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Agri sector grows 1.2 percent in 2023, PSA reports

By Othel V. Campos

THE country's agriculture grew by 1.2 percent in 2023, faster than the 0.6% output in 2022, driven by higher poultry and livestock production, increased fruit harvest, and record rice output, the Philippine Statistics Authority reported.

Agriculture contributed 9% of GDP

last year but employs around 25% of the 49.7 million Filipinos in the labor force as of November.

"We are pleased that agriculture has contributed positively to growth of the economy last year. But certainly, we could do more," said Department of Agriculture Secretary Francisco P. Tiù Laurel.

The country last year saw a record

rice harvest of 20.06 million metric tons, helping trim rice imports to 3.5 million metric tons from 3.8 million metric tons in 2022 and boosting farmers' income.

Financial and other assistance to farms from the Rice Competitiveness Enhancement Fund of the Rice Tariffication Law also helped increase rice output.



DA to boosts farm sector with foreign partnerships

THE Department of Agriculture (DA) is accelerating efforts to boost the farming sector through partnerships with Vietnam and Indonesia.

Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. said that the department has formalized an agreement with Vietnam focusing on the growth and development of high-value crops, livestock, dairy and aquaculture production.

"The Philippines puts high importance to its bilateral relations with Vietnam in the field of agriculture, and it considers Vietnam a key partner in the effort to transform the agriculture sector of the Philippines as well," Laurel said during his bilateral meeting with Agriculture and Rural Development

Minister Le Minh Hoan during President Ferdinand Marcos Jr.'s state visit to Vietnam on January 29-30.

Laurel and Le have decided to strengthen the current agricultural ties between the two countries and revise the prior cooperation pact from 1999.

The new memorandum of understanding (MoU) also aims to boost collaboration in post-harvest facilities, food processing, digital and climate-smart agriculture, and agri-fisheries mechanization, among others.

A five-year rice trade agreement was also signed between the two nations. Under the MoU, Vietnam commits to supply the Philippines with 1.5 to 2 million metric tons of white rice annually.

"While DA is focused on improving capacities for increased agricultural productivity, it is equally imperative to maintain a robust trade to help ensure food security, in particular, the supply of rice, especially in challenging times," said Laurel.

He noted Vietnam's importance as a trading ally for the Philippines, particularly in agricultural goods. Latest data from the department showed that approximately 80 percent of rice imports into the Philippines originate from Vietnam, while the Philippine market constitutes more than 40 percent of Vietnam's rice export.

Meanwhile, the DA is considering a potential partnership with Indonesia specifically aimed at tuna production and trade.

The Agriculture department, through the Philippine Fisheries Development Authority (PFDA), held a discussion with the Consulate General of Indonesia regarding a potential collaboration with Indonesian fishermen and fishing vessel operators.

PFDA-Davao Fish Port Complex Manager Albert Aguinaldo, and OIC-Consulate General and Consul for Protocol, and Consular Affairs Harya Kakerasana Sidharta, and Consul for Economic Affairs Novita S.D. Supit led the said discussion.

"They talked about the opportunity for Indonesian fish workers to transship, trade and process their abundant tuna catch," the PFDA said.

JANINE ALEXIS MIGUEL

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1 DEAD, 3 RETURNED TO SEA

SHORE FIND This short-finned pilot whale stranded on the beach of Paoay, Ilocos Norte, died despite efforts by local fishermen and volunteers to rescue it. —ARTHUR VALENTE/CONTRIBUTOR

BLAST FISHING EYED IN STRANDING OF WHALES, DOLPHIN IN ILOCOS

By Yolanda Sotelo
@yzsoteloINQ

SAN FERNANDO CITY—Three short-finned pilot whales (*Globicephala macrorhynchus*) and a spinner dolphin (*Stenella longirostris*) were stranded in different coastal towns of the Ilocos region on Wednesday, marking the first cases of marine mammal stranding in the area this year.

The two pilot whales that beached on the shorelines of Bacnotan town in La Union province and San Vicente town in nearby Ilocos Sur province were successfully released back to the sea, said Hasmin Chogsayan, veterinarian of the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) in the region.

She said the other pilot whale found in Paoay town in Ilocos Norte province, was also released, but it lingered in the shallow water before it was rescued again.

According to Chogsayan, marine mammal rescuers and local fishermen provided supportive care for the rescued whale throughout the night and released it the following morning, only to get stranded again in a neighboring village before it died.

She said the dead whale displayed signs of injuries due to traces of blood in its blowhole.

The spinner dolphin found on Saud beach in Pagudpud town, also in Ilocos Norte, was also successfully released to the sea, the BFAR said in a report.

Disoriented

"We are investigating whether the marine mammals fell victim to blast fishing," Chogsayan said in an interview, noting that the marine mammals exhibited good body

condition suggesting that the stranding might be due to disorientation secondary to blast activities.

In a previous interview, Lemnuel Aragones, head of the Philippine Marine Mammal Stranding Network, explained that marine animals washing ashore exhibiting good body conditions might indicate acute factors such as blasting, causing them to lose their acoustic sensors and swim straight until reaching the beach.

BFAR records showed that over 20 marine animals were stranded or beached in the coastal towns of the region last year.

Among these, five were successfully released back to the sea, while others were either found dead or died during rehabilitation.

