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Still black and blue, PH agri meets old foe yet again

By **Jordeene B. Lagare**
@jordeenelagare

The Department of Agriculture (DA) admits the El Niño-induced dry spell and external price and supply shocks would be the biggest threats to the industry this year.

Against this backdrop, Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. wants the entire DA staff to undertake a "very big mission": to increase local production and lower the cost of producing agricultural commodities for the sake of both Filipino consumers and producers.

"The entire Philippines is watching us," Laurel says. "And because the country's attention is focused on us, we have to perform well."

The swine industry, yet to fully recover from the mounting losses due to African swine fever (ASF), assures they will keep producing hogs even as production volume would be relatively unchanged.

"This extension is further damaging the confidence of local swine farmers, as farm-gate prices have been greatly affected, currently averaging P175 per kilogram, which is below the cost of production," Pork Producers Federation of the Philippines Inc. president Rolando Tambago says.

National Federation of Hog Farmers Inc. president Chester Warren Tan says production will



Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr.
—MARIANNE BERMUDEZ

continue as scheduled even if they anticipate a slow recovery following the retention of low import duty on meat.

"Hog production will carry on but to be honest, we believe the sector's recovery will slow down because of what happened (the extension of lowered import tariffs). But it does not mean production will stop," Tan says.

Tambago pegs domestic pork output to remain the same as 2023 "with possible overall year-end negative growth."

Traders are not that keen to bring in more imported meat either as Filipinos cut back on their pork and beef consumption amid retail prices remaining high.

Meat Importers and Traders Association president emeritus Jesus Cham says meat imports would remain almost the same despite the temporary modification of tariffs providing "more



SOWING SEASON Rice farmers in Barangay Bakero in Cabanatuan City start planting in this photo taken on Jan. 17 to keep up with the scheduled irrigation of the National Irrigation Administration in time for the dry cropping season in Nueva Ecija. All seven provinces in Central Luzon are now experiencing a dry spell and a drought due to the continuing strong El Niño phenomenon at the start of this year. —ARMAND GALANG

stability and certainty."

"We have seen less imports in 2023 versus 2022. However, if consumption recovers and local pork remains high priced then there could be more," Cham says.

For his part, Federation of Free Farmers national manager Raul Montemayor says the tariff reduction "sends the wrong signals to farmers at a time when we need them to expand production."

Misleading Marcos

Montemayor believes President Marcos was blindsided when he made the decision, adding, "The economic managers withheld vital info from the president and effectively misled him."

Groups claim the imposition of lower tariff rates since 2021 has

failed to bring down retail prices of food in the market. Aside from losing billions of pesos in revenues, they argue it did not diversify the country's sources of imported goods, specifically rice.

Earning the ire of many industry players is Executive Order (EO) No. 50, which extended the validity of reduced import tariffs on rice, corn and meat until the end of 2024.

Signed last Dec. 22, 2023, the EO maintained the tariff rate on imported rice at 35 percent for both in-quota and out-quota imports.

For meat (fresh, chilled, or frozen), the import duty is maintained at 15 percent for in-quota and 25 percent for out-quota. In the case of imported corn, the

import duty remained at 5 percent for in-quota and 15 percent for out-quota.

The import duties, subject to a semestral review, are meant to keep food prices lower on the back of El Niño, the continued spread of ASF and the export ban in some countries.

Rizal Commercial Banking Corporation chief economist Michael Ricafort says the government needs to perform a "delicate" balancing act to manage any potential risk from EO No. 50.

Ricafort says this can be achieved by providing and managing better information, especially on demand-supply balance, to prevent undue competition with local production when there is a glut or oversupply.

Needed investments

The DA also says at least P1.3 trillion in investments would be needed over the next few years to boost rice production and cut agricultural waste.

Laurel says P1.2 trillion would go to the irrigation of 1.2 million hectares of farm lands dedicated to rice and some P90 billion would be earmarked for building integrated rice mill and warehouse complexes.

For this year alone, the agency set aside P1 billion to construct four cold storage facilities, mainly at the Food Terminal Inc. (FTI) complex in Taguig City.

These storage facilities, the

DA says, will address oversupply and minimize postharvest losses, particularly from the spoilage of vegetables from Benguet.

It intends to develop a chiller warehouse dedicated to vegetables and other high-value crops on a 1.3-hectare section of FTI.

With a project cost of P500 million, the warehouse will feature a processing plant and trading area. This would prioritize farmers' produce for buffer stocking.

The Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) is yet to publish the latest reading on agricultural production in 2023. Likewise, the DA is yet to provide the growth target for this year as it is calibrating the projections as of press time.

Even so, the agency expects palay output to remain at the 20 million metric ton (MT) level given the possible constraints of El Niño on production.

Despite the gloomy outlook provided by industry stakeholders, DA spokesperson and assistant secretary Arnel de Mesa says agriculture production would grow albeit only in the 3- to 4-percent range.

The country's farm output has been on a downtrend for the last three years after logging a modest increase in 2019.

Based on data from the PSA, agriculture output fell by 0.1 percent in 2022, smaller than the decline of 1.7 percent and 1.2 percent in 2021 and 2020, respectively. **INQ**



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Where to next, DA?

When the government proclaims anticorruption moves sans follow through, don't expect these will ever become reality.

There is a big risk that this may actually become the end result of an important anticorruption announcement of the Department of Agriculture (DA) made last Jan. 5. This was done during a national meeting of the private sector-led regional agricultural and fisheries councils (RAFCs).

The Commission on Audit had earlier reported unliquidated and unexplained expenses scandalously amounting to one-third of the DA budget for each of the years 2020, 2021 and 2022. The Agrifisheries Alliance (AFA) representing three coalitions (farmers and fisherfolk, agribusiness and science and academe) had requested the Senate Blue Ribbon and agriculture committees to investigate this problem. No response was ever given, which we find puzzling.

RCEP conditionality

Not to be discouraged, the AFA proceeded to push for the restoration of a successful anticorruption practice in the DA. Thankfully, senators used it as a condition that will make or break the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).

If such is not met, a provision in the ratification document of the trade deal states

COMMENTARY

ERNESTO M. ORDONEZ

that: "The Senate of the Philippines may recommend to the President the withdrawal from the Agreement."

Almost a year since the RCEP was ratified on Feb. 21, 2023, this conditionality has yet to be effected: for the DA regional executive directors (REDs) to provide the private sector-led regional agriculture and fisheries councils a complete list of projects for transparency's sake. For without a list, what projects can be monitored?

Thankfully, last Jan. 5, Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu-Laurel Jr. used strong political will in directing the REDs to give these lists to the councils. Regrettably, the action taken by the REDs on this issue has been very slow.

In the Jan. 22 Inquirer editorial, it stated that the DA wanted a much larger budget "to increase agriculture productivity, lower food costs, ensure food security, and make farming and fisheries attract private sector investors."

Indeed, the agriculture share in the total budget has been averaging just 2 percent in the past few years. Note that Vietnam, once our closest rival, has been hitting 6 percent.

And even with a small-ish amount lost to corruption, our agriculture will surely continue its rapid decline.

