

CLIPPINGS FOR TODAY, FEBRUARY 16, 2024

A. SEC. FTL Jr. QUOTED

THE PHILIPPINE STAR

Another DA official stripped of position  
'El Niño unlikely to cause crisis'

BUSINESS WORLD

Iloilo farmers get P909 million in financial, infrastructure aid

B. DA FAMILY

MANILA STANDARD

As high as 40c: Brace for hot summer months due to El Niño

PHILIPPINE DAILY INQUIRER

Drought hits Bataan, Zambales; crop losses in Negros at P14.4M  
The Philippines should fast-track consolidation of small farms

THE PHILIPPINE STAR

Sketches: 'Price crash'  
'Rice retail prices down by P2/Kilo'  
Gov't Oks higher 600,000 MT potato imports at lower tariff

MANILA BULLETIN

The role of knowledge management in developing Philippine agriculture  
Gov't mulls converting portion of 4Ps cash aid to rice supply

THE MANILA TIMES

Fish deliveries down 19% in January  
Triggers of development in agriculture

MALAYA BUSINESS INSIGHT

FDA lifts ban on pork from Singapore  
Fish unloading volume up 2% YoY

BUSINESS WORLD

January fishport landed volumes increase 2.37%  
Corn research, technical aid legislation filed in Congress

ABANTE TONITE

Reclamation, dinamita, galunggong!

PILIPINO STAR NGAYON

Ang asukal, bow

C. AGRI-RELATED STORY

*No stories*

D. FOREIGN STORY

MALAYA BUSINESS INSIGHT

Soybeans, corn decline

BUSINESS WORLD

Arabica coffee prices dip on Brazil, rising stocks



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## Another DA official stripped of position

Department of Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. has replaced Assistant Secretary James Layug as head of the DA office tasked to oversee the campaign against smugglers and hoarders of agricultural products.

Laurel appointed his chief of staff, Alvin John Balagbag, as undersecretary for the DA's inspectorate and enforcement office.

Layug is now on floating status after he was stripped of his position.

The appointment of Balagbag was part of the revamp of key officials in the department.

Earlier, Laurel designated former Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources director Asis Perez as undersecretary for policy, planning and regulations.

Perez replaced DA Undersecretary Drusila Esther Bayate, who was previously appointed to replace Undersecretary Mercedita Sombilla.

Sombilla is now undersecretary for DA bureaus.

Bayate returned to her previous position as undersecretary for fisheries.

Laurel now has 11 undersecretaries compared to the six undersecretaries when President Marcos was the concurrent agriculture secretary.

— Bella Cariaso





# 'El Niño unlikely to cause crisis'

By **BELLA CARIASO**

The El Niño phenomenon being experienced in the country is not expected to result in a crisis as food, water and power supplies are adequate during the critical months, an official of the El Niño Task Force said yesterday.

Task force spokesperson Joey Villarama said that with all the preparations, interventions and mitigations being done by the government, he does not foresee the El Niño phenomenon creating a crisis.

"We have enough supply. We do not see (a crisis level) in terms of food supply," Villarama said.

He cited a report of Agriculture Secretary **Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr.** to President Marcos during a recent meeting at Malacanan.

Villarama said Laurel assured Marcos that the country's rice stock is enough until the third quarter of the year.

Water levels in dams are enough until

May and deep wells are being constructed in Metro Manila, he said.

Marcos has ordered concerned agencies to complete the construction of all water-related projects.

Villarama said that although the El Niño phenomenon is expected to peak this month, its effect could persist until May.

"The classification of El Niño in January and February is strong, but its effect is expected to persist in March, April and May. We have to study climate models to see if it will remain strong during these months," he said.

Meanwhile, state meteorologists warned of "level-up" temperatures that may reach

40 degrees Celsius in some parts of the country this coming dry season.

The Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration (PAGASA) said temperatures could peak from April to May, and could be higher than summer.

Ana Solis, officer-in-charge of PAGASA's climatology and agrometeorology division, said the ridge of a high-pressure area, which is the opposite of the low-pressure area, is expected to dominate the country's weather system.

Solis said temperatures could reach over 40 degrees Celsius in Cagayan Valley. Metro Manila may experience a maximum temperature of 37 to 38 degrees Celsius.

Health experts warned people to be wary of heat cramps as this could lead to heat stroke, which is life-threatening. — **With Romina Cabrera, Rhodina Villanueva**





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## Iloilo farmers get P909 million in financial, infrastructure aid

By **Adrian H. Halili**  
Reporter

THE DEPARTMENT of Agriculture (DA) said that it has disbursed P909.68 million worth of farm intervention to farmers and fisherfolks in Iloilo.

The DA said in a statement that P885.52 million worth of infrastructure improvements

had been approved as part of the Philippine Rural Development Project.

It said that cash assistance amounting to P2.35 million was handed out to farmers, while P8.5 million was given to cooperatives to improve their market linkages.

The Philippine Center for Postharvest Development and Mechanization (PhilMech) also turned over P11.25 million worth of farming equipment.

This included walk-behind transplanters, riding-type transplanters, rice precision seeders, rice combine harvesters, and single-pass rice mills.

The Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources also distributed gill nets, 10 horsepower marine engines, and *tilapia* fingerlings amounting to P2.07 million.

The P19.7-billion multipurpose Jalaur River project is also set to be fully operational

by 2025, according to Agriculture Secretary Francisco P. Tiu Laurel, Jr.

"This is what we need to maximize the potential of Western Visayas in rice production. I am not dismissing the potential of this region to contribute more for rice sufficiency of our country," Mr. Tiu Laurel said.

The province of Iloilo was reported to be the fifth largest rice producer in 2023, accord-

ing to the Philippine Statistics Authority. The province had a total *palay*, or unmilled, rice output of 1.07 million metric tons (MT).

The Jalaur project is 74% complete as of January, will have a coverage area of 31,840 hectares, and will benefit 25,000 farmers and 4,500 indigenous peoples.

The project will increase rice production by 71% to 338,000 MT.





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## As high as 40°C: Brace for hot summer months due to El Niño

By Othel Campos

GOVERNMENT agencies warned Filipinos to prepare for a hot season — as high as 40 degrees celsius in certain parts of the country — since people, particularly those with comorbidities, will not be spared by the prolonged dry spell and drought.

PAGASA's Climatology and Agrometeorology Division said Metro Manila and adjacent provinces may hit 37 to 38 degrees celsius.