Reginald Atabay, head of BFAR Ilocos' fishery protection and law enforcement division, said agency personnel routinely patrol the Lingayen Gulf to monitor illegal fishing activities in the area.

But he said that despite their increased surveillance efforts, some fishermen continue to use banned methods, such as blast fishing.

In October 2023, BFAR and the Marine Mammal Research and Conservation Laboratory of the University of the Philippines in Diliman conducted a cetacean survey in the Lingayen Gulf.

According to the research team's report, the surveyors deployed hydrophones supposedly to listen to a pod of dolphins they sighted within the deeper portion of municipal waters.

While there were no visible fishing boats, the team recorded blasts in five of the 10 hydrophone deployments, the report said. INQ

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Dry spell takes toll on Negros farmers ...

BACOLOD CITY—Rice farmers in two towns and a city in Negros Occidental suffered losses in income estimated at around P7 million, as El Niño left swaths of farmland parched and unproductive, according to a report from the Department of Agriculture. The Office of the Provincial Agriculturist said 117.22 hectares of rain-fed rice farms had started to dry up, affecting at least 143 farmers in 11 barangays. —STORY BY CARLA GOMEZ

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Negros Occ farmers lose P7M to dry spell

**Absence of rainfall damages 117 hectares of rice fields
in Himamaylan City, towns of Cauayan and Isabela**

By Carla Gomez
@carlagomezINQ

BACOLOD CITY—Rice farmers in two towns and a city in Negros Occidental lost at least P7 million as the dry spell caused by the El Niño weather phenomenon hits farms in the province, reports from the Department of Agriculture (DA) showed.

Dina Genzola, officer in charge of the Office of the Provincial Agriculturist, said 117.22 hectares of rice farms had started to dry up, affecting at least 143 farmers in 11 barangays.

Reports from the provincial agriculture office said Cauayan town posted P4.105 million in losses covering 52 ha; Himamaylan City, P2.414 million affecting 59.22 ha; and Isabela town, P560,250 with 6 ha affected.

Genzola said they sent agriculture extension workers to validate the damage reported by the three local governments.

"The crops are either in vegetative or harvestable stage. You can see the soil is cracking from the dry spell and plants have wilted," she said.

Most of the affected areas



PARCHED Personnel of the Office of the Provincial Agriculturist in Negros Occidental inspect a rice field hit by the dry spell in Cauayan town. —PHOTO COURTESY OF THE OFFICE OF THE PROVINCIAL AGRICULTURIST

are rainfed or those that rely mainly on rainfall for water.

Genzola said farmers covered by the Philippine Crop Insurance Corp. would be qualified to avail of crop insurance.

Preparation

The provincial government has also allocated funds for the crop insurance program.

According to Gov. Eugenio



Jose Lacson, Negros Occidental is bracing for "a very hard" El Niño and will ensure that irrigated rice lands have adequate water supply.

Lacson said 60 percent of the province's irrigated rice lands produce the bulk of the province's rice needs.

"The province is 84-percent rice sufficient. We have to maximize the use of available wa-

ter and avoid wastage," Lacson said.

Earlier, the Department of Science and Technology announced that at least 65 provinces might experience moderate-to-severe drought conditions from February to May due to a "strong" El Niño, a climate pattern characterized by the unusual warming of surface waters in the eastern tropical Pacific Ocean.

In a briefing in Malacañang in December, Science and Technology Secretary Renato Solidum Jr. said: "By the end of May, 77 percent of the provinces in the country will have the potential for drought. That would be around 65 provinces and 7 percent potential for a dry spell or around six provinces."

Also in December, President Marcos met with officials of the DA, the National Economic and Development Authority, the Department of Environment and Natural Resources and the National Irrigation Administration and ordered them to categorize actions into short- and medium-term to mitigate the impact of El Niño. INQ

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Food prices, hunger and malnutrition



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SOCIAL Weather Stations (SWS) Inc., the oldest and most reputable public opinion survey organization in the country, reported last week that "involuntary hunger" rose from 9.8 percent in September

2023 to 12.6 percent in December 2023. This is an increase of 2.8 percentage points! Coming as it did during the Christmas holidays, which Filipinos perceive to be a season of hope and blessings, this

must have felt like a tragedy for affected families.

The SWS defines "involuntary hunger" as those families "experiencing hunger and not having access to food at least once in the past

three months." It further categorizes this into two: "moderate hunger," which means those families who experienced hunger "only once" or a "few times" during the last three

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■ FINER FROM B1

Food

months," and "severe hunger," or those who experienced it "often" or "always" in the previous three months.

Out of the 12.6 percent who suffered "involuntary hunger," 11.2 percent fell under the "moderate hunger" category and 1.4 percent under the "severe hunger" bracket.

In addition, "involuntary hunger" in Luzon was the highest at 14.3 percent, followed by Metro Manila at 12.7 percent, Mindanao at 12 percent (which saw the highest rise from just 6.7 percent in September 2023), and the Visayas at 9.3 percent.

With hunger becoming a national scourge due to high food prices, it is no wonder that it has become a top concern of the public. A December poll by another survey organization, the OCTA Research group, found that 72 percent of respondents strongly felt the government should focus its attention on controlling the high prices of basic goods and services.