Cooperation

Three follow-up recommendations must be implemented immediately:

First, there is a need for a one- or two-day workshop between the REDs and the regional council leaders. They should agree on their roles, responsibilities and expectations.

Resolving unliquidated and unexplained expenses is challenging since it also involves funds that the DA devolved to local governments, many of which may not wish to cooperate.

There should be a uniform set of policies, procedures and documents for systematic monitoring and accountability. This must include a reward and punishment system.

Second, there has to be adequate monitoring budget. Most heads have complained they could not do their desired way of monitoring because the REDs have been telling them there was no adequate budget for such.

Elected interim overall RAFC head Buen Mondejar suggested that a certain percentage (i.e., 2 percent to 3 percent) of a program's budget be allocated for monitoring, consultation and complementary activities. This was unanimously advocated by all the

heads and approved by Laurel.

Third, an incident uncovered during the 2023 limited monitoring should be acted upon and parties involved penalized. Mondejar specifically mentioned a P200,000-worth corn shelter whose final price tag showed P1 million. Told it was just typographical error, he pointed out that the same issue appeared in all four provinces of his region. No action has so far been taken on this.

We also heard about the discovery of a nonexistent albeit fully funded road. Mondejar was told the infrastructure can be found in another barangay. Which barangay, one might ask? No information was given. End of story.

He argued that if penalties are not meted out vis-a-vis private sector findings, monitoring would simply become a farce.

After such a long wait, the first step toward transparency is finally here. Without a follow through, however, one can already read a corrupt individual's thought bubble: Much ado about nothing. INQ



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



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Solon exhorts DA to implement stricter monitoring of agri products

AGRI party-list Rep. Wilbert Lee on Sunday said the Department of Agriculture (DA) must implement a more comprehensive supply monitoring of agricultural products to avoid fluctuating prices of farm products.

Lee was reacting to Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr.'s order on the suspension of onion imports in a bid to control declining prices.

"If last year, our problem was the high prices of onions, now our problem is, the price of onions is very much cheap," he said.

"We pity our local farmers because they are losing so much. The government should intensify supply monitoring," he said.

According to the Department of Agriculture, farm gate prices of onion have fallen to P50 to P70 per kilo due to the increased supply.

Prices could further drop next month when more onions are harvested.

Such is a complete opposite to the situation in December 2022 when onion prices skyrocketed to a record high P720 a kilo due to dwindling supply.

"Come to think of it, the DA is the one telling other areas in Nueva Ecija that prices of onions have dropped to P20 per kilo. Let us not wait for our farmers to throw away their harvest to cut their losses because it would be cheaper for them to do so," Lee said.

Nueva Ecija produces 97 percent of onions in Luzon which accounts for 65 percent to the country's onion supply.

"To be a winner, monitoring and projection must be systematic, especially that we have El Niño," Lee said. **Rio N. Araja**

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SITE VISIT. Agriculture Secretary Francisco P. Tiu Laurel, Jr. conducted a site visit and consultation with highland vegetable stakeholders at the Benguet Agri-Pinoy Trading Center (BAPTC) on Jan. 26. He also awarded P115.46 million worth of agri-fishery assistance to Cordillera farmers. **Jay Morales DA-OSecFran**



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CAR vegetable farmers targeted for assistance

THE Department of Agriculture (DA) said it will help vegetable producers in the Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR) to raise their output, with P130 million worth of financial aid, equipment, and irrigation projects.

In a statement on Sunday, Agriculture Secretary Francisco P. Tiù Laurel, Jr. said that the assistance is designed to increase the output of highland crops.

"To further enhance the region's output, we are turning over P417,000 worth of farm machinery to three cooperatives and associations in Mountain Province," Mr. Laurel added.

The region produces 80% of the country's highland vegetables.

He said that P454 million was also earmarked to fund three infrastructure projects in the area, while P13.9 million was allocated for an unspecified agriculture

project. The works are set to be completed within the year.

"The assistance we're providing will promote sustainable growth through better production, processing, marketing, and distribution of high-value crops," he added.

Mr. Laurel said that the DA is planning to tap local government units in the region to promote crop diversification, in an effort to stabilize farmer incomes and encourage the cultivation of other crops.

"The government can also tap the abundant harvests of farmers for distribution and sale in Kadiwa centers," he added, referring to the government-subsidized direct-from-farmers outlets.

CAR farmers earlier sought government intervention due to the low prices offered by traders for highland vegetables, forcing some of them to dump their crops.

The DA's regional office in CAR reported that the drop in prices

was due to a lack of buyers for the upland vegetables between Dec. 28 and Jan. 3.

Additionally, Mr. Laurel said that the agency has allotted P25.9 million for the rehabilitation of rice farms affected by Super Typhoon Egay (international name: Doksuri). The storm had affected 14,714 farmers in the area.

The Philippine Center for Postharvest Development and Mechanization disbursed P82.9

million worth of rice production and post-harvest equipment and facilities in Kalinga and Ifugao provinces.

Some P41.2 million worth of irrigation projects were also turned over to CAR irrigator associations, according to Mr. Laurel.

"These irrigation systems will increase yields on 195 hectares tilled by 299 farmers," the DA said. — **Adrian H. Halili**



Usual suspects involved in onion supply, price manipulation – group

The same individuals who have been identified as involved in hoarding and manipulating the supply and prices of onions during the investigation of the House of Representatives and the Senate are the same people behind the current slump in farmgate prices of the bulbs, according to the head of a farmers' group.

In a radio interview yesterday, Samahang Industriya ng Agrikultura executive director Jayson Cainglet said that the unscrupulous traders are still involved in old activities as nobody has been charged despite having been already identified during the probes conducted by the two houses of Congress.

"There were many hearings conducted for a long time, but sadly, nobody was charged despite the fact that those involved in the manipulation of prices (have been) identified," Cainglet added, referring to the hearings where certain individuals allegedly behind the hoarding and manipulation of the supply and prices of the bulbs were invited by the House committee on agriculture and food.

"Those involved in hoarding and manipulation in the last two years are the same group and individuals tagged by farmers who still control the supply and release of the onions," he said.

At the same time, Cainglet noted that while the Department of Agriculture (DA), through the Bureau of Plant Industry (BPI), did not allow the entry of onions from other countries in 2022, which resulted in the shortage in supply, there was over-importation last year after at least 21,000 metric tons (MT) of bulbs were imported.

"We are afraid that because of over-importation, it will affect the peak harvest in March (2024) and will further cause a slump in the farmgate price of onions," he noted.

Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. earlier confirmed the delay in the arrival of imported onions despite the deadline set for the arrival of 21,000 metric tons of outsourced bulbs on Dec. 31 last year.

Laurel said that at least 99 MT of imported onions entered the country between Jan. 1 and Jan. 15.

He had already ordered a moratorium on the importation amid the decrease in the farmgate price of the bulbs.

"The farmgate price of onions is down and it is almost equivalent to the cost of production, that is why onion farmers are crying," Cainglet said.

He added that DA and BPI officials should be made accountable for failure to do their jobs.

"Even if (officials) are not in cahoots with unscrupulous traders, they should be made accountable over the failure to control the importation and monitor the cold storage. During the hearings, they admitted that they have no inventory of local production, that's why when the harvest comes, there is an oversupply (because of the flooding of imported onions)," Cainglet said.