"The absence of storms and rains will cause a double whammy on agriculture and people. The ongoing drought and dry spell, and the pre-developing La Nina will double the impact of the drought," said *Next page*

## As high...

From A1

CAD officer-in-charge Ana Liza Solis in a briefing on Thursday.

"The maximum temperature, we could get as high as 40 degrees, but it's only instantaneous and not on the average," she added.

In particular, this shall be "mostly" felt in the Cagayan Valley Region, she added.

"Around 41 provinces are under meteorological drought, but if we include dry spells and drought areas, still around 80 provinces are affected," Solis said.

Meanwhile, a government task force is set to help some 4,000 farmers severely affected by the El Niño phenomenon in Western Visayas and Zamboanga Peninsula.

Task Force El Niño spokesperson Joey Villarama said the farmers will receive seeds for alternative crops after rice and corn plantations were badly affected by the weather phenomenon.

They have also been given animals as a source of livelihood, he said.

The government will also fix irrigation canals and conduct cloud seeding operations to help the affected farmers.

Agricultural damage due to El Niño has reached P151 million, with possible production losses pegged at 6,618 metric tons of palay and corn, mostly in Iloilo, Antique, Negros Occidental, and Zamboanga Del Norte, according to a report of the **Department of Agriculture**.

In a related development, Defense Secretary Gilberto Teodoro Jr. has ordered all military camp commanders to conserve water to ease the effects of El

Niño, which may persist until the month of May.

"Commanders of all military camps across the country must take the lead in conserving water as we begin to experience the effects of El Niño," Teodoro said during the second meeting of Task Force El Niño (TFEN) at the Office of Civil Defense in Camp Aguinaldo.

He also raised the need to repair facilities, such as leaking pipes, to stop water waste.

The Metropolitan Waterworks and Sewerage System (MWSS), on the other hand, assured Thursday that water source augmentation efforts are in place to cushion the effects of El Niño.

In a press briefing, MWSS Field Operations chief engineer Christian Gonzales said the country is now more prepared in mitigating the impact of the weather phenomenon. **With Vince Lopez**





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DEPT. OF AGRICULTURE

Date: FEB. 16, 2024 Page: All

# Drought hits Bataan, Zambales; crop losses in Negros at P14.4M

By Tonette Orejas  
and Carla Gomez  
@InqNational

Drought triggered by the El Niño weather phenomenon, or the unusual warming of surface waters in the eastern tropical Pacific Ocean, has hit the provinces of Bataan and Zambales, a Department of Agriculture (DA) official said.

In a report, Lowell Rebillaco, DA regional field office focal person for disaster risk reduction and management, confirmed that the two Central Luzon provinces were "experiencing drought" while Aurora, Nueva Ecija, Pampanga and Tarlac "were already under dry spell condition."

The report has yet to cite the extent or cost of damage to the local agriculture industry resulting from the drought or how farmers, livestock or poul-

try growers and fisherfolk are managing the situation.

According to him, field monitoring reports matched the climate outlook released by the Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration (Pagasa) during the 168th Climate Forum for February until July this year.

## Damaged rice farms

Pagasa, in its website, says a dry spell is characterized by "three consecutive months of below normal (21-percent to 60-percent reduction from average) rainfall conditions; or two consecutive months of way below normal (more than 60-percent reduction from average) rainfall conditions."

Drought, on the other hand, occurs when there is "three consecutive months of way below normal; or five consecutive months of below normal rainfall conditions."



**FARM INSPECTION** A turnip farmer, in this photo taken on Tuesday, checks a plantation bordering San Marcelino and San Antonio towns in Zambales amid the scarcity of rain. Farmers in Central Luzon are reeling from the impact of the drought and dry spell accompanying the El Niño phenomenon. —**JOANNA ROSE AGLIBOT**

To ease the impact of El Niño, the DA has reported reactivating a disaster task force, monitoring water levels in dams, updating planting and harvesting reports, mapping drought-vulnerable areas, increasing awareness of El Niño and alternate wetting and drying technology.

Rebillaco said the regional office has available buffer stocks of rice, corn and vegetable seeds, as well as biopesticides and bio-control agents. It also encouraged the shift to corn, onion and other high-value crops.

Rebillaco said onion and mango growers in Central Luzon stand

to benefit from minimal rains.

In Negros Occidental, damage to rice farms due to the dry spell has risen to P14,474,887, government reports showed.

Gov. Eugenio Jose Lacson on Wednesday said the losses in the province affected 383 farmers who tilled 369 hectares in 43 barangays.

Cauayan town was worst hit with damage to crops reaching P7.6 million followed by Hino-baan with P2.5 million. Himamaylan City reported losses at P2.4 million, Sipalay City at P535,658, Binalbagan town at P513,360, Moises Padilla town at P450,897 and Isabela town at P334,800.

## Water conservation

Lacson said Dennis Arpi, DA regional director in Western Visayas, assured him that cloud seeding would be done in Negros Occidental.

The provincial government,

the governor said, will use its savings to assist farmers affected by the dry spell.

Meanwhile, Defense Secretary Gilberto Teodoro Jr., who also chairs the government's Task Force El Niño, directed commanders of military camps across the country to implement tighter measures to conserve water.

Teodoro, in a statement released by the Presidential Communications Office, stressed the importance of practicing the government's water conservation policy amid the dry season.

He reminded commanders of military camps to repair facilities, like leaking pipes, to prevent wastage.

"All military personnel and their dependents living inside military camps must do their part in the whole-of-government approach to mitigate the effects of El Niño," Teodoro said. —**WITH**

**A REPORT FROM JULIE M. AURELIO INQ**





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# The Philippines should fast-track consolidation of small farms

**T**he consolidation and clustering of our small farms averaging less than 2 hectares (ha) must be accelerated to achieve economies of scale. This is especially critical at a time of stiff global competition, climate change and increasing hunger.

Back in 2021, there was still no specific budget for this initiative called the Farm and Fisheries Clustering and Consolidation (F2C2). But in a media interview with then presidential candidate Ferdinand Marcos Jr. on Dec. 6, 2021, he committed to the initiative by pledging a P185-million budget.

## Background

Farm and fisherfolk clustering and consolidation was one of 12 agriculture directions that emerged from an unprecedented unanimous agreement by five coalitions: Alyansa Agrikultura (AA), Federation of Free Farmers, Philippine Council of Agriculture and Fisheries, Inc., Coalition for Agriculture Modernization in the Philippines (CAMP), and Bayanihan sa Agrikultura.