That rising food prices, or food inflation, are the biggest contributory factor to overall inflation is beyond doubt. When we tracked the share of food and non-alcoholic food beverages (one of the commodities used in measuring the consumer price index) to total inflation, we found that it averaged around 43 percent from 2001 to 2021. This worsened in 2022 and 2023 at nearly more than 45 percent and was 48.5 percent in 2023, almost half of total inflation!

With meager and limited income sources, high food prices serve as the single-biggest contributor to the high incidence of hunger and malnutrition among poor Filipinos. In fact, around 60 percent of the income of the poor goes to purchasing food. A 2018 World Food Programme study showed that even if 70 percent of

their income is spent procuring food, it is still not enough to afford them access to nutritious food.

Expectedly, hunger and malnutrition in the Philippines are the highest compared to Southeast Asian peers. Stunting among Filipino kids 0-5 years old is almost 29 percent, the highest in the region. Malnutrition in the Philippines is nine times, 20 times, and 287 times higher compared to Thailand, Malaysia and Vietnam, respectively.

Given the fact that 90 percent of a person's brain develops from 0-5 years of age, malnutrition at this stage will have a long-lasting impact on cognitive ability. It is no surprise that Filipino kids suffer from serious learning poverty; the vast majority of 10-year-olds can hardly read and understand what they read. School feeding programs cannot help because brain maldevelopment occurred prior to their entering schools. The intervention is too late to reverse the situation.

To bring down food prices, the solution is to produce more. That is what the law of supply and demand tells us. If supply is greater than demand, prices will fall. Conversely, if supply is short vis-à-vis demand, prices will rise. High food prices in the country can thus be unequivocally attributed to production shortfalls of agricultural and food commodities. A Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) report on the country's sufficiency ratio for various food commodities attests to this.

The obvious task is to raise farm productivity. The government, particularly the Department of Agriculture (DA), has launched various programs for many decades now to achieve this goal. In fact, it has established commodity-based programs (its budget is largely based on these), such as for rice, corn, livestock, and high-value crops, not to mention agencies for coconut, sugar and fisheries, yet sustainably raising

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the productivity of these products remains elusive.

As a result, the government is forced to allow the importation of products such as rice, corn, vegetable oil, sugar, fish, pork and poultry. This in turn incurs the ire of local producers and protectionists because they argue that enough domestic supply can be produced if given proper assistance by the government. Their list is quite long, but foremost of this is to maintain the country's high tariffs.

Sadly, high tariffs for agricultural products have been in existence for over 50 years now, and farm productivity remains low. This is in stark

contrast to neighboring countries with robust agricultural sectors like Thailand, Vietnam and Indonesia, which gradually lowered their tariffs to promote greater competition and efficiency. In the meantime, as the debate rages on whether we should reduce tariffs to allow more food imports, malnutrition and hunger continue to ravage our people, especially our kids.

On another issue, PSA reported that our rice inventory as of Dec. 1, 2023, was at 1.9 million metric tons (MT), down 25.2 percent from 2.53 million MT last year. The DA must give us actual rice import arrivals (as per Customs

data) and total rice inventory to allay fears that we are not going to experience a serious shortfall during the first quarter — considered lean months — of this year. It is also worrying not to have any estimate for the lean months of June to August given that the effect of El Niño is projected to be severe

from May to June.

Issuing assurances that we have enough or ample supply of rice for the first half of the year will not be credible without citing official data on our actual rice supply and demand situation.

(fdadriano88@gmail.com)

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Rice crops severely affected by El Niño

₱109-M damage already recorded in Visayas, Mindanao

By GABRIEL CHRISTEL GALANG

As the El Niño phenomenon persists, the Department of Agriculture (DA) reported additional rice damage

in parts of Western Visayas and Zamboanga during the early months of the year.

The DA-Disaster Risk Reduction Management (DA-DRRM) said some rice fields suffered ₱109 million

losses by the end of January, affecting 2,602 farmers.

The rice damage which was found in its reproductive phase or near ripening, reached 4,758 metric tons (MT) of production at 2,177 hectares of rice areas.

Because of this, the agency will continue sharing advisories on agrometeorological information and better crop management through various stakeholders to avoid yield waste.

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The DA will also pursue studying the data on planting and harvesting rice and corn, as well as the sources of irrigation systems like dams, small water impounding systems (SWIP), and small-scale irrigation projects (SSIP).

The DA-DRRM also said that the reservoir water level (RWL) of Angat Dam, which is responsible for the Bulacan and Pampanga rice field irrigation, is 211 meters by the last stretch

of January.

On Wednesday, the National Irrigation Administration (NIA) assured sufficient supply from the Magat Dam, which is one of the largest water sources in the Philippines that aid with irrigation.

Moreover, other under-construction projects like solar pump irrigation and dams within Visayas are expected to counter the effects of the dry season.

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Egg retail prices drop due to low demand

By BELLA CARIASO

Egg traders are reeling from the decreasing farmgate and retail prices as well as from low demand for the poultry product, according to Gregorio San Diego, chairman of the United Broiler Raisers' Association.

San Diego said the farmgate price of eggs has gone down to P5 per piece.

"This is good news for consumers, but it is not good news for our producers," San Diego said.

He said egg supply is stuck in farms due to low demand.

"We are suffering losses at present. If the retail price of eggs is P6 (per piece), the farmgate price is only P5," San Diego said, noting that egg producers spend at least P4.75 daily for feeds of every chicken layer.