Former agriculture secretary and Federation of Free Farmers national president Leonardo Montemayor has said that farmers in major onion-producing provinces of Pangasinan, Nueva Ecija and Mindoro Occidental suffer over huge drops in farmgate prices as the bulbs are now priced as low as P10 per kilo amid the late arrival of onion imports.

Montemayor added that the slump in farmgate price was also aggravated by the widespread worm infestations and reduced irrigation amid the impact of El Niño.

Based on monitoring of the DA, the retail prices of local onions remain high between P100 and P170 per kilo; local white onions between P60 and P130 per kilo; imported red onions between P80 and P120 and imported white onions between P80 and P140 per kilo.

– Bella Cariasio



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P2.7B invested under DA program

A TOTAL of P2.7 billion has been invested by the Department of Agriculture (DA) for its Philippine Rural Development Project (PRDP) Scale-up.

Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel said over the weekend that 104 infrastructure and enterprise subprojects were successfully launched across the country through the PRDP Scale-up.

"Three infrastructure subprojects worth P454 million and one enterprise subproject worth P13.9 million are expected to be completed this year," Laurel said.

Recognizing the Cordillera Administrative Region's (CAR) significant contribution in supplying nearly 80 percent of the country's highland vegetables, Laurel said that the government has delivered over P130 million in financial assistance, equipment, and irrigation initiatives for farmers in the region.

This support aims to boost vegetable production and crop diversification and enhance post-harvest infrastructure to ensure stable incomes for farmers and a steady vegetable supply.

The DA will also turn over P417,000 worth of farm machines to three farmer cooperatives and

associations in the Mountain Province to be funded under the PRDP Scale-up.

"The assistance we're providing is seen to promote sustainable growth through better production, processing, marketing, and distribution of high-value crops," the Agriculture chief said.

Laurel said that the Agriculture department's rural development initiative for CAR has successfully executed 59 projects valued at P170 million, benefiting 74 groups and farmer cooperatives.

Additionally, he suggested that the government could utilize the abundant harvests from farmers for distribution and sale in Kadiwa centers.

Laurel also revealed plans to construct cold storage facilities in various locations such as Benguet, La Union, Mindoro, Quezon province and Taguig City to prolong the shelf-life of highland vegetables.

Financial assistance was also distributed to rice farmers affected by Typhoon "Egay" during Laurel's visit to Baguio City. Farm equipment and facilities and over seven irrigation projects were given to irrigators groups under the Rice Competitiveness Enhancement Fund (RCEF).

"A total of P25.9 million had been set aside for the rehabilitation of more than 8,200 hectares of rice fields damaged by Typhoon Egay. A total of 14,714 farmers were affected by Egay," said Laurel.

The DA also reported that various initiatives have been undertaken to enhance agricultural productivity and support local farmers in the Philippines. This includes the allocation of P82.9 million for rice production equipment and facilities in Kalinga and Ifugao provinces, funded by RCEF.

About P619.2 million from the same fund has been distributed to over 122,000 small-scale farmers across six provinces in CAR. Completed irrigation projects worth P41.2 million have been handed over to irrigators associations from the same region to improve yield in 195 hectares of farmland.

The Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources, for its part, has also provided support by delivering a fish landing center and fish cages valued at P5.85 million to fisherfolk groups in Apayao. These efforts aim to boost agricultural productivity and empower local farming communities.

JANINE ALEXIS MIGUEL

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Tighter monitoring of food supply pushed

THE Department of Agriculture (DA) should closely monitor the supply of food products to prevent price fluctuations, according to a lawmaker.

AGRI Party-list Rep. Wilbert T. Lee issued the call after Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. ordered the suspension of onion imports in a bid to prevent onion prices from falling.

"Kung noong nakaraang taon, ang problema natin ay napakamahal ng presyo ng sibuyas, ngayon,

ang problema naman natin ay sobrang mura na nito," he said in a statement.

"Kawawa naman po ang ating mga lokal na magsasaka dahil sa huli, sila ang malulugi at magdurusa. Kaya paigtingin pa sana ng gobyerno ang supply monitoring para maiwasan ang mga ganitong sitwasyon."

According to the DA, farm gate prices of onion have fallen to P50 to P70 per kilo due to the increased supply. Prices could further drop next month when more onions are

harvested.

This is a complete opposite to the situation in December 2022 when onion prices skyrocketed to a record high P720 a kilo due to dwindling supply.

"Isipin ninyo, ang DA na mismo ang nagsabi na sa ibang mga lugar sa Nueva Ecija, bumagsak na sa P20 kada kilo ang presyo ng sibuyas. Let us not wait for our farmers to throw away their harvest to cut their losses because it would be cheaper for them to do so," the

Bicolano lawmaker said.

Nueva Ecija produces 97 percent of onions in Luzon. Luzon, meanwhile, contributes 65 percent to the country's onion supply.

"Dapat mas maayos ang monitoring and projection natin lalo na at mayroon pang El Niño. Mahirap kapag nasa kasagsagan na tayo ng tagtuyot ay saka pa lang natin mare-realize na kailangan pala natin mag-angkat," Lee said.

"On the flip side, mahirap din na kapag umaapaw na tayo sa supply at bagsak na bagsak na ang presyo ng mga farm goods ay saka pa lang tayo titigil sa importasyon."



HEALTH ALERT

DOH WARNS VS RABIES AMID CASE UPTICK

By **Dexter Cabalza**
@dexcabalzaINQ

The Department of Health (DOH) is calling on the public to become responsible pet owners and have their furry friends vaccinated amid the increase in the number of cases of rabies, a fatal disease, in the country.

According to data from the DOH, a total of seven cases of rabies have been reported nationwide in the first two weeks of the month, from Jan. 1 to Jan. 13—46-percent down from the 13 cases reported from Dec. 17 to Dec. 31.

This was a better figure from the 63-percent increase of 13 rabies cases recorded from Dec. 17 to Dec. 31, from the mere eight cases reported from the previous two weeks.

The DOH said of the seven latest rabies cases, five were caused by dogs, while the two were caused by cats. Four of these were domesticated (or homegrown pets), while the three were stray animals.

Of the seven animals that caused the rabies cases, four were unvaccinated, while only one had been vaccinated. The other remaining animals had unknown vaccination history.

According to the DOH, the National Capital Region, Ilocos Region, Calabarzon, Bicol Region, Western Visayas, Northern Mindanao, Soccsksargen and the Bangsamoro Region showed increases in rabies cases in the recent four weeks.

The DOH noted that the case fatality rate of rabies is almost 100 percent. That is, once clinical symptoms appear to a human, rabies will lead to death.

Vaccinate pets

Despite being vaccine-preventable, rabies is the cause of more than 59,000 human deaths each year. In the Philippines, at least 200 deaths annually were caused by rabies.

"Rabies kills. Pets such as cats and dogs may carry rabies and infect their owners. Stray cats and dogs may likewise do so," the DOH said.

"Prevention is always better than cure: all cats and dogs must be vaccinated against rabies, and all animal bites must be brought to medical attention immediately," it added.