The groups stated as a requirement for successful transformation: "To ensure

## COMMENTARY

ERNESTO M. ORDOÑEZ

more producers' income and livelihood, the Department of Agriculture (DA) should lead the shift from monocropping to localized, diversified, sustainable production system and clustered cooperative community-based approaches to production, value adding and marketing."

But while the DA budget was increased significantly by 32 percent from P157 billion to P202 billion in 2024, the F2C2 budget was decreased by 14 percent to P145 million.

This was a big mistake. However, it can still be remedied through other funding sources.

## Performance

So far, F2C2 has been performing well. From an average of 292 clusters for the prior two years, F2C2 has catalyzed 711 new empowered clusters (or 2.4 times). Today, there are 1,296 clusters with 484,396 farmers and fisherfolk covering an area of 779,596 ha.

They are found in rice (462),

corn/cassava (304), high value crops (323), livelihood (110), fisheries (40), organic (26) and others (31). However, the number is still too small because it covers less than 5 percent of a potential area.

In Thailand, agriculture is handled by the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives. Their emphasis on clustering and consolidation has produced results. Last year, Thailand agriculture experts reached \$42.3 billion, six times our measly \$7.1 billion.

But we are still on the right track. F2C2 is also learning from the best practices of our successful neighboring countries.

One such collaboration is with the Taiwan Technical Mission (TTM). F2C2 entered into an agreement with TTM to implement a project with the Tabon San Jose Farmers Association in San Luis, Pampanga. Projects like this should be multiplied nationwide.

## Other recommendations

Agriculture Fisheries Alliance (AFA) leaders also have other suggestions. CAMP president Eufemio Rasco says: "It should be clear that for diversification, horizontal and vertical integration should be part of the tool box for consolidation and clustering. We

must use a commodity system approach rather than single commodity programs."

From the farmers and fisherfolk component of AA, vice president and concurrent Pakisama spokesperson Rene Arcilla states: "We should simultaneously address our own severe nutrition and hunger challenges through programs like Harb's 'Family Food Garden in Every Household,' [which is] now present in 50 provinces but on an extremely limited scale." (I have talked about this in my column last week.)

For this year, we must use additional resources from the DA banner programs and work for a much larger F2C2 outlay during the 2025 budget deliberations.

Only with clustering and consolidation—which I highlight was supported by President Marcos before he stepped into office—will we realize the true agriculture transformation we need. **INQ**

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DEPT. OF AGRICULTURE

Date: FEB. 16, 2024 Page: 8

## SKETCHES ANA MARIE PAMINTUAN

### 'Price crash'

**W**e keep hearing about prices of agricultural commodities falling at the farm gate. So how come retail prices at least in Metro Manila don't follow the fall?

The government seems unable to identify who along the supply chain makes a killing when farmers groan about prices of their crops hitting rock bottom while retail prices register only minimal reductions.



Egg prices, for example, have "crashed" at the farm gate, according to poultry producers. As of last Wednesday, the P270 that I used to pay at the start of the year for a tray of 30 jumbo (the largest) eggs in our neighborhood wet market was down to only P250.

That's a reduction of 70 centavos per egg, from P9 to P8.30 each, but still not close to the P220 that I used to pay per tray of the same size in mid-2023, or P7.30 per piece. Yesterday there were eggs at P6 per piece in the wet market, but these were of the smallest size.

Any price reduction is welcome news, but I would hardly call it a "crash" in egg prices. The producers must be referring mainly to the farm gate prices, which are rarely reflected in the retail outlets.

Since the importation of tons of sugar failed to significantly bring down the retail price of white refined sugar last year, even as domestic producers lamented the fall in mill gate prices, people have wondered where the mega profits are being made along the food supply chain.

Retailers say they peg their price based on how much they pay wholesale. So it must be the wholesale buyers of domestic produce who are making a killing, or oppressing farmers. In the past weeks when upland farmers had to sell their vegetables such as carrots and cabbage dirt-cheap, the market retail prices in Metro Manila didn't go down commensurately. Retail vendors said their buying prices from the wholesalers remained high.

Maybe the wholesalers had to tack on the pass-through fees, or whatever term barangays and local government units have concocted to circumvent President Marcos' prohibition on the collection of such fees. The prohibition might have even raised the rates, thus negating any price "crash" at the farm gate.

Meanwhile, for imported agricultural products such as sugar and onions, the wholesalers say they peg their price based on what is set by the importers.

For sugar, the three lucky importers handpicked by Marcos 2.0 at the start of 2023 controlled prices: All Asian Countertrade Inc., Edison Lee Marketing Corp. and S&D Sudden Philippines.

Despite the three favored importers bringing in 440,000 metric tons of sugar (ahead of the issuance of the import order), later followed by a normal harvest and more importations, retail prices refused to come down from the stratosphere.

Today the lowest retail price for white refined sugar in the wet market is P80 a kilo; in the supermarkets, the price can be as high as P110. And to this day, the anomalous importation in the first quarter of 2023 has not been fully investigated.

Dozens of traders were reportedly slapped with charges of agricultural smuggling last year after prices of red onions surged to an eye-watering P700 a kilo (with no white onions to be had) during the 2022 Christmas holiday season.

I'm not sure though if those charged included the so-called onion queen, who has been implicated in onion smuggling during congressional investigations in the past years. She seems as untouchable as a well-connected player in the agriculture sector.

For rice, a farmers' group said this week that the average retail price of well-milled rice had gone down by P2, to P52 a kilo.

In my part of town yesterday, rice retail prices ranged from P50 to P56 for non-special varieties. Last week when I replenished my supply at my *suki* wholesaler, the local *sinandomeng* varieties that I bought for just P47 to P49 a kilo by the sack in the fourth quarter of 2023 had gone up to P54 to P56.

Rice, the country's staple, is reportedly the only food item that has defied the easing inflation trend.

The Marcos administration has reported that it has secured rice imports from India and Vietnam, two of the world's top exporters, to prevent a price spike as El Niño intensifies. Industry experts have said Filipinos aren't big consumers of Indian rice. But if the imports can stabilize supply and prices, consumers will welcome the imports.

Farmers have stressed that the import volume must be balanced with domestic rice production. And there lies the rub: the government has yet to come up with accurate data on agricultural output.

Apart from importation, the P20-a-kilo rice administration is also considering giving cash transfer beneficiaries rice instead of money ostensibly to tame food inflation.