"That is only for feeds. It does not include labor and consumption in electricity," San Diego said.

Egg producers met recently to discuss the matter. They attributed the low demand to the decreasing purchasing power of consumers.

"People have no money. They prioritize the expenses for electricity, water, rent and fares. In terms of food, the priority is rice. Now that retail prices of the staple reached as high as P75 per kilo, the budget for food diminished further," San Diego said.

Latest monitoring by the Department of Agriculture showed the lowest retail price of medium-sized eggs was P6.80 per piece.



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PHL-Vietnam rice deal seen as hedge vs weak domestic production

By Adrian H. Halili
Reporter

THE government's five-year rice deal with Vietnam is expected to serve as insurance in the event production continues to fail to keep up with demand growth, analysts said.

Rizal Commercial Banking Corp. Chief Economist Michael L. Ricafort said that the import deal may be a hedge in case domestic rice production remains inadequate to meet the country's needs.

"Demand for rice is relatively inelastic as a basic necessity for many Filipinos, though any eas-

ing of local rice prices or at least tempered rice price increases will still support demand," Mr. Ricafort said in a Viber message.

In 2023, palay or unmilled rice production rose 1.5% to 20.06 million metric tons (MT). This translates to about 13.2 million MT of milled rice. The Department of Agriculture (DA) also has a 20 million MT palay target for 2024.

"The rice import deal will help address the gap between rice production and consumption," he added.

FULL STORY



Read the full story by scanning the QR code with your smartphone or by typing the link
<tinyurl.com/yphs1mo8>

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Prices of bangus, tilapia in NCR remain stable

THE Department of Agriculture-Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (DA-BFAR) on Wednesday assured the public that the retail prices of bangus (milk fish) and tilapia (cichlid fish) remain stable in the National Capital Region (NCR).

Its latest price monitoring report showed that medium-sized bangus sourced from Bulacan and Pangasinan are priced at P180 per kilo, while medium-sized tilapia sourced from Batangas and Pampanga costs P120 per kilo. The report covers 10 major retail markets in the region.

"Two to three pieces of medium-sized bangus usually weigh one kilogram, and the same goes for tilapia," the DA-BFAR said in a news release. It said no fluctuations in the prevailing retail prices of bangus and tilapia were observed.

"The prices of these fisheries commodities have remained stable since the previous weeks due to sufficient supply from farms. The farmgate prices of tilapia have decreased from P90 to P93 last week to P85 to P88 this week, while bangus farmgate prices were at P130 to P140 only this week," it added.

However, minor price differences may be due to several factors, including varying sizes of unloaded supplies in wet markets.

"Large-sized bangus, for example, commands a higher price of P200 to P240 per kilo. In addition, secondary markets — which source their supply from primary markets — may sell fisheries products at marked-up prices," it said.

Meanwhile, an increase in the supply of local-fresh galunggong (mackerel scad) is anticipated in the markets as Palawan, a major source of galunggong in Luzon, ended its closed fishing season on Wednesday.

The ban started on Nov. 1, 2023.

PNA



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DURIAN PROPAGATION.

Engineer Avila Abobakar (right) and Standard reporter Nash Maulana water a newly planted durian seedling, one of numerous saplings of the Mao Shan Wang durian variety, being propagated at the foot of the Timako hill in Cotabato City.



Vermiculture eyed as livelihood for marsh dwellers in Bangsamoro

By Nash B. Maulana

COTABATO CITY—A Moro engineer wants the autonomous region to create more viable livelihood opportunities for the local community of marsh dwellers out of earthworms and water hyacinths.

Engineer Avila Abobakar of Barangay Ungap, Sultan Kudarat said he is developing 12 concrete tubs to stuff with large volumes of water lilies that are otherwise left drifting downstream from the marshes of the Mindanao River.

The community, he said, could freely harvest floating hyacinths from the river and feed them

to a kind of earthworms more popularly called the “ANCs”—short for African Night Crawlers

Abobakar said ANC's feed on hyacinths stuffed on tubs to excrete them in soil form, a simplified biological process to produce organic compost fertilizer.

He said the ANC's multiply fast, as even their males are reproductive, or bear their young by biological nature.

Abobakar said he had considered a project area situated somewhere in Cotabato City to be accessible for future educational tours, on agriculture.

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THAILAND ON BOARD WITH PH-INITIATED AGRI MSME DEVELOPMENT PLAN

The ASEAN Business Advisory Council (ABAC) Thailand has become the latest to sign to the region-wide private sector-led agriculture-MSME Development plan initiated in the Philippines. Thailand's signing brings to near-completion the consensus among the ASEAN BACs of nine ASEAN-member states to bring together agriculture companies from the private sector to conduct possible joint business ventures and increase trade and investment within the region.

"This is an absolute win for the ASEAN, for its MSMEs, and for agriculture and food security in the region," said Joey Concepcion, chairman of ABAC Philippines. "Successful ventures made possible by the region-wide partnerships can result in the agriculture sector's development by involving more players across the value chain, especially farmers and fisherfolk," he explained.

The signing was held during the 99th ASEAN BAC Council Meeting last January 29, 2024 at Luang Prabang in Lao PDR. It was led by Concepcion and Kobsak Duangdee, ABAC Thailand Chair, and witnessed by the ABAC Council chairs from the ASEAN countries. The areas of collaboration with Thailand cover rice, banana, vegetables, and palm oil.