Under the Anti-Rabies Act of 2007, the Department of Agriculture-Bureau of Animal Industry is mandated to lead in the control and eradication of animal and human rabies. INQ



Agriculture output rebound seen possible in 2023 on base effects

By Adrian H. Halili
Reporter

A REBOUND in agricultural output was deemed likely in 2023, with analysts citing the low base the industry is coming off in 2022.

"We forecast growth of 1.3% this 2023 with crops and poultry contributing significantly," former Agriculture Secretary William D. Dar said in a text message.

"Very hard to determine. But since we are coming from a low base in 2022, I would not be surprised if there is a slight uptick in output in real terms," Federation of Free Farmers National Manager Raul Q. Montemayor said in a Viber message.

If the forecasts are borne out, they would reverse the 0.1% contraction in the value of production in agriculture and fisheries in 2022, at constant 2018 prices.

The decline in 2022 output was due to weak production in crops and fisheries, according to the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA).

Agriculture production fell 0.3% in the third quarter of 2023.

Agriculture accounts for about a tenth of gross domestic product and around a quarter of all jobs.

Earlier, Agriculture Assistant Secretary and Spokesperson Arnel V. de Mesa told reporters that the DA is expecting "positive growth" in agriculture output for 2023 though the growth would fall below 3-4%.

Mr. De Mesa said that the lack of major typhoons and disasters during the fourth quarter likely improved overall farm output for the year.

The DA's official target is 2.3%-2.5% growth in 2023.

Mr. Montemayor said that the growth in production would be buoyed by "generally good weather"

and higher farmgate prices, mainly for palay or unmilled rice.

The National Food Authority (NFA) raised buying prices for palay in September to P19-23 per kilogram for dry and P16-19 per kilo for wet palay.

Palay production for 2023 was initially estimated to have grown 1.53% to 20.06 million metric tons (MT), exceeding the 20 million MT target set earlier by the DA.

"Historical high, yes, but actually a minimal increase, not even enough to offset population and demand growth. (Gross Value Added) palay grew much larger due to an increase in farmgate prices," Mr. Montemayor added.

The national farmgate price for palay rose 14% to an average of P19.89 per kilo in 2023.

National daily consumption of rice is equivalent to 33,983.5 MT or 679,670 bags, according to the NFA.

Elias Jose M. Inciong, president of the United Broiler Rais-

ers Association, said the poultry segment has continued to be a growth driver in overall agricultural production.

However, the H5N1 Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI), or bird flu, continues to hinder further growth, Mr. Inciong added.

"HPAI will always be a concern unless and until we have effective vaccines for breeders and layers," he said.

In November, the DA released guidelines for the deployment of bird flu vaccines to be administered to commercial farms for layer chicken, layer chicken breeders, broiler chicken breeders, free-range breeders, grandparent broiler breeders, as well as small-hold layer/native chicken, duck, game fowl, turkey, and goose farms.

The DA said that it will give priority in deploying protective emergency vaccines to areas with a high concentration of HPAI cases.



DA: Shear line agri damage reaches P137 M

The shear line's damage to the agriculture sector in Davao and Caraga reached P136.57 million covering at least 9,043 hectares of rice and corn, according to the Department of Agriculture (DA).

In its latest bulletin, the DA said the loss in production volume totaled 1,141 metric tons and affected at least 6,923 farmers.

"Most of the damage and losses were incurred at the vegetative stage of rice and corn," the DA said.

At least P124.38 million rice plantations were affected by rains and flooding brought by the shear line, covering 8,536 hectares of land, the DA added.

As for corn production, the damage

reached P6.58 million affecting 197 hectares.

Damage to high-value crops reached P5.61 million covering 310 hectares.

Around P18.5 million worth of rice, corn and assorted vegetable seeds are ready for distribution once farmers are ready to replant, the DA noted.

Affected farmers could avail themselves of the P25,000 loan under the Survival and Recovery Loan Program from the Agricultural Credit Policy Council, payable in three years at zero interest.

The Quick Response Fund will be tapped for the rehabilitation of affected areas, the DA added. — Bella Carias



Bohol to host 7th farm tourism conference

AFTER a 5-year lull due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Provincial Government of Bohol is hosting the resumption of the Philippine Farm Tourism Conference set at The Bellevue Resort in Panglao from February 26 to 28.

Now on its 7th edition, the international event is organized by the International School of Sustainable Tourism (ISST) and supported by the Southeast Asian Regional Center for Graduate Study and Research in Agriculture (Searca) based in Los Baños, Laguna.

Themed, "Farm Tourism: Consciousness for Healthy Living and New Experiences," the conference will showcase lessons from the pandemic, and share best practices which seeks to provide social and economic empowerment to communities.

The event is also supported by the Asean Centre for Biodiversity, the Department of Tourism, Tourism Promotions Board, Department of Agriculture—Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources, Philippine Exporters Confederation (Philexport), the Department of Trade and Industry, and Philippine Airlines as the official carrier.

According to ISST President Mina Gabor, this year's conference will focus on sustainable growth through the cultivation of fruit and vegetable farms, aquaculture and artisanal fisheries, and green investments in farm tourism.

The former tourism chief said that the event will also have a DTI-led exhibit of agricultural produce and by-products under its One Town One Product program, and a farm tour which will highlight the notable farm tourism sites.

Conference topics include hospitality industry embracing sustainable farm-to-table concept, processing fruits and vegetables—key to food security, right marketing and revenue, value added benefits of artisanal fisheries, revival of the country's multi-million seaweeds industry, the pampano fish as upcoming star of aquaculture, and green investment in agriculture and tourism in the Asian setting.

The conference will also confer the 4th Lakbay Bukid Awards to five local and foreign individuals and organizations who have contributed to the development of farm tourism in Asia.

Bohol First District Congressman Edgar Chatto noted that the event will be an opportunity to showcase the island province as the country's first Unesco Global Geopark in 2023 which recognized its rich terrestrial and marine attributes spread out in a 8,808-sq km area.

As chairperson of the House of Representatives Climate Change Committee, Chatto will also be one of the resource persons in the 3-day gathering.

Participants will immerse in farm sites, such as Loboc Cacao Farm, Asin Tibuok makers in Alburquerque, Kinaiyahan Forest Park in Bilar, Lasang Cacao Farm in Maribojoc, Green Thumb Farm in Corella, South Farm in Panglao, Bohol Bee Farm in Dauis, Manay's Farm in San Miguel, Ubay Dairy Farm, and Jagna Recycling Facility and Eco Farm.

The group will also visit the province's iconic attractions of Tarsier Sanctuary in Corella and the Chocolate Hills Park in Carmen.



3K Zambales farmers receive financial aid under FARM program

By Jester Manalastas

ABOUT 3,000 farmers from Zambales received financial assistance under a new program aptly named Farmers Assistance for Recovery and Modernization (FARM)

This, according to Speaker Ferdinand Martin Romualdez, aims to help struggling rice farmers and at the same time aid in increasing the buffer stock of rice of the Marcos government.