An official of the Department of Agriculture said President Marcos is considering this proposal, which the Department of Social Welfare and Development had opposed last December, pointing out that a cash grant is more practical than rice distribution.

It's also doubtful that the beneficiaries of the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program or 4Ps would prefer rice to cash, which they withdraw from ATMs or banks. With the cash, they can pick the variety of rice to buy and use the rest of the money according to their needs. If it's a rice handout, which will likely be distributed by politicians complete with photo ops, the beneficiaries could end up being shortchanged.

BBM, during his disastrous stint as concurrent agriculture secretary, had promised intervention in the supply chain to raise the earnings of farmers while at the same time bringing down retail prices.

The interventions were supposed to include cutting down the number of middlemen and providing cold storage facilities to preserve harvests and prevent prices from crashing.

Today there's a new agriculture secretary. A seasoned businessman, perhaps he can translate into reality all the stuff that remain in the realm of aspiration.

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Date: FEB. 16, 2024 Page: 5



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## 'Rice retail prices down by P2/kilo'

By **BELLA CARIASO**

The retail prices of rice decreased by P2 per kilo as well-milled rice went down to P52 per kilo compared to the previous P54 per kilo, according to farmers' group Samahang Industriya ng Agrikultura (Sinag).

"The good news is there is a slight decrease in the price (of rice) in the world market, at least \$30 per metric ton. This means that there will be a decrease in the imported rice 15 days from now. We expect that by March, the retail price will further go down as it is also the peak in the local palay harvest," Sinag chairman Rosendo So said yesterday in a radio interview.

He noted that the 25 percent broken rice in Vietnam went down to \$612 from the previous \$640 per metric ton; Thailand, \$568 per MT from the previous \$605 per MT.

So added that the P52 per kilo of well-milled rice is already available in local markets.

"The delivery of rice in Metro Manila is at P48 per kilo, these are the 25 percent broken. This means that you have P52 (per kilo) retail price from the previous P54 to P56 per kilo. It should go down to P52 to P54 per kilo," he said.

According to So, the retailers are expected to bring down their prices once their old stocks are sold and they have to replenish.

He added that the palay production will not be affected by the El Niño phenomenon as many farmers planted this crop season.

"More areas were planted (palay) compared to last year so if there was an increase in farmlands, the drop in production will be recovered with the increase in

area planted to rice," So said.

On the other hand, he said that the government should continue imposing tariff on imported rice so that farmers could continue to benefit from proceeds from the collection.

"There is no assurance that the retail price of imported rice will go down if there will be a slash in tariff. The tariff is necessary so that the farmers are protected," he added.

So noted that at least P31.5 billion tariff collected from the imported staple in 2023 were used to benefit rice farmers.

"At least P5 billion went to the machinery; P3 billion for certified seeds; P1 billion to the loans being provided by the Landbank; P1 billion for technical training and in January, at least P12.7 billion were distributed where farmers owning two hectares and below, received P5,000 cash each," he said.

Meanwhile, the retail price of *galunggong* or round scad started to go down by P40 per kilo as the closed fishing season formally ended yesterday, according to the **Department of Agriculture (DA).**

Based on monitoring of the DA in Metro Manila markets yesterday, round scad was sold at P280 per kilo, compared to P320 per kilo on Wednesday or a drop of P40 per kilo.

The retail price of *galunggong* is expected to decrease by 30 percent with the end of the three-month closed fishing season in Visayan Sea and Zamboanga peninsula on Feb. 15, Agriculture Assistant Secretary and spokesperson Arnel de Mesa said.

Imported round scad was pegged at P260 per kilo.

Commercial fishers can resume their operations effective today with the end of the fishing ban.





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# Gov't OKs higher 60,000 MT potato imports at lower tariff

By JASPER EMMANUEL ARCALAS

The Philippines has allowed the entry of more imported potatoes used for making chips and french fries at a lower tariff to meet the growing demand for the raw material by local snack manufacturers.

The inter-agency Minimum Access Volume (MAV) Management Committee doubled the allowable volume of chipping potatoes to be imported under MAV to 60,000 metric tons.

"There is a need to reflect the current import requirements to ensure competitiveness of locally manufactured potato chips," the MMC said in an unnumbered administrative circular.

Firms such as Gokongwei-led Universal Robina Corp., Liwayway Marketing Corp. and Leslie Food Corp. stand to benefit from the expansion of the MAV for chipping potatoes. The three companies have the current allocation under the MAV to import chipping potatoes at

a lower tariff rate.

The MMC noted that URC imported 24,881.96 MT of chipping potatoes in 2022 while Liwayway Food and Leslie Food imported 4,399.04 MT and 719 MT, respectively, for a total of 30,000 MT.

Imports of chipping potatoes under MAV are levied with only three percent tariff but imports outside the MAV have a 40 percent tariff.

"No locally produced chipping potatoes are currently available for use for manufacturing of potato chips, prompting local potato chips manufacturers to import their additional raw materials requirements outside of the current MAV at a tariff rate of 40 percent," the MMC said.

The Philippines first opened a unilateral MAV for chipping potatoes in 2018 with a volume of 20,000 MT to cater the needs of the local potato chips manufacturers for raw materials.

Before the establishment of the MAV for chipping potatoes, local food manu-

facturers have opted to bring in finished goods of potato chips since they are levied with lower tariffs instead of importing raw materials at 40 percent. The tariff on imported potato chips ranges from zero to seven percent depending on the origin.

Under existing rules, local potato chip manufacturers must allocate a minimum of P0.25 per kilogram of chipping potato that they would import under the MAV mechanism. The money collected from the manufacturers would be used to develop the local potato industry through a program jointly undertaken by the local manufacturers and the **Department of Agriculture**.

The country imported 32,616.332 MT of chipping potatoes last year, 12.5 percent over the 28,991.593 MT recorded in 2022, Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) data showed. The United States was the country's top supplier of chipping potatoes, accounting for almost half of the total import volume or about 15,601.019 MT last year, based on PSA data.





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## The role of knowledge management in developing Philippine agriculture

**K**nowledge management is extremely important, especially in industries that rely on information to move forward, yet have a personnel base that are most of the time loath to adapt new techniques.

A large number of Filipino farmers fall into this category, with many adopting a "to see is to believe" attitude before allowing themselves to try new farming techniques.

This is one of the many hindrances agricultural research and knowledge dissemination institutions and organizations are up against when it comes to modernizing farming techniques.