ABAC Philippines initiated the project with each



THAILAND MAKES NINE: ASEAN BAC Thailand became the ninth to sign the Memorandum of Understanding to a region-wide private sector-led agriculture-MSME Development plan initiated in the Philippines. Present for ABAC Thailand were (seated, from left) Vathit Chokwatana, Visit Limlurcha, Kobsak Duangdee, with ASEAN BAC Philippines Chair Joey Concepcion, Go Negosyo Senior Adviser Dr. William Dar, and ABAC Philippines's George Barcelon and Michael Tan. On hand to witness and to reaffirm the commitment of the council chairs to pursue the objectives of the MOU were (standing, from left) Thanongsinh Kanlagna (Laos), Moe Kyaw (Myanmar), Dr. Robert Yap (Singapore), Oudet Souvannavong (Laos), Chanthachone Vongsay (Laos), Jukhee Hong (Malaysia), and ASEAN BAC Executive Director Gil Gonzales.

ASEAN member-state, starting with Malaysia, which signed its MOU last July. This was followed by the ABACs of Brunei, Cambodia, Singapore, Laos, Myanmar, and Indonesia, who all signed last September in time to coincide with the ASEAN Business Investment Summit, with Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. and Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Manet as witnesses.

The MOUs covered the exploration of joint partnerships in knowledge and technology

development; trade and investment opportunities; research and development; and strategies in sustainable agriculture, among others. The agri-MSME development partnerships are patterned after Go Negosyo's Kapatid Angat Lahat sa Agri Program (KALAP) which aims to integrate small farmers into the value chain of large agri companies, also called "big-brother companies" under the KALAP program. Concepcion is also the founder of Go Negosyo.

During the meetings in Laos, it was also decided that the Philippines should chair the technical working group on Food Security of ASEAN BAC in 2024.

An initial trade mission has been tentatively scheduled this April 23 and 24, coinciding with the 100th ABAC meeting on April 25 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, to facilitate engagement between key industry players from the Philippines and Malaysia, as part of the MOU implementation. The objective is to explore collaborative opportunities and exchange best practices in sectors including oil palm, rubber, rice, dairy, poultry, pineapples, durian, banana, coconut, and corn, and generate mutual commercial benefits for both parties. Following suit, other ASEAN BAC member countries who have endorsed the MOU will also embark on similar trade missions.



THAILAND MAKES NINE Asean Business Advisory Council (ABAC) Thailand becomes the ninth state to sign the memorandum of understanding (MoU) to a regionwide private sector-led agriculture-MSME development plan initiated in the Philippines. Present for ABAC Thailand were (seated, from left) Vathit Chokwatana, Visit Limlurcha, Kobsak Duangdee, with Asean BAC Philippines Chairman Jose Maria "Joey" Concepcion 3rd, Go Negosyo Senior Adviser Dr. William Dar, and ABAC Philippines' George Barcelon and Michael Tan. On hand to witness and to reaffirm the commitment of the council heads to pursue the objectives of the MoU were (standing, from left) Thanongsinh Kanlagna (Laos), Moe Kyaw (Myanmar), Dr. Robert Yap (Singapore), Oudet Souvannavong (Laos), Chanthachone Vongsay (Laos), Jukhee Hong (Malaysia) and Asean BAC Executive Director Gil Gonzales.

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Thailand backs PH plan for agri-MSME link-ups

TWO private sector groups representing Thailand and the Philippines signed an agreement supporting the regionwide agriculture micro, small and medium enterprise (MSME) development plan, Go Negosyo founder Jose Maria "Joey" Concepcion 3rd said Thursday.

In a statement, Concepcion said the Association of Southeast Asian Nations

Business Advisory Council (ABAC) Thailand is the latest to sign to the agriculture-MSME development plan initiated in the Philippines.

He said Thailand's signing "brings to near-completion the consensus among the Asean BACs of nine Asean-member states to bring together agriculture companies from the private sector to conduct possible

joint business ventures and increase trade and investment within the region."

"This is an absolute win for the Asean, for its MSMEs, and for agriculture and food security in the region," said Concepcion, chairman of ABAC Philippines.

"Successful ventures made possible by the regionwide partnerships can result in the agriculture sector's development by

involving more players across the value chain, especially farmers and fisherfolk," he added.

The signing of memorandum of understanding (MoU) was held during the 99th Asean BAC Council Meeting on Jan. 29, 2024 at Luang Prabang, Laos.

It was led by Concepcion and Kobsak

►PlanA2



■ PLAN FROM A1
Thailand

Duangdee, ABAC Thailand chairman, and witnessed by the ABAC Council heads.

The areas of collaboration with Thailand cover rice, banana, vegetables, and palm oil.

ABAC Philippines initiated the project with each Asean member-state, starting with Malaysia, which signed its MoU last July.

This was followed by the ABACs of Brunei, Cambodia, Singapore, Laos, Myanmar, and Indonesia, who all signed last September in time for the Asean Business Investment Summit, with President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. and Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Manet as witnesses.

The MoUs covered the exploration of joint partnerships in knowledge and technology development; trade and investment opportunities; research and development; and strategies in sustainable agriculture, among others.

The agri-MSME development partnerships are patterned after Go Negosyo's Kapatid Angat Lahat sa Agri Program (Kalap) which aims to integrate small farmers into the

value chain of large agri companies, also called "big-brother companies," under the program.