The FARM program is another initiative of Speaker Romualdez and the House of Representatives in collaboration with the National Food Authority (NFA), Department of Agriculture (DA), and the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) as part of President Ferdinand "Bongbong" R. Marcos Jr.'s commitment to help the agricultural sector.

"Bahagi pa rin ito ng direktiba ng ating Pangulong Ferdinand Marcos Jr. na tulungan ang ating mga rice farmers na nagkukulang sa panggas-tos sa pamilya at sa kanilang sinasaka. This also helps the Marcos administration's efforts to enhance our food security," Romualdez said.

"We will give our farmers cash aid for now, and we will encourage them to sell at least 100 kilos of their produce of rice to the NFA to boost our buffer stock. This way, natutulungan na natin ang mga kababayan nating magsasaka at nakakatulong naman sila sa food security ng ating bansa," he added.

The program, which coincides with the opening of the two-day Bagong Pilipinas Serbisyo Fair in Zambales Saturday, aims to support the NFA's mission to increase its buffer stock, which can be used in case of emergencies, and also to assist struggling rice farmers by legislative districts of the House of Representatives.

Under the FARM program, the DA identifies local farmers selected by the DA.

For the Zambales distribution, a total of 3,000 farmers will receive P2,000 each under the Assistance to Individuals in Crisis Situations (AICS)

program of the DSWD.

In turn, the farmers are encouraged to sell at least 100 kilos of rice to the NFA.

The beneficiaries will be from the congressional district of Zambales Rep. Doris "Nanay Bing" E. Maniquiz.

The program was designed for the said dual purposes, addressing a dilemma by the NFA to accomplish their mandate to ensure that there is sufficient rice stockpile.

The current buying price of NFA is at P23 per

kilo, discouraging farmers from selling to the agency and instead sell their rice to private sectors that offer much more competitive prices.

"Following the approach used in our CARD and the ISIP for Youth programs, we will visit every legislative district of the House of Representatives, in line with President Marcos' directive, to ensure equitable distribution of government aid throughout the countryside," Speaker Romualdez said.



SMC says urban farming initiative reaping success

Conglomerate San Miguel Corp. is heeding the call of the United Nations' Food and Agricultural Organization to promote urban farming and sustainable agriculture.

Its Backyard Bukid program, initiated in 2021 to assist 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," says San Miguel president and chief executive officer Ramon S. Ang.

"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," Ang said.

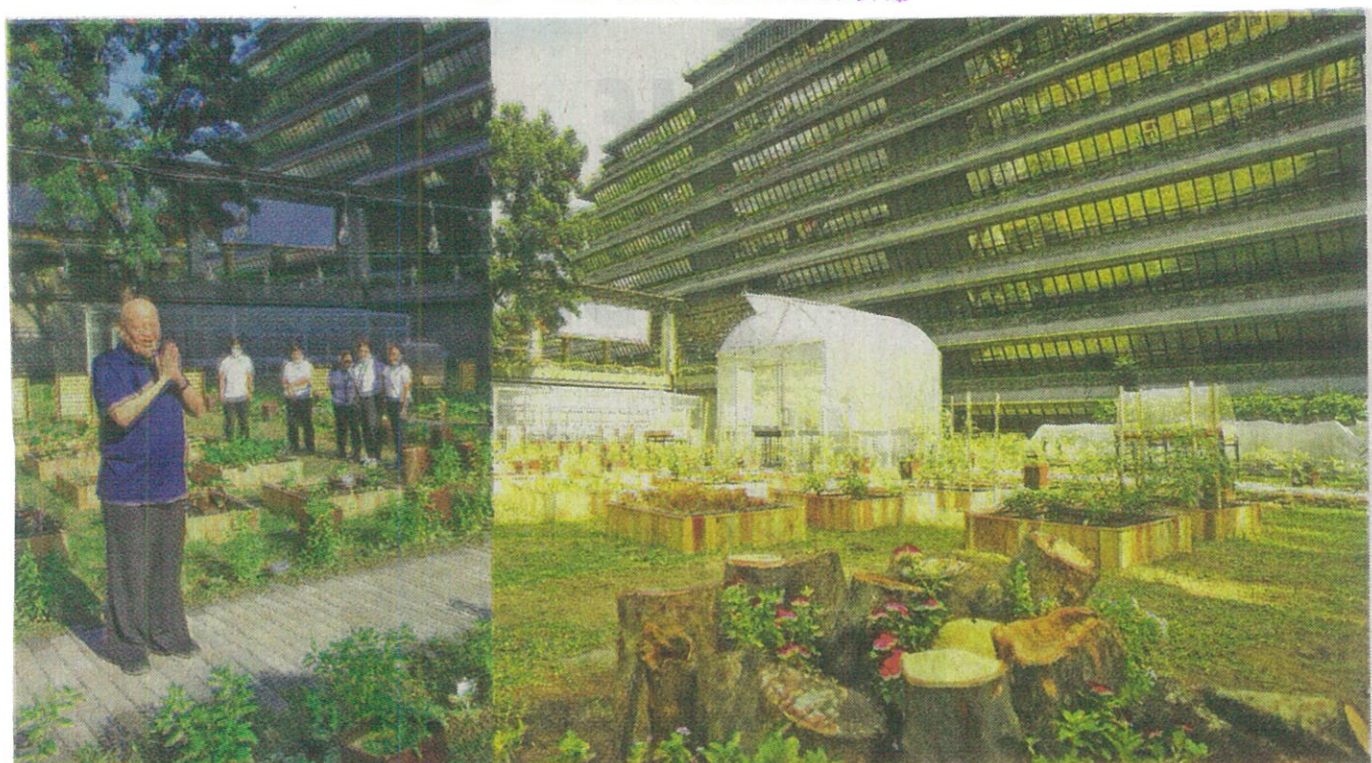
Louie Gutierrez, Urban Farmers PH founder and farmer-in-chief, said: "We're really happy and excited to be connecting with companies like San Miguel. The pandemic showed us that we need to have growing vegetables in idle lands in the city. We hope this project inspires SMC employees and other companies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

The FAO has advocated urban and peri-urban agriculture (UPA), or practices that yield food and other outputs through agricultural production and related processes taking place on land and other spaces within cities and surrounding regions.

It involves urban and peri-urban actors, communities, methods, places, policies, institutions, systems, ecologies and economies, largely using and regenerating local resources to meet changing needs of local populations while serving multiple goals and functions.

At least 55 percent of the world's population already lives in urban areas and up to 70 percent of all food produced globally is destined for consumption in city spaces, according to FAO.

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San Miguel Corp. San Miguel president and chief executive officer Ramon S. Ang (left) surveys the urban vegetable farm beside the company's head office complex (right) in the Ortigas business district in Mandaluyong City.



Farmers call for focus on streamlined gov't, not Constitutional amendments

FARMERS said on Sunday that legislators need to pay more attention to governance issues and reducing red tape, rather than pushing plans to amend the 1987 Constitution, calling the need to shore up food security more urgent.

Gregorio A. San Diego, Jr., chairman of the Philippine Egg Board Association, said seven foreign broiler producers and large Philippine integrators are mainly concerned about red tape.

"All of them including us are all complaining about the increasing chicken meat-import and LGU (local government unit) regulations, (and) not about land ownership," Mr. San Diego said in a Viber message, referring to one of the proposed Constitutional reforms.