### Proper knowledge management

The availability of digital technology has been a boon to information dissemination in the agriculture industry, not just in terms of spreading knowledge but also in giving industry outsiders a glimpse of what goes on inside a farm, fishpond, or fishing vessel.

Within knowledge institutions, it has been instrumental in the capturing, analyzing, and dissemination of research and information. That many people had access to a smartphone and internet, for example, was especially helpful during the pandemic



AVANT  
GARDENER  
YVETTE TAN

*Knowledge management, at least in the agriculture sector, should begin with information storage and end in successful real-world applications.*

where people continued to learn, teach, and even sell products online.

Agricultural institutions such as the Agriculture Training Institute (ATI) do a good job collecting information and turning them into instructional videos and pamphlets and so on. What is needed is more people and avenues to be able to deliver such information effectively to those who need it and either do not know it exists, do not think they need it but actually do, or do not have the means to access the materials.

### Capitalizing on the exponential effects of knowledge networks

But aside from just being able to record and

store instructional audio and video, it is also important to be able to understand how to arrange all acquired knowledge so that it makes sense to someone who is accessing the information for the first time. Nowadays, when disseminating information to the public relies more than ever on the public's interest for a topic to become popular (something enabled by social media algorithms), it is also important that scientific and agricultural institutions understand how to package their messages to appeal to the masses, without diluting its meaning.

Knowledge institutions should also continue to strengthen collaborations with other capacity building organizations with the goal of reaching and supporting the most number of constituents. An example would be ATI partnerships with the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) to speed the process of setting up a small business for agripreneurs with promising products.

Knowledge management, at least in the agriculture sector, should begin with information storage and end in successful real-world applications.



Date: FEB. 16, 2024 Page: 13



LIBRARY  
DEPT. OF AGRICULTURE

## Gov't mulls converting portion of 4Ps cash aid to rice supply

By GABRIELL CHRISTEL GALANG

**I**n an effort to lower market demand for rice, the government is exploring the option of directly supplying rice to poor Filipinos instead of providing them with cash grants.

Agriculture Undersecretary Roger Navarro said that his department and the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) are considering the potential conversion of a portion of the cash grants for Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps) beneficiaries into rice supply.

Navarro said that the Department of Agriculture (DA) and the DSWD are finalizing the specifics of the proposal to ensure that poor Filipinos are not compelled to purchase rice at high market prices.

He also said that by doing so, government could ease demand for rice in the market by 20 percent, lowering inflationary pressure.

The 4Ps provides benefits to households below the provincial poverty threshold; have children under the age of 18 or a pregnant member in the family; or those who meet the conditions within the 4Ps.

Despite the ample rice supply due to bumper harvest and importations which came in early this year, Navarro said that reducing prices is still a challenge, stating that "the cost of grain even in Vietnam and Thailand, have also gone up to ₱48 and ₱52 per kilo."

Vietnam and Thailand are two of the Philippines' major rice suppliers.

"The challenge is not the price of

rice but more of stabilizing supply," he added.

Pushing rice prices down will be difficult, the DA said, now that demand rose after India's export ban on non-basmati rice affects supply,

Prolonged effects of El Niño, higher fertilizer expenses, and other farm inputs were also seen as the large factors determining the high rice prices.

The Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) recorded a sharp decrease in inflation, marking 3.9 percent in December down to 2.8 percent because of the lower costs of food, transport, and utilities.

Food, beverage and tobacco account for 74.5 percent of the basket of goods consumed by the bottom 30 percent of Filipino households—the poorest of the poor who are main beneficiaries of government's 4Ps program.

Of that consumer basket, rice accounts for 17.87 percentage points—double the weight in the basket of goods for all income households at 8.87 percent.





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## Fish deliveries down 19% in January

FISH unloaded in January this year reached 38,780.63 metric tons (MT), marking a decrease from the previous month's fish deliveries, the Philippine Fisheries Development Authority (PFDA) said.

The latest figure was 19.12 percent lower from the 47,952 MT of fish delivered in December last year. The PFDA attributed the decline to the closed fishing seasons in key fishing areas and unfavorable weather conditions during the month.

"Nonetheless, all PFDA Regional fish ports still managed to supply sufficient and affordable fishery products to all their clients and stakeholders," the PFDA said.

Year on year, the result was 2.3

percent higher than the 37,900.16 MT volume of fish delivered in the same month of 2023.

Despite the lower fish delivery, both the Lucena Fish Port Complex (LFPC) and the Zamboanga Fish Port Complex showed steady growth in fish shipments.

The LFPC in South-Central Luzon saw a rise of 8.17 percent, delivering 1,645.61 MT of fish during the month. Meanwhile, the Western Mindanao port recorded a 10.97-percent increase, handling 857.75 MT of fish.

The General Santos Fish Port Complex, meanwhile, saw a slight decrease in its monthly fish unloading at 22,706.98 MT. PFDA said that the decline is partly due

to a decrease in vessel arrivals.

The reduced fishing activity during the lean season also impacted the Navotas Fish Port Complex as its January delivery dropped by 35.7 percent to 10,606.00 MT.

The Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources announced in November last year the three-month closed fishing season in the Zamboanga Peninsula and the Visayan Sea.

This is done annually through the Bureau's Administrative Circular 225 that aims to conserve and protect the economically important species in the two fishing grounds during their spawning period.

Additionally, a slight decline in fish delivery was recorded in both

Iloilo Fish Port Complex and the Bulan Fish Port Complex during the month. However, the two ports managed to deliver 1,607.20 MT and 1,080.95 MT of fish, respectively.

The Davao Fish Port Complex also posted a decline in volume attributed to adverse weather conditions and calamities throughout the month, resulting in the unloading of 276.14 MT of fish.

The PFDA said that it expects fish deliveries "to significantly recover come February when the annual closed fishing season in the waters of Zamboanga Peninsula, Northern Palawan and the Visayan Sea simultaneously reopen."

**JANINE ALEXIS MIGUEL**





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## Triggers of development in agriculture

FINER POINTS

FERMIN ADRIANO



IT IS universally recognized that the main problem of the

Philippine agricultural sector is its low productivity compared to neighboring countries. However, there is no consensus among our policymakers and politicians as to what measures need to be implemented to trigger high and sustained growth.

Based on my more than 40 years of being a student and mentor of agricultural development, intellectual exchanges with agricultural scientists at UP Los Baños and other universities, and my decades-long exposure to the workings of our Department of Agriculture (DA), below are key triggers (not in the order of priority) that can jumpstart the development of our agricultural sector.

