock through different grazing areas prevents overgrazing, allows for natural pasture recovery and improves soil health;

**Farm waste management.** Promotes the continual and sustainable use of resources by utilizing agricultural wastes to improve soil health and minimize environmental impacts.

The good news is digitalization and the rise of agricultural technology (agtech) can play a big role in scaling up regenerative agriculture. We should also be thankful that much of the innovations from agtech companies aim to make food production sustainable and more efficient, resulting in lesser inputs used and more income for farmers and fishers.

Hence, regenerative agriculture and agtech can be a powerful synergy to radically transform our local and global food systems.

This, as regenerative agriculture, which focuses on rejuvenating and enhancing ecosystems, also frequently draws inspiration from traditional and nature-based farming approaches.

On the other hand, modern

farming boosted by agtech provides fine-tuned farming approaches utilizing modern tools, technology and digital solutions to improve various agricultural activities aimed at improving efficiency, production and sustainability in agriculture.

From the agtech sphere, here are the applicable technologies to scale up regenerative agriculture.

**Balanced fertilization.** Regenerates soil resources by reducing the use of chemical fertilizers by as much as 50 percent by utilizing natural farm wastes as compost or soil enhancer. Taking it one step further, natural inoculants can be used to produce substitutes for inorganic fertilizer.

**Efficient irrigation.** Irrigation systems that combine digital technology and mechanical systems that can reduce water usage by as much as 50 percent to grow crops. These efficient systems can minimize water wastage and runoff, promoting sustainable water management. Examples include drip irrigation, sprinkler systems, water piping and precision irrigation techniques.

**Integrated pest management (IPM).** Emphasizes the use of multiple strategies to minimize the impact of pests on crops while maintaining the overall

health of the agroecosystem. IPM aligns well with the principles of regenerative agriculture and contributes to its goals such as reduced dependency on chemicals, injection of biological and cultural control methods that helps maintain a healthy soil microbiome and other holistic land management strategies.

**Precision farming.** Involves the application of new technologies, data and analytics to improve major aspects of agricultural operations. It seeks to improve efficiency, productivity and sustainability by administering inputs such as water, fertilizer and pesticides accurately and efficiently.

**Molecular breeding.** Molecular breeding or other advanced plant breeding technology has also produced crop varieties that need less time and water to grow. It allows trait selection for resilience, accelerated crop improvement and development of crops with inherent resistance to pests and diseases.

### Economic benefits

Among the economic benefits of regenerative agriculture are: Climate resiliency; cost-efficient use of inputs; increased yields;

and healthy and nutritious foods.

When it comes to climate resiliency, regenerative agriculture can result in farms becoming more resilient to droughts and floods, contributing to more stable crop yields.

For cost-efficient use of inputs, farmers who adopt regenerative approaches frequently have a reduced dependence on costly farm inputs such as fertilizers, which leads to better economic benefits.

Increased yields are the natural outcome of regenerative agriculture, with data suggesting sustainable farming practices can improve soil fertility and crop health, contributing to sustainable and higher yields in the long run.

Healthy and nutritious foods are also a major outcome of regenerative agriculture. This, as a strong on holistic and sustainable farming practices not only benefits the environment but also promotes the economic value of food through the production of healthier and more nutritious products.

In the second part of this column-series, I will discuss the global and local initiatives aimed at shifting to the "Second Agricultural Revolution" centered on regenerative agriculture.





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## San Miguel expands urban farming initiative

**S**AN Miguel Corp.'s (SMC) Backyard Bukid, initiated in 2021 to assist its service personnel during the pandemic, has grown into a vibrant urban farm at the company's head office complex, now cultivating 39 varieties of flowering plants and vegetables.

The urban farm, which now includes a plant nursery and 80 garden plots, also functions as a center for employee wellness, volunteerism, and training.

Replicated in several SMC facilities by the San Miguel Foundation, the project has recently been expanded through a partnership with Urban Farmers PH, enhancing the farm's diversity and variety of produce.

Apart from farmyard staples such as tomatoes, okra, and ampalaya, the farm also produces kale, romaine lettuce and other salad greens.

"I am proud to see the progress of our Backyard Bukid project. Apart from promoting urban agriculture, it has also become a space for our support staff to collaborate and learn life-long skills that will help them become more resilient and self-sufficient. I'm grateful to our partner, Urban Farmers PH, for helping us expand this project. Our goal is to extend this initiative to even more facilities, involve more employees, and encourage other companies to do the same," said SMC President and CEO Ramon S. Ang.

Louie Gutierrez, Urban Farmers PH founder and farmer-in-chief, said: "We're really happy and excited to be connecting with companies like San Miguel. The pandemic showed us that we need to have growing vegetables in idle lands in the city. We hope this project inspires SMC employees and other companies to get into agriculture because this is the future of our food."

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Awards, which recognizes organizations that offer solutions to social, environmental, and economic challenges.

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Support staff involved in the project dedicate an hour every morning and afternoon to tend to the farm. They also attend weekly plant care sessions with Urban Farmers PH.