Kalap is an initiative of Go Negosyo, the nonprofit organization founded by Concepcion, to promote entrepreneurship and advocate for the development of Filipino MSMEs.

During the meetings in Laos, it was also decided that the Philippines should chair the technical working group on Food Security of ABAC in 2024.

An initial trade mission has been tentatively scheduled on April 23 and 24, coinciding with the 100th ABAC meeting on April 25 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, to facilitate engagement between key industry players from the Philippines and Malaysia, as part of the MoU implementation.

The objective is to explore collaborative opportunities and exchange best practices in sectors including oil palm, rubber, rice, dairy, poultry, pineapples, durian, banana, coconut, and corn, and generate mutual commercial benefits for both parties.

Other ABAC member countries who have endorsed the MoU will also embark on similar trade missions.

CATHERINE S. VALENTE

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Onion prices normalize after House exposes agricultural cartel

Rarely does one of these dragging, protracted hearings in aid of legislation ever result to a tangible benefit to the common Filipino.

But that's exactly what happened after the House of Representatives sought to get to the bottom of overpriced local onions in February 2023. Upon the order of House Speaker Martin Romualdez, the Committee on Agriculture spent the next four months digging through tips and piecing together evidence on the problem of agricultural hoarding in the country.

It all began in late 2022, when prices of onions suddenly surged to an absurd P700 per kilo. At this point, onions cost more than some meat products. "This is economic sabotage...People are still trying to recover from the pandemic. The last thing we need is an unreasonable rise in food prices," Romualdez said.

By the final quarter of 2023, local onion prices had normalized to P160 per kilo, as the series of House hearings had clearly established the artificial nature of the price spike no thanks to certain enterprising personalities. (Ellson Quismorio)



Thailand joins PH-initiated MSME development plan for agriculture

Thailand is the latest and ninth country to join the memorandum of understanding (MOU) that the Philippines has initiated for a region-wide, private sector-led micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) development plan for the agriculture sector.

Thailand's Association of Southeast Asian Nations-Business Advisory Council (ASEAN-BAC) signed the MOU, which aims to help MSMEs in the agriculture sector grow their reach and access larger markets, on Jan. 29, 2024.

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THAILAND SIGNS MOU — Thailand becomes the ninth country to sign the Memorandum of Understanding for a region-wide private sector-led agriculture-MSME development plan initiated in the Philippines. Signing for ABAC Thailand were (seated, from left) Vathit Chokwatana, Visit Limlurcha, and Kobsak Duangdee, witnessed by ASEAN BAC Philippines Chairman Joey Concepcion, Go Negosyo Senior Adviser Dr. William Dar, and ABAC Philippines' George Barcelon and Michael Tan. On hand to witness and reaffirm the commitment of the council chairs to pursue the objectives of the MOU were (standing, from left) Thanongsinh Kanlagna (Laos), Moe Kyaw (Myanmar), Dr. Robert Yap (Singapore), Oudet Souvannavong (Laos), Chanthachone Vongsay (Laos), Jukhee Hong (Malaysia), and ASEAN BAC Executive Director Gil Gonzales.

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Thailand joins PH-initiated MSME development plan for agriculture 1◀

The ASEAN-BAC leaders, including Philippine chair and Go Negosyo founder Joey Concepcion, had previously highlighted that it is ready to strengthen the private sector-government synergy to promote economic growth in the region.

"This is an absolute win for the ASEAN, for its MSMEs, and for agriculture and food security in the region," Concepcion said in a statement on Thursday, Feb. 1. "Successful ventures made possible by the region-wide partnerships can result in the agriculture sector's development by involving more players across the value chain, especially farmers and fisherfolk," he explained.

The signing of the MOU, which took place during the 99th ASEAN BAC Council Meeting held at Luang Prabang in Lao People's Democratic Republic, reaffirmed the commitment of the council chairs to pursue its objectives.

The MOUs covered the exploration of joint partnerships in knowledge and technology development; trade and investment opportunities;

research and development; and strategies in sustainable agriculture, among others.

The areas of collaboration with Thailand cover rice, banana, vegetables, and palm oil, according to the statement from Concepcion's office.

The agri-MSME development partnerships were patterned after Go Negosyo's Kapatid Angat Lahat sa Agri Program (KALAP) which aims to integrate small farmers into the value chain of large agri companies, also called "big-brother companies" under the said program.

Present during the signing were Concepcion, Vathit Chokwatana, Visit Limlurcha, and Kobsak Duangdee for ABAC Thailand, Go Negosyo Senior Adviser Dr. William Dar, and ABAC Philippines's George Barcelon and Michael Tan.

Thanongsinh Kanlagna of Laos, Moe Kyaw of Myanmar, Dr. Robert Yap of Singapore, Oudet Souvannavong of Laos, Chanthachone Vongsay of Laos, Jukhee Hong of Malaysia, and ASEAN BAC Executive Director Gil Gonzales were also in attendance to witness the signing. (Raymund Antonio)



Happy 124th Anniversary, Manila Bulletin

Today the Manila Bulletin celebrates its 124th anniversary. That's 124 years of reporting on news and current events. 124 years of informing, educating, and entertaining its readers while being at the forefront of history and relaying it to the Filipino people. And within those 124 years, becoming a staunch supporter of the Philippine agriculture industry and one of its biggest, if not the biggest, mouthpieces in mainstream media.