One, farm clustering and consolidation is indispensable. Ideally, the agricultural land market should be restored. But given the existence and protracted implementation of the agrarian reform law, the second-best option is to cluster our small farms (which average around a hectare) to enjoy economies of scale.

Only then will we be able to efficiently use modern farm machineries and technologies while at the same time planting a uniform variety for easier processing and marketing. It will also facilitate the delivery of government services, as it will not deal with hundreds and

► Finer B3

■ FINER FROM B1

## Triggers

thousands of individual farmers but with their cooperatives or associations.

Two, it is imperative that a robust (properly validated) Registry System for the Basic Sector of Agriculture, or in layman's terms, a farmers and fishery registry, be completed. This will trigger reforms in the way by which the DA extends assistance to small farmers and fishers.

Instead of the DA procuring the materials (e.g., seeds, fertilizers, etc.), it can give the cash equivalent directly to the farmers'/fishers' ATM accounts. This will prevent corruption, which normally accompanies the procurement process, and facilitate the delivery of services to beneficiaries. In addition, it will develop markets for other brands as the recipients will buy only those agricultural inputs that are effective and no longer blame the government as the inputs bought are their choices.

Unfortunately, the current list has not been properly validated. There are many recipients who are not eligible, while many of those eligible are not in the list.

Three, the application of satellite imaging and digital technology to monitor farm operations will revolutionize our knowledge of the actual situation on farms. Provided high magnification satellite images, we will have real-time data on whether farms were planted, their planting density, damage and losses incurred in cases of natural disasters, and even the type of pests or diseases that hit crops. Satellite imaging will have to be accompanied by geo-tagging to determine the extent of damages or

losses in each individual farm.

Armed with detailed and real-time data on ongoing farm operations, private insurance companies will be encouraged to participate in the crop insurance business. They will also expand our agricultural credit programs because lending institutions are assured that actual planting took place in the farms of farmers borrowing money from them.

Four is the need to wean our production programs and budgets away from rice to finance the development of agricultural products where we have a comparative advantage. The rice program eats up more than half of the total agriculture budget, leaving little for the development of other crops that are of higher value and for exports. This partly accounts for the drop in our agricultural export earnings over the last four decades.

In the livestock and poultry industry, an animal nutritionist will inform growers that there is a certain level by which the consumption-weight gain of an animal begins to plateau. Once reached, further feeding the animal will no longer result in significant weight gain. It is at that point when the animal should be sold to gain a higher profit and lessen cost.

The same is true for rice. We do not have ample natural resource endowments, besides an ever-growing population, to attain absolute self-sufficiency. Doing so will force us to irrigate marginal lands at an exorbitant cost, though the gains will be insignificant. Until we recognize this scientific fact, aim at a sufficiency level (e.g., 75-80 percent) where local production can meet demand in an efficient manner, and divert resources to the development of other crops where we have a comparative advantage, our agricultural sector will remain a laggard among peers in the region.

Five is the need for a clear strategy on how to engage and encourage the private sector to participate in agricultural development. There will be a need to examine myriads of regulatory measures that are supposedly meant to protect the public, animal and plant health but which are mainly based on populist precepts devoid of any scientific basis.

In addition, we need to formulate a research and development program and activities that support our agricultural exports (e.g., varietal improvement) and avoid funding esoteric studies of academicians and researchers that are meant for publication and are only useful in their promotion as a faculty member or researcher.

Finally, there will be a need to strengthen the capability of DA officials and staff and change their mindset that only the government can give a satisfactory solution to the problems besetting the agricultural sector and that doing so will require more funds for their respective agencies or programs. The main driver of economic growth is not the government, as its resources are limited. The bulk of resources are in the hands of the private sector and hence their active participation in the development process must be encouraged and facilitated.

The caveat here is that only technically qualified individuals with the country's interests in their hearts can do this mental shift. It is the height of foolishness to expect an engineer to treat a person with a medical illness. Similarly, we do not expect medical doctors to build houses and roads or lawyers to determine at what point will the economy run efficiently, as this is a task assigned to economists. Or do we?

(fdadriano88@gmail.com)





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## FDA lifts ban on pork from Singapore

THE Food and Drug Administration (FDA) yesterday lifted the nine-month ban on pig products and by-products from Singapore due to the elimination of the threat of African swine fever (ASF) in that country.

"The temporary ban on the importation of domestic and wild pigs and their products, including pork meat, pig skin, processed animal proteins, and semen originating from Singapore, is hereby lifted," said the FDA in its Order No. 2023-0790-A.

The agency said the lifting of the ban is in accordance with the official

self-declaration report of Singapore in the World Organization for Animal Health (WOAH) and the supporting documents submitted by the Chief Veterinary Officer Director General of Animal and Veterinary Service of Singapore stating all ASFV reported events have ended with resolved status and no additional outbreaks.

The FDA said it also based its decision on the evaluation of **Department of Agriculture.**

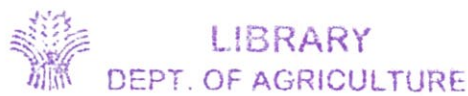
"The risk of contamination from domestic and wild pigs and their products, including pork meat, pig

skin, processed animal proteins, and semen originating from Singapore, is now negligible," it noted.

The ban was imposed in May 2023.

FDA said the ban imposed on tpork products from the following countries shall remain in effect: China, Hungary, Latvia, Poland, Romania, Russia, Ukraine, Vietnam, Zambia, South Africa, Bulgaria, Cambodia, Mongolia, Moldova, Hong Kong, North Korea, Laos, Germany, Indonesia, Greece, Myanmar, Serbia, Slovakia, South Korea, Zimbabwe, Malaysia, Thailand, Italy, and Czech Republic.





Fish unloading volume up 2% YoY

FISH unloading volume across all regional fish ports recorded a 2.3 percent annual increase in January, according to the Philippine Fisheries Development Authority (PFDA).  
PFDA said total fish unloading volume reached 38,780.63 metric tons (MT) last month, up from January 2023's 37,900.16 MT.