"*Masayang masaya po ako sa Backyard Bukid. Maliban sa madami akong nakilalang bagong mga kaibigan, natuto po ako dito magtanim at mag-alaga ng mga halaman. Maraming, maraming salamat po kay Boss RSA at sa San Miguel at binigyan po kami ng project na ganito na napapakinabangan po namin,*" shares Backyard Bukid member Je-An Layva.

As one of the biggest and most diversified conglomerates in the country, SMC has launched various initiatives that aim to promote agriculture and assist local farmers.

In July 2020, the company opened Better World Diliman, a community center that serves as a ready market for excess produce from all over Luzon. To date, Better World Diliman has rescued over 950,000 kilograms of produce and helped some 4,500 farmers—and in the process, has helped reduce food waste from local farms.

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## Malaysia palm oil harvest gets boost from foreign worker move

**P**ALM oil output in Malaysia, the No. 2 supplier, could rise 5 percent this year after the government allowed plantations to hire foreign workers, said Joseph Tek, chief executive of the Malaysian Palm Oil Association.

The admission of new workers potentially means that an additional 5.2 million tons of fresh fruit bunches can be harvested, the top growers' group said in a statement. That translates into 1 million tons of crude palm oil, Tek said.

The extra tonnage would also generate revenue of close to 4 billion ringgit (\$845 million), bringing "significant relief" to the industry, which is grappling with a substantial shortage of 40,000 workers, the group said. The news pressured benchmark palm oil futures in Kuala Lumpur trading.

The government has been trying to reduce reliance on cheap foreign labor across many industries including manufacturing, construction and plantations, and seeks to regulate admission processes to prevent any issues

like forced labor, worker exploitation and human trafficking.

In March last year, the country temporarily suspended the application and approval process for foreign workers under a quota system in order to speed up the entry of workers already approved.

Malaysia's palm oil industry is heavily reliant on foreign labor. A chronic shortage of workers resulted in revenue losses estimated at 20 billion ringgit in 2022 and continued to curb growth in output last year.

Palm oil production in Malaysia totaled 18.55 million tons in 2023, and earlier this month the Palm Oil Board, which regulates the industry, predicted output of 18.75 million tons for this year. That's less than half the supply from top producer Indonesia, where output has expanded steadily in recent years.

The association represents over 40 percent of the oil palm area in Malaysia. Members include some of the top plantation companies such as Sime Darby Plantation Bhd, Kuala Lumpur Kepong Bhd, IOI Corp.

and FGV Holdings Bhd.

Palm oil futures in Kuala Lumpur climbed as much as 0.9 percent to 3,985 ringgit a ton on Wednesday, before paring gains to 3,955 ringgit by midday.

The higher output estimate is capping the rally, said Gnanasekar Thiagarajan, head of trading and hedging strategies at Kaleesuwari Intercontinental. The move to allow more foreign workers "adds to supply woes," he said.

### Tropical cyclone

**A**TROPICAL cyclone has formed off Australia and is expected to cross the coast later Thursday, weeks after a storm unleashed a deluge in Queensland state that damaged crops and inundated homes.

Cyclone Kirrily has developed in the Coral Sea and is expected to strengthen as it tracks toward Queensland, according to the Bureau of Meteorology. The storm, which is currently a Category 1 system, is forecast to make landfall between Cardwell and Bowen, the weather bureau said.

Queensland is still counting the costs of

Cyclone Jasper, which the Insurance Council of Australia declared a "catastrophe," after the storm dumped heavy rain across the far north that led to widespread flooding. It's the first time that two systems have hit the state weeks apart since 2015.

"The cumulative effect on farms and communities who are hit with consecutive weather events is incredibly difficult," said Jo Sheppard, the chief executive officer of the Queensland Farmers' Federation. Sugar cane, mango, pineapple, avocado, chicken and dairy farmers could be impacted, she added.

Queensland accounts for 95 percent of Australia's sugar output and any damage will affect the 2024 crop that will be harvested later this year.

After Kirrily crosses the coast, the cyclone is expected to quickly weaken to a tropical low, moving further inland and then west southwest across central Queensland, according to the bureau. Heavy to intense rainfall is likely during Friday and into the weekend, the weather forecaster said. **Bloomberg News**

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## Soybeans, wheat soar

SINGAPORE- Chicago soybean futures rose further on Wednesday, with prices climbing to their highest in more than a week on support from short-covering, although expectations of record South American supplies limited the gains.

Wheat rose after closing almost unchanged on Tuesday, while corn ticked higher.

"Managed funds are covering short positions, which is supporting soybean prices," said one trader in Singapore.

"On the fundamental front, the market is well supplied with South

American harvest likely to gain momentum."

Commodity funds were net buyers of CBOT soybean, soymeal, soyoil, corn and wheat futures contracts on Tuesday, traders said.

The most-active soybean contract on the Chicago Board of Trade (CBOT) added 0.2 percent to \$12.41-1/4 a bushel, after climbing earlier in the session to its highest since Jan. 12 at \$12.42-1/4 a bushel.

Wheat rose 0.7 percent to \$6.00-3/4 a bushel and corn gained 0.2 percent at \$4.47-1/2 a bushel.

- Reuters