During my term as Agriculture editor, I was cognizant of the fact that I was continuing a grand tradition of reporting, not just on the ups and downs of the local agriculture industry, but also of the stories of individuals who have made it in what, unfortunately, can still be compared to the Wild West when

it comes to business — when you work with nature, nothing is sure — stories of hope and triumph in what otherwise is known as a difficult industry to survive, much less thrive in.

I'm grateful to have been part of a publication who led the pack in featuring a neglected industry in the hopes of cheering on current practitioners and enticing new players to participate in the construction of a profitable agriculture sector that offers maximum profit for producers while at the same time giving Filipino people access to nutritious, delicious, sustainable, culturally relevant, and most of all cheap food



AVANT GARDENER
YVETTE TAN

How does a publication whose output is words and images instead of food, help the industry? By spreading news, both good and bad, so people within and outside the industry can stay informed.

— something considered a pipe dream in today's capitalist hellscape.

To believe in an equitable and profitable agriculture industry is to believe that radical change, because making it happen would involve changing the minds of everyone, not just direct stakeholders. Unfortunately, a chunk of profit in the industry is made not by farmers or honest businessmen, but by folks that have become larger than life, the few who soil the reputation of the many in their respective places of work such as unscrupulous middlemen, corrupt officials, and so on.

How does a publication whose output is words

and images instead of food, help the industry? By spreading news, both good and bad, so people within and outside the industry can stay informed. By telling the stories of individuals who have achieved success despite the odds, and to share the tips they have garnered along the way so that less people will commit the same mistakes they did. By reminding people that the agriculture industry exists, and that it needs the support of the very people it was meant to feed.

People have been so removed from agriculture production that many now take food for granted. They do not understand that unless we secure the country's food system, the Philippines will constantly be on the verge of a food crisis, which, in the worst case scenario, might lead to political instability. A hungry nation is an unstable nation.

I am proud to have been part of a publication that, through its support of the agriculture industry via its industry-specific features and publications via Agriculture magazine, newspaper sections and specials, and this column.

Once again, happy 124th Anniversary, Manila Bulletin. May you have more than 124 more years of news reporting to come!



ASEAN Business Advisory Council Thailand became the ninth to sign the memorandum of understanding to a region-wide private sector-led agriculture-MSME Development plan initiated in the Philippines. Present for ABAC Thailand were (seated, from left) Vathit Chokwatana, Visit Limlurcha, Kobsak Duangdee, with ASEAN BAC Philippines chair Joey Concepcion, Go Negosyo senior adviser William Dar, and ABAC Philippines George Barcelon and Michael Tan. On hand to witness and to reaffirm the commitment of the council chairs to pursue the objectives of the MOU were (standing, from left) Thanongsinh Kanlagna (Laos), Moe Kyaw (Myanmar), Robert Yap (Singapore), Oudet Souvannavong (Laos), Chanthachone Vongsay (Laos), Jukhee Hong (Malaysia), and ASEAN BAC executive director Gil Gonzales.

Thailand joins Asean agri-MSME dev't plan

The ASEAN Business Advisory Council (ABAC) Thailand has become the latest to sign to the region-wide private sector-led agriculture-MSME Development plan initiated in the Philippines.

Thailand's signing brings to near-completion the consensus among the ASEAN BACs of nine ASEAN-member states to bring together agriculture companies from the private sector to conduct possible joint business ventures and increase trade and investment within the region.

"This is an absolute win for the ASEAN, for its MSMEs, and for agriculture and food security in the region," said Joey Concepcion, chairman of ABAC Philippines. "Successful ventures made possible by the region-wide partnerships can result in the agriculture sector's development by involving more players across the value chain, especially farmers and fisherfolk," he explained.

The signing was held during the 99th ASEAN BAC Council Meeting last Jan. 29 at Luang Prabang in Lao PDR. It was led by Concepcion and Kobsak Duangdee,

ABAC Thailand chair, and witnessed by the ABAC Council chairs from the ASEAN countries. The areas of collaboration with Thailand cover rice, banana, vegetables, and palm oil.

ABAC Philippines initiated the project with each ASEAN member-state, starting with Malaysia, which signed its MOU last July. This was followed by the ABACs of Brunei, Cambodia, Singapore, Laos, Myanmar, and Indonesia, who all signed last September in time to coincide with the ASEAN Business Investment Summit, with President Marcos and Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Manet as witnesses.

The MOUs covered the exploration of joint partnerships in knowledge and technology development; trade and investment opportunities; research and development; and strategies in sustainable agriculture, among others.

The agri-MSME development partnerships are patterned after Go Negosyo's Kapatid Angat Lahat sa Agri Program (KALAP) which aims to integrate small farmers into the value chain of large

agri companies, also called "big-brother companies" under the KALAP program. Concepcion is also the founder of Go Negosyo.

During the meetings in Laos, it was also decided that the Philippines should chair the technical working group on Food Security of ASEAN BAC in 2024.

An initial trade mission has been tentatively scheduled this April 23 and 24, coinciding with the 100th ABAC meeting on April 25 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, to facilitate engagement between key industry players from the Philippines and Malaysia, as part of the MOU implementation.