This, however, is 19.13 percent lower than the 47,952.79 MT in December 2023 due to the closed fishing season in various major fishing grounds and unfavorable weather conditions.  
The unloading volume is expected to significantly recover this month when the annual closed fishing

season in the waters of Zamboanga Peninsula, Northern Palawan and the Visayan Sea simultaneously reopen, PFDA said.  
Regional fish ports in PFDA's monitoring are in Bulan, Sorsogon; Sual, Pangasinan; General Santos; Davao; Zamboanga; Lucena, Quezon; Iloilo; and Navotas.- *Jed Macapagal*





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PHILIPPINE STAR/EDD GUMBAN

## January fishport landed volumes increase 2.37%

THE catch landed at regional fish ports (RFPs) rose 2.37% year on year by volume in January, even with the closed season in force in some fisheries, the Philippine Fisheries Development Authority (PFDA) said.

Fish landed at RFPs amounted to 38,780.63 metric tons (MT) during the month, according to the PFDA's monthly briefer.

"All RFPs still managed to supply sufficient and affordable fishery products to all their clients and stakeholders," it said.

Commercial fishing was banned in several major fisheries starting the fourth quarter of last year, according to the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources.

The closed fishing season is a conservation measure aimed at allowing fish stocks to regenerate.

"The PFDA is expecting to significantly recover by February when the annual closed fishing season in the waters of Zamboanga Peninsula, Northern Palawan, and the Visayan Sea simultaneously re-open," it added.

The PFDA said that the Lucena Fish Port Complex posted an 8.17% increase in deliveries to 1,645.61 MT during the month.

The Zamboanga Fish Port, likewise, saw a 10.97% rise in fish landed, amounting to 857.75 MT.

The Navotas Fish Port posted a drop in volume to 10,606.00 MT in January.

Fish landed in General Santos City declined to 22,706.98 MT.

In 2023, fisheries production dropped 6.5%, accelerating the 5% decline recorded in the prior year, according to the Philippine Statistics Authority. — **Adrian H. Halili**





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## Corn research, technical aid legislation filed in Congress

A MEASURE proposing to create a corn industry research institute has been filed in the House of Representatives in aid of the government's food security efforts.

House Bill No. 9861 seeks to establish the Philippine Corn Research Institute, as farmers face challenges in growing the crop due to the high cost of production, fertilizer, and seed, as well as labor and environmental issues.

"This legislation aims to fully develop and utilize corn as one of the most essential crops in the country, primarily in the pursuit of food security and self-sufficiency," Ilocos Norte Rep. Angelo M. Barba said in the bill's explanatory note.

The measure also called for subsidized credit from the Land Bank of the Philippines to be applied to the purchase of inputs and machinery, according to a copy of the bill.

The **Department of Agriculture**, with other agencies, has been tasked with deploying agricultural engineers, agriculturalists and farm technicians to assist corn farmers in farm management and technical know-how.

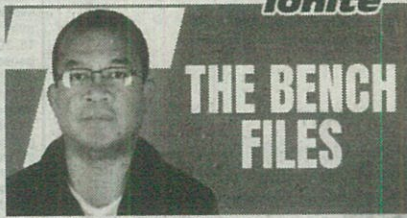
The measure proposes to establish a farm mechanization training program to prepare farmers to use and maintain equipment.

The proposed law will require funding of P4 billion a year from the national budget, with 20% earmarked for the farm support and farm mechanization programs and 15% for research and development.

The funding also includes 60% for infrastructure support, and 5% for grants targeted at students in state universities and colleges taking up agricultural courses related to corn farming.

Corn crops were projected to be the most vulnerable to climate change by 2030, the World Bank said last year. — **Beatriz Marie D. Cruz**





BENJIE ALEJANDRO

Tonite

## THE BENCH FILES

Noong nakaraang linggo inanunsiyo ng Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) na inaasahang bababa na ang presyo ng isdang galunggong.

Paliwanag ng BFAR tapos na kasi ang "closed fishing season" noong January 31, kaya naman magiging matatag na ang suplay ng galunggong na paboritong isda ng mga Pinoy kahit na may kataasan ang halaga ng kada kilo.

Ayon sa BFAR, karamihan ng mga galunggong ay nangagaling pa sa karagatan ng Palawan.

Ayon sa BFAR "makakakita na ang publiko ng mas maraming supply ng galunggong sa mga palengke."

Ang tanong nga lamang bumaba na kaya ang halaga nito sa abo't kayang presyo ng mga

## Reclamation, dinamita, galunggong!

ordinaryong Pilipino.

Samantala, kasabay ng anunsiyo ng BFAR na maari na muling manghuli ang mga mangingisda ng galunggong sa karagatan ng Palawan, naglunsad naman ng kilos protesta sa Department of Environment and Natural Resources sa Quezon City noong Miyerkoles ang mga miyembro ng grupong Pangisda Pilipinas, isang alyansa ng maliliit na mangingisda upang hilingin sa gobyerno na itigil na ang "reclamation" sa Manila Bay at sa iba pang bahagi ng Pilipinas.

Kinondena ng grupo ang "reclamation activity" ng Vietnam sa mga isla at bahura sa Spratlys na sakop ng exclusive economic zone (EEZ) ng Pilipinas.

Hindi rin pinalampas ng grupo ang "poaching" o ilegal na panghuhuli ng mga Vietnamese fishermen sa karagatan ng Palawan na pangunahing it-logan ng mga isdang galunggong.

Ayon sa grupong Pangisda Pilipinas, ang patuloy na reclamation projects at paggamit ng "cyanide at dynamite" sa panghuhuli ng isda ay nagpapabilis sa pagkasira ng yamang dagat at mas lalong naglulubog sa kanilang

sektor sa kahirapan at gutom.

Totoo na hindi lamang ang galunggong ang isda na maaring kainin ng mga Pinoy. Nariyan naman ang bangus, tilapia at iba pang yamang dagat mula sa karagatan ng Pilipinas.

Subalit ang "reclamation" at panghuhuli ng isda ng mga dayuhan gamit ang "cyanide at dinamita" sa karagatang sakop ng Pilipinas ay salot na pumapatay sa mga mangingisda ng Pilipino.

Dahil sa "reclamation" sa Manila Bay, ang mga maliliit na mangingisda ay kailangan pumalaot ng malayo hanggang sa karagatan ng Palawan para manghuli ng galunggong at ng iba pang yamang-dagat.

Sa layo, kahit na marami ang mahuling isda, maraming litro rin ng gasolina o krudo ang mauubos at kung mamalasin pa ay baka limitado lamang ang huling isda dahil nabulabog ng mga "cyanide at dinamita" mula sa mga dayuhang mangingisda.