Last week, Albay Rep. Jose Ma. Clemente S. Salceda said amending the Constitution to ease restrictions on land ownership will help address food security issues.

"The key to boosting food production and reducing food prices in the Philippines is investment in agriculture," he said in a statement.

"These restrictions cover ownership, lease, transfer, and even foreign management — leaving foreign investors very little room for involvement in local agriculture," Mr. Salceda, who also heads

the House ways and means committee, added.

United Broiler Raisers Association (UBRA) President Elias Jose M. Inciong said amending the charter is not the answer to the Philippines' agricultural crisis, especially if imports remain a priority over local production.

"The crisis is mainly traceable to the failure to implement the design of our treaty commitments (domestic support, trade remedies, and quarantine systems [in] sanitary and phytosanitary systems) in the World Trade Organization (WTO)," he said in a Viber chat.

Mr. Inciong, a lawyer, said that past administrations have focused on import liberalization, weakening producers.

"The sector is a victim not only of neglect but also of an insidious false narrative that it is protected by high tariffs," he said, also citing the government's poor implementation of current agricultural laws as well as insufficient budget support.

He urged Congress to instead focus on implementing the Agriculture and Fisheries Modernization Act (Republic Act No. 8435), the magna carta for small farmers (RA 7607), and the Food Safety Act (RA 10611).

Provisions of the Local Government Code must also be reviewed,

particularly on zoning, imposition of fees, and LGUs authority over quarantine and food safety matters, Mr. Inciong added.

Leonardo A. Lanzona, who teaches economics at the Ateneo de Manila, said passing laws that would allow agrarian reform beneficiaries to negotiate fair and efficient contracts with foreign corporations without giving away their land ensures a more equitable partnership that will make robust production more likely.

"In effect, the agrarian reform beneficiaries can be part-owners of these corporations with their land as their input to the potential production," Mr. Lanzona said via Facebook Messenger chat.

He added that ownership does not correlate with agricultural production. "Land is so contentious that we cannot just open the constitution and allow big foreign corporations to take over the land."

Congress has revived talks to amend the 1987 Constitution to soften economic restrictions and admit more foreign investors.

The Senate is set to conduct its own review of the charter, specifically on easing economic constraints on public utilities, advertising, and education. — **Beatriz Marie D. Cruz**



Phl peanut capital reeling from high labor cost

By **BELLA CARIASO**

The municipality of Enrile in Cagayan stands to lose its title of being the country's peanut capital as farmers are discouraged from planting the crop due to the high cost of labor.

Municipal councilor Pedro Taganguin, 70, of Barangay Lanna, said local farmers pay a lot for the cultivation of the farms as well as planting, weed removal and harvest of peanuts.

Taganguin said he has been planting peanuts in the past 20 years. He said farmers like him incur losses as they need to pay P150 per worker during planting and harvest, as well as hire tractors and equipment.

During the launch of the Peanut Farms and Industry Encounters through Science and Technology Agenda at the Cagayan State University recently, Enrile Mayor Miguel Decena Jr. warned that his town might lose its title as peanut capital of the country due to the decline in production.

Decena cited data from the municipal agriculture office, showing peanut plantations were down to 250 hectares in nine barangays.

He said peanut farmers could hardly afford to hire workers due to the high cost of labor.

The town was declared the Peanut Capital of the Philippines in 2015 by then agriculture secretary Proceso Alcala.

Taganguin said each farmer used to harvest a maximum of 150 kilos of peanuts. Now they can produce only 40 to 60 kilos of peanuts each, which traders buy at P40 per kilo.

He expressed hope the event would benefit local farmers and revitalize the local peanut production.

"We still want to plant (peanuts). What we want is support from the government," Taganguin said, noting that farmers need financial

assistance to cover the high cost of labor and production.

Meanwhile, Reynaldo Ebora, chief of the Philippine Council for Agriculture, Aquatic and Natural Resources Research and Development, said the event intends to revitalize the industry. He said the PCAARRD, through its Industry Strategic S&T Program for Legumes, targets to increase the country's peanut production from 1.24 tons to 3.0 tons per hectare.

The program aims to persuade local government units, investors, entrepreneurs, policymakers and other stakeholders to participate in food security programs as well as improve the peanut industry.

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EDITORIAL

A different onion crisis

During the 2022 Christmas holidays, Filipinos reeled from the eye-watering prices of red onions, which surged to over P700 a kilo, with no white onions to be had for onion rings, burgers and *bistek*. Onion memes provided some comic relief amid the crisis.

The government was not amused, and moved to ensure that for the 2023 holidays, there would be no repeat of the onion mess. Reversing its refusal to make timely importations of red and white onions in 2022, the government flooded the market last year with imports, paying little heed to local production. The result: onion prices have plummeted to levels that are making producers weep, at just P10 per kilo at the farm gate.

Consumers should be happy, and would be even happier if retail prices reflected the glut. But if the farm gate prices are accurate, some folks along the value chain are again making a killing from onions, with retail prices ranging from P90 to P140 – more than 10 times the buying price from farmers.

A farmers' group says the same persons behind the onion crisis in 2022 are the same ones behind the current slump in onion farm gate prices. The claim deserves to be investigated. Philippine agriculture production has a

wide room for expansion, but this requires people who see farming as their life's calling. In the past years, however, older generations of farmers have seen their children refusing to engage in agriculture. Farms including the terraced rice paddies in the Cordillera highlands are lying fallow as younger generations prefer to find jobs and livelihood opportunities elsewhere.

Seeing crops being dumped periodically or sold at a loss will hardly encourage interest in farming. For many years now, the government has been promising various forms of assistance to farmers, from planting to post-harvest and marketing. Yet the small-scale farmers who make up the majority of people in the country's agriculture sector continue to suffer from an exploitative system and the inadequacy of facilities such as cold storage for making their livelihood viable.

Several congressional investigations have been conducted, during which those behind a so-called onion cartel were even identified. If the farmers' group is correct in saying that the same unscrupulous people are behind the dirt-cheap farm gate prices of onions, more resolute action is needed to stop what should constitute economic sabotage.



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FARMERS' GROUP SEES HIGHER RICE IMPORTS

A FARMERS' organization sees higher rice imports this year despite elevated prices of the commodity in the global market.

Federation of Free Farmers (FFF) national manager Raul Montemayor also said that the record palay (unmilled rice) in 2023 was only a small improvement over the previous year.

"Our imports [will] continue to increase because our production is not catching up with the annual increase in population and domestic rice requirements," said Montemayor.

Despite the recent announcement of a record local rice harvest last year of a little over 20 million metric tons (MT), Montemayor said that "this is actually only a small improvement given that our 2021 output was already at 19.9 million MT."

In 2022, local rice production went down to 19.76 million MT. "A record crop in 2023 is just offsetting part of what we lost in 2022, and will not be enough to offset the growth in demand," said Montemayor.

Furthermore, he added that the Philippines' status as the top rice importer globally will depend on how large other countries will decide to

import.

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) forecast the Philippines to remain as the world's top importer of the commodity, estimated to reach 3.8 million MT this year.