The objective is to explore collaborative opportunities and exchange best practices in sectors including oil palm, rubber, rice, dairy, poultry, pineapples, durian, banana, coconut, and corn, and generate mutual commercial benefits for both parties.

Following suit, other ASEAN BAC member countries who have endorsed the MOU will also embark on similar trade missions.



THAILAND JOINS PH-INITIATED AGRI-MSMED DEV'T PLAN

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THAILAND MAKES NINE: ASEAN BAC Thailand became the ninth to sign the memorandum of understanding to a regionwide private sector-led agriculture-MSME development plan initiated in the Philippines. Present for ABAC Thailand are (seated from left) Vathit Chokwatana, Visit Limlurcha, Kobsak Duangdee, with ASEAN BAC Philippines chair Joey Concepcion, Go Negosyo senior adviser Dr. William Dar and ABAC Philippines's George Barcelon and Michael Tan. Witnessing the event are (standing from left) Thanongsinh Kanlagna (Laos), Moe Kyaw (Myanmar), Dr. Robert Yap (Singapore), Oudet Souvannavong (Laos), Chanthachone Vongsay (Laos), Jukhee Hong (Malaysia), and ASEAN BAC Executive Director Gil Gonzales.

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Thai rice export volumes seen down

BANGKOK- Thailand expects to export 7.5 million metric tons of rice in 2024, down 14.38 percent year-on-year, due to lower production and increased competition, the commerce ministry said on Thursday.

Rice production is expected to drop 5.87 percent in 2024, impacted by the El Nino weather phenomenon, the ministry said in a statement.

Rice exports from Thailand, the world's second-largest shipper of the grain, "face competition and many challenges," the ministry said, citing expected higher global supply and lower imports from trade partners.

Thai rice exports in January jumped, however, up about 44 percent year-on-year to 1.12 million metric tons, the ministry said, without giving details.

Indonesia may also buy less Thai rice than last year because of a large stockpile, while top rice exporter India could lift its export ban, the ministry said.

Thailand's government in December said Indonesia was seeking to buy 2 million metric tons of Thai rice in 2024.

In 2023, Thailand's rice exports rose 13.6 percent year-on-year to 8.76 million metric tons, beating a target of 8 million tons, with the value up 28.4 percent on the year, ministry said.

The rice exports last year accounted for 1.8 percent of Thailand's total shipments in value terms. **-Reuters**



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Wheat, soybeans fall

CANBERRA- Chicago wheat futures moved lower on Thursday amid weak demand and falling export prices in Russia, while soybeans and corn also lost ground and were just above multi-year lows on the prospect of ample supply.

The most-active wheat contract on the Chicago Board of Trade (CBOT) was down 0.3 percent at \$5.93-1/4 a bushel. Prices fell 5.2 percent in January and aren't far from a three-year low of \$5.40 reached last September.

CBOT soybeans fell 0.2 percent to \$12.19-3/4 a bushel and were close to Tuesday's two-year low of \$11.88, while corn slipped 0.3

percent to \$4.47 a bushel and was near a three-year low of \$4.37 hit twice during January.

"Grain prices are likely to remain under pressure, as markets globally and locally battle with a supply outlook for 2024 that is more plentiful than in past years," said Stefan Vogel at Rabobank in Sydney.

"For a significant 2024 price upside for grain, the world would need to see weather-related supply shortages arise."

Falling wheat prices in Russia, which still has a large surplus to shift before this summer's harvest, have kept the wheat market's focus on Black Sea supplies. **-Reuters**



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London cocoa climbs to record high; sugar also up

NEW YORK — London cocoa futures on ICE hit a record high on Wednesday, extending the market's prolonged advance on tightening stocks after poor crops in West Africa. Sugar futures also rose.

COCOA: March London cocoa settled up £15 or 0.4% at £3,883 per metric ton, after setting a record high of £3,910.

Dealers said supplies remain very tight owing to poor crops in West Africa and there is no sign of the current run-up in prices coming to an end.

There are some concerns, however, that price increases for products such as chocolate bars may be starting to crimp demand.

Citi cut its view of chocolate maker Barry Callebaut's shares due to "extreme cocoa inflation."

March New York cocoa rose 0.4% to \$4,822 a ton.

Cocoa farmgate prices rose to a record high in Cameroon on Wednesday, pushed up by tightening global supply because of production shortfalls in top growers Ivory Coast and Ghana.

COFFEE: March robusta coffee settled down \$31 or 0.9% at \$3,305 a ton, with the market consolidating just below the previous session's contract high of \$3,379.

Dealers said robusta stocks in Europe were tight partly because of disruption to the flow of Asian supplies across the Red Sea.

"Destination stocks were incredibly low when the Red Sea problems began, disrupting

the flow of robustas and, to a lower extent, arabicas in Europe," Rabobank said in a note.

March arabica coffee was little changed at \$1.9405 per pound (lb).

Coffee trader Comexim projected the new Brazilian crop at 67.15 million bags, a small increase over the current crop.

SUGAR: March raw sugar settled up 0.22 cent or 0.9% at 24.13 cents per lb.

Dealers cited uncertainty about Brazil's 2024 crop as rains have been below average.

Broker StoneX on Wednesday projected Brazil's new sugarcane crop at 622 million tons, 5.4% below the previous one.

March white sugar rose 0.5% to \$666.30 a ton. — **Reuters**