Kaya kahit na sabihing lifted na ang "ban" sa panghuhuli ng galunggong, hindi pa rin sigurado na bababa ang halaga nito.



Date: FEB 16 2024 Page: 495



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## Ang asukal, bow

NAGKAROON ng argumento sa isa pang panukala mula sa **Sugar Regulatory Administration (SRA)** ng Department of Agriculture na dagdagan ang pag-import ng asukal sa mga stakeholder ng asukal. Inaasahan ang pinsalang idulot ng isa pang alon ng mga pag-import sa mga producer ng asukal, tinawag ng National Federation of Sugar Workers (NFSW) na kahiya-hiya ang lumalaking hindi pagkakasundo sa mga grupo ng mga sugar baron.

Sabi ng NFSW, ang tanging makatwiran at mahabagin na posisyon ay ang manindigan laban sa liberalisadong importasyon. Ang pagbaha sa merkado ng mga inangkat na asukal ay patuloy na nakapinsala sa kabuhayan ng mga maliliit na nagtatanim at manggagawa ng asukal. Kinagat din ng mga import ang kita ng mga panginoong maylupa mula sa backbreaking na trabaho na hindi nila ginawa mismo, ngunit ang mga panginoong maylupa na kontrolado rin ang mga kompanyang pangkalakal na lampas sa kanilang sugar estate ay nanindigan na kumita ng higit pa kaysa sa natalo.

"Walang pakialam ang landlord kung mawalan siya ng asukal sa lokal kung babawi naman siya ng mas mala-

## ORA MISMO

NI BUTCH M. QUEJADA



king kita sa dayuhang asukal. Ganyan kalala ang krisis ng malapyudalismo. Ang landlord na kumikita sa lokal na produksyon at ang komprador na kumikita sa pag-aampon, kahit pa magbangga ang interes ay nagsasanib sa iisang katauhan," sabi ni NFSW sec. general John Milton Lozande.

Sa halip na pag-aangkat ng asukal, ang NFSW ay nakakita ng mas praktikal na alternatibo sa pag-asa sa sarili sa pamamagitan ng direktang pagkuha ng estado. Ang SRA, gayundin ang mga local government units, ay maaaring bumili ng direkta mula sa maliliit na planter ng quedan. Inirerekomenda ng federation na unahin ng SRA ang mga may mas mababa sa 10 ektarya gamit ang P5 milyon na inilaan ng ahensya noong nakaraang buwan para sa pagbili ng 1.8 milyong bag ng asukal—isang planong pag-aangkat ay pinahina.

Ang SRA ay maaaring mapadali ang pag-bid sa mga  
(Sundan sa pahina 5)

## ORA MISMO... Mula pahina 4

mangangalakal habang pinu-protektahan ang maliliit na nagtatanim. Ito ay maaaring magkaisa sa pagkakaloob ng mga subsidyo sa produksyon at paggamit ng mga kontrol sa presyo sa mga input ng sakan tulad ng mga pataba. Itinulak din ng mga manggagawa sa asukal ang pambansang

industriyalisasyon gayundin ang mga patakarang ginagarantiyahan ang seguridad sa trabaho at pamumuhay na sahod upang mapanatili ang mga pag-unlad na ginawa mula sa tunay na repormang agraryo at muling mapunan ang lumiliit na manggagawa sa asukal.





## Soybeans, corn decline

CANBERRA- Chicago soybean futures fell on Thursday to their lowest levels since December 2020 as speculators responded to plentiful supply and a strong US dollar by betting on a further price drop.

Ample supply also pushed wheat futures lower, while corn hovered near a three-year low reached in the previous session.

The most-active soybean contract on the Chicago Board of Trade (CBOT) was down 0.3 percent at \$11.67-1/4 a bushel.

CBOT corn dropped 0.4 percent to \$4.22-3/4 a bushel after matching Wednesday's low of \$4.22, its weakest price since December 2020.

Wheat slipped 0.5 percent to \$5.82-3/4 a bushel and was hovering close to last September's three-year low of \$5.40.

Soybeans and corn have lost around 10 percent so far this year and wheat has fallen around 7 percent.

US grains and soybeans face stiff competition for export busi-

ness from other suppliers with plentiful cheap stocks, and the greenback hit a three-month high this week, making US farm products costlier for importers.

"A strong dollar makes it more difficult for these commodities to compete on the global market in a time when global supplies are more than adequate," said StoneX analyst Arlan Suderman.

"Many of these markets are over-sold, with managed money holding massive short positions. But thus far, there isn't a headline to create concern among these money managers to cause them to change their positions," he said.

Plentiful rains in recent days across Argentina's main growing regions cemented expectations for large corn and soybean harvests there.

Consultants Sovecon raised their 2024 Russian wheat crop estimate by 1.4 million metric tons to 93.6 million tons, which would be a third consecutive bumper harvest in Russia. - Reuters





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## Arabica coffee prices dip on Brazil rains, rising stocks

NEW YORK — Arabica coffee futures on ICE fell on Wednesday, with rains in Brazil boosting the outlook for crops and rising exchange stocks also weighing on prices.

May arabica coffee settled down 5.25 cents or 2.8% at \$1.828 per pound (lb).

"If we continue to see Brazilian rains alongside stock replenishment we could see funds cut their net long position," Rabobank wrote in a report.

ICE certified arabica stocks stood at 297,445 bags, as of Feb. 13, up 19% from 249,829 bags at the end of January.

May robusta coffee fell 2.3% at \$3,090 a metric ton. March raw sugar settled up 0.07 cent or 0.3% at 23.37 cents per lb.

Dealers said forecast showers in Center-South Brazil this week could ease concerns about dry conditions, though doubts remain over whether there will be sufficient rain to make a significant difference.

Analyst Green Pool downgraded its forecast for the 2024/2025 cane crop in CS Brazil late last week, saying that some yield potential had already been lost.

March white sugar expired little changed at \$658.70 a ton, with traders saying 5.239 lots were delivered.

Raw sugar prices are expected to post an annual gain of nearly 20% in 2024 as the global market shifts into a deficit in the upcoming season.

May London cocoa settled down £11 or 0.2% to £4,690 per ton.

Dealers said the market was consolidating after its recent run to record highs, but prices remain underpinned by supply tightness after poor crops in the world's top two producers, Ivory Coast, and Ghana.

May New York cocoa fell 1.2% to \$5,584 a ton.

Hershey and Cadbury are planning more price increases to cover another record-setting surge in cocoa prices. — **Reuters**