Last year, inbound shipments of the staple totaled 3.6 million MT, down 5.9 percent from the record-high 3.82 million MT logged in 2022, according to DA's Bureau of Plant Industry.

Rizal Commercial Banking Corp. chief economist Michael Ricafort said that the Philippines has been one of the biggest rice importing countries for many years already.

"Especially now that there is a risk of El Niño drought that would reduce palay and rice output, especially if El Niño is severe, so targeted and managed rice importation would be the recourse," said Ricafort.

However, he added that this can be offset through government initiatives to boost rice agricultural productivity.

Higher rice prices at the world market coupled with the dry phenomenon leads to reduced rice production and in turn would also lead to some pick up in prices of the commodity, said Ricafort.

JANINE ALEXIS MIGUEL



'Milk imports fall on weak peso, high prices'

By JASPER EMMANUEL Y. ARCALAS
X@jearcalas

A WEAKER peso and high food prices likely slashed the Philippines's total milk imports by 15 percent year-on-year to 2.3 million metric tons (MMT) last year, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

FAO projected that the country's milk and milk products imports in 2023 could have fallen to 2.385 million metric tons (MMT), 421,000 metric tons (MT) lower than the 2.806 MMT recorded in 2022.

The estimated import volume

last year is even below the Philippines's 2.576 MMT average import volume in 2020-2021, according to the UN agency.

FAO noted that the eroded consumer purchasing power due to elevated inflation and currency depre-



BUSINESSMIRROR FILE PHOTO

ciation slashed the country's total dairy imports last year. A weaker currency would lead to higher milk prices for the Philippines as it virtually imports all of its dairy require-

dairy products is forecast at 84.0 million tons [in milk equivalent], down 1.0 percent from 2022, a slower pace of decline than the 4.2 percent registered in 2022," it said in its latest Dairy Market Review report published recently.

"The anticipated drop in world dairy trade in 2023 is primarily due to likely declines in imports by China, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia, partially compensated by higher imports by Brazil, Mexico, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, and Australia."

FAO noted that a contraction is expected across all the various milk products being imported by the Philippines last year, including butter, whey, whole milk powder and skim milk powder (SMP).

"International butter exports are forecast at 1.1 million tons in 2023, a drop of 2.0 percent year-

on-year, after reaching a record high in 2022," it said.

"The drop in trade reflects anticipated declines in imports by China, Indonesia, Bahrain and the Philippines."

Butter imports in the Philippines were estimated to drop by 8.5 percent year-on-year in 2023, according to FAO.

"Similarly, high inflation and slow economic growth in Indonesia and the Philippines would reduce consumer purchasing power, lowering butter imports by 25.4 percent and 8.5 percent, respectively," it said.

"[SMP] imports are forecast to drop in the Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia due to lower consumer purchasing power of some population segments due to high inflation and currency depreciation."

ments annually.

It also said the Philippines contributed to the drop in overall global dairy trade.

"In 2023, international trade in

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American producers set sights on local pet food sector

AMERICAN pet food makers would spend over \$1.3 million (about P73.177 million) this year to expand their exports in 10 markets, including the Philippines, United States-based Pet Food Institute (PFI) said.

The PFI recently announced that it has received a \$1.344-million funding under the US Department of Agriculture's Foreign Agricultural Service's (USDA-FAS) Market Access Program (MAP) this year.

The MAP program helps US food and agricultural exporters "expand" their shipments to key overseas markets.

PFI said the fund would be used to increase its exports to 10 markets where it is currently active: Brazil, the Caribbean, Central America, China, Colombia, Mex-

ico, the Middle East, the Philippines, South Korea, and Taiwan.

"The funds will be used to promote the benefits of complete and balanced US-made pet food to consumers in these markets," it said in a statement.

The PFI noted that US agricultural exports rose by more than \$24 for every dollar that they spent in the "development" of export markets through the MAP.

"The allocation of these funds to PFI is not just a win for the pet food industry, it is a win for the US agricultural industry," Nat Davies, PFI's Vice President of Business Operations and Programs said.

"Pet food makers use at least 8,000,000 [metric] tons of plant- and animal-based agricultural ingredients annually, investing \$6.9 billion into the economy to

manufacture pet food. This provides an economic boost to rural communities and helps strengthen the US economy," Davies added.

The Philippines has been part of PFI's MAP market in recent years due to its growing demand for pet food.

The PFI said its members produce the "vast majority" of all US pet food and treat products. Some of its members include Cargill, Mars Petcare US, Nestlé Purina PetCare Company, and Royal Canin, among others, according to the PFI's website.

Last year, the USDA-FAS in Manila projected that total pet food sales in the Philippines in 2023 would reach a record level of \$434 million, about 9.3 percent over the \$397 million recorded in 2022.

The USDA-FAS in Manila said

the Philippines's demand for pet foods has been constantly increasing in recent years due to the growing number of Filipino pet owners.

In fact, the Philippines ranked as the 9th largest market for US dog and cat food in 2021, according to the USDA-FAS in Manila. The US exported \$51 million worth of dog and cat food to the Philippines in 2021, it added.

The top dog and cat food supplier to the Philippines in 2021 were Thailand at \$71 million followed by the US and Europe (\$28 million), the USDA-FAS in Manila said.

"The Philippines offers a growing opportunity for US pet food. While people were confined to their homes during the pandemic, dog and cat adoptions increased and pet food consumption grew."

Jasper Emmanuel Y. Arcalas

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ACT-Agri Kaagapay kaisa sa panawagang pagkakaisa

Nakikisa ang ACT-Agri Kaagapay organization sa panawagang pagkakaisa ng pamahalaan, sa isinagawang "kick-off rally" ng Bagong Pilipinas sa Quirino Grandstand sa Maynila kahapon ng hapon.

Pinangunahan ni Virginia Rodriguez, pangulo ng ACT-Agri Kaagapay, ang kanyang grupo para ipakita ang kanilang mainit na suporta sa liderato ng Pangulong Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr.

Nagtungo ang grupo ng Ms. Rodriguez sa Luneta dakong alas-3:00 ng hapon para saksihan ang mga programang inilatag para sa mahalagang okasyon hinggil sa panawagan ng pagkakaisa.

"We support Bagong Pilipinas, we support President BBM, nais naming maging parte ng pagbabago para sa ating sarili, komunidad at bayan," ani Rodriguez.

Anya, ang pakikisa nila sa rally ay upang lalong mag-alab ang pag-asa ng bawat isang Pilipino na naghahangad na mapabuti ang bansa sa pamamagitan ng sama-samang tugon at aksiyon sa mga magagandang programa ng gobyerno.

Namigay din ng 'food pack', miryenda at mineral water ang grupo ni Rodriguez sa mga kapwa nila durhala sa rally.

Si Rodriguez ay dating reporter na ngayon ay isa nang negosyante at pilantropo. (Mer Layson)



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Calabarzon cops get training in mushroom farming

By Jane Eleda

CAMP BGEN VICENTE LIM, Canlubang, Calamba, Laguna. Personnel of the Police Regional Office 4A (Calabarzon) in this camp were trained on how to grow mushroom for additional income.

The mushroom propagation and hydroponic farming training was initiated by the PRO 4A Officers Ladies Club headed by its adviser, Mrs. Mary June T. Lucas, wife of PRO 4A Regional Director Brig. Gen. Paul Kenneth T. Lucas.

The training was part of Mrs. Lucas' advocacy on environmental protection and the "Gulayan sa Kampo" project.

The initiative aims to equip lawmen with knowledge about fresh and organic food and also to provide added income for every police personnel.

Fifty members of the Police Regional Office Calabarzon successfully completed the Mushroom Propagation and Hydroponic Farming training facilitated by the Regional Community Affairs and Development Division, in partnership with the local government of Calamba City.

During the activity, Calamba City senior agriculturist Sally G. Quilay, together with representatives from Adhika Group Calamba, a group engaged in community gardening, facilitated the lecture and demonstration proper in mushroom and hydroponic farming.

Selected personnel from the Regional Headquarters were taught how to culture edible mushrooms of



Members of the Police Regional Office 4A were taught on how to farm mushroom.

Photo courtesy of PRO4A PIO

different varieties. Lawmen were also trained how to make low-cost and low-maintenance hydroponic farming facilities using recycled materials, which require minimum budget requirements.

The activity concluded with the awarding of certificates to those who participated in the training.

A plaque of recognition was also given to the guests from the city government of Calamba and Adhika Group Calamba who served as lecturers and trainers.



SINAG dismayado, mga sibuyas smuggler lagare pa rin

PATULOY na namamag-yagpag ang smuggling ng sibuyas sa bansa dahil hindi naman nakasuhan at napakulong ng mga awtoridad ang mga bigat-ting smuggler at hoarder, ayon sa Samahang Industriya ng Agrikultura.

Sinabi ni SINAG Executive Director Jayson Cainglet na nawalan ng saysay ang isinagawang imbestigasyon ng Kamara de Representantes noong nakaraang taon dahil patuloy pa rin sa kanilang operasyon ang mga smuggler at hoarder ng sibuyas at iba pang produktong agrikultura.

"Yong hearing kasi na-

tin, ang haba, ang tagal, ang dami pero sa kasa-maang-palad wala siyang nakasuhan talaga na, 'yong sinabing nagsamantala, 'yong nagmanipula ng presyo," ani Cainglet sa radio interview.

"Kaya palagay na-



tin hindi natatakot 'yong mga nagsamantala noong nakaraang dalawang taon, sila pa rin 'yong sinasabi ng mga farmer natin na nagkokontrol ng supply at paglabas ng sibuyas," dagdag pa niya.

Dahil sa pagbaha ng mga imported na sibuyas,

maraming magsisibuyas, ang umiiyak na sa baba ng presyo ng kanilang inaani, ang iba ay nana-nalangin na mabawi manlang ang kanilang pinuhunan.

"Noong nakaraang dalawang taon, 'yong dapat mag-import, hindi nag-import.

Ngayon naman, sobra-sobra 'yong import kaya nag-

aalala tayo kasi 'yong peak harvest malapit na bandang March eh, kaya talagang tatamaan po 'yong farmgate," ani Cainglet. "Medyo bagsak ang farmgate nasa cost of production na kaya talagang umiiyak na 'yong magsisibuyas."



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Soybeans, corn decline

CHICAGO- US soybean futures sank to a one-week low on Friday and corn fell more than 1 percent as traders focused on improving prospects for South American harvests, analysts said.

Wheat fell 2 percent on profit-taking and slowing global export trade.

Chicago Board of Trade March soybeans settled down 13-3/4 cents at \$12.09-1/4 per bushel after dipping to \$12.08-1/2, the contract's lowest since Jan. 18.

CBOT March corn ended down 5-1/2 cents at \$4.46-1/4 a bushel and March wheat fell 12 cents to settle at \$6.00-1/4 a bushel.

Outlooks for large soy and corn crops in Argentina and optimism about Brazil's harvest set the tone. The Buenos Aires Grains Exchange on Thursday raised its estimate of Argentina's soybean crop to 52.5 million metric tons, up about 1 percent from its previous forecast, and pegged the corn crop at 56.5 million tons, up nearly 3 percent.

Given weather forecasts for welcome rains in Argentina early next month after a dry spell, "I think you will see bigger increases down the road," said Mark Soderberg, a market analyst with ADM Investor Services. - *Reuters*



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France drops plan to decrease farmers' diesel discount but protests to continue

MONTASTRUC-DE-SALIES, France — The French government dropped plans to gradually reduce state subsidies on agricultural diesel but that seems not enough for angry farmers surrounding Paris and still threatening to converge on the capital in their tractors.

After two weeks of protests that have spread across France, with irate farmers on Friday blocking a major highway out of Paris, Prime Minister Gabriel Attal announced a series of measures to ease financial and administrative pressure on farmers.

"We have decided to pursue our movement. The prime minister had not responded to all of our questions," Arnaud Rousseau, head of FNSEA, France's biggest farming union, told French TV station TF1.

Speaking earlier in a mountain village farm near the Spanish border, with his notes on a bale of hay, Mr. Attal said: "We will put agriculture above everything else."

He said a plan to phase out state support on diesel would be scrapped, red tape simplified and an appeal lodged with the European Union for a waiver on bloc-wide rules on fallow land. "We will stop this Kafka-esque system," said Mr. Attal, 34, France's new prime minister, in response to the first big crisis of his premiership.

"We will stop this planned trajectory of increasing tax on non-road diesel fuel." Mr. Attal also announced a raft of other steps designed to quell the unrest that has seen farmers spray manure over a public building and supermarket, dump hay bales in highways and empty the contents of trucks carrying fresh produce from neighboring countries.

France would remain opposed to signing the Mercosur free-trade deal, which farmers say will flood the country with cheaper Latin American meat and produce, he said.

France will also push to ease European Union rules forcing farmers to leave some of their land fallow.

Ahead of Mr. Attal's announcements, farmers had threatened to take their protest into central Paris. "We will go right into Paris to highlight our rage, our grievances," said farmer Matteo Legrand.

Some farmers called Mr. Attal's pledges an encouraging start, with the road blockade in southern France, where the French prime minister spoke with demonstrators after his announcements, to be lifted on Saturday.

"That is one blockade but there are 100 more blockades. What was announced (...) does not calm the anger," Mr. Rousseau said, adding he was waiting for an invitation from Mr. Attal to resume talks.

Earlier on Friday, the finance and farm ministers held emergency talks with food industry officials about fair prices for produce — a "number one priority" for farmers who say they are on the sharp end of the government's drive to lower consumer prices.

Finance Minister Bruno Le Maire said the government would "double down" on enforcing a law aimed at guaranteeing fair farmgate prices and vowed to be "pitiless" towards the supermarkets.

Mr. Le Maire has previously spent months pressuring food retail giants such as Carrefour and Danone to lower their prices after a phase of high inflation, thereby earning the ire of farmers.

France is the European Union's biggest agricultural producer. France's protests follow similar action in other European countries, including Germany and Poland, six months ahead of European elections in which the far right — for whom farmers represent a growing constituency — are seen making gains. — **Reuters**