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DA chief creates panel to investigate 'collusion' between NFA, rice traders

By Othel V. Campos

THE Department of Agriculture (DA) will look into possible collusion between the National Food Authority (NFA) and some traders who sold thousands of metric tons of affordable rice at prices disadvantageous to the government.

Meanwhile, the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) maintained that distributing cash grants is more practical and efficient than giving bags of rice worth P600 per month to Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps) beneficiaries.

Agriculture Secretary Francisco

Tiu Laurel has created a panel to conduct the investigation, particularly on charges that the NFA agreed to sell milled rice at P25 a kilo without prior bidding.

"We do not brush aside reports of impropriety against officials of the Department of Agriculture, regardless

of the source. We also welcome any government agency who may wish to conduct their own probe to ferret out the truth," Laurel said.

The NFA reportedly purchased the palay from farmers at P23 per kilo.

"We are custodians of government funds—monies to be spent for the benefit of Filipinos, especially farmers and fisherfolk. Taxpayers' money shouldn't be squandered to line anybody's pockets," Laurel added.

The DA chief noted that farmers and fishermen have been a neglected sector, while some officials tasked to look after their welfare have been focusing instead on enriching themselves.

The DA stressed that the harshest measure should be inflicted on people, groups and organizations, who profit at

the expense of farmers and fisherfolk, as well as the Filipino consumers.

"After discussion with the Department of Agriculture, we made it clear to them that this is not feasible because of the logistical requirements which may not be convenient with the beneficiaries," DSWD Assistant Secretary Romel Lopez told reporters during a news forum dubbed Traditional Media Service.

DA officials have proposed to President Marcos to actually give away rice to be supplied by the NFA instead of the P600-rice subsidy for 4Ps beneficiaries into rice to be supplied by the National Food Authority (NFA), saying the scheme would "ease the price pressures of the market in terms of buying high-price rice."

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NFA execs face corruption probe over cheap rice sale

By **ROMINA CABRERA**

The **National Food Authority (NFA)** is facing an investigation for corruption after it allegedly sold rice to some traders at lower prices.

Some NFA officials allegedly authorized the sale of milled rice stored in the agency's

warehouse at P25 per kilo without bidding even after purchasing grains in palay form at P23 per kilo.

A panel has been formed to probe the allegations, according to **Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr.**

"We do not brush

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aside reports of impropriety against officials of the Department of Agriculture, regardless of the source. We also welcome any government agency who may wish to conduct their own probe to ferret out the

truth," Laurel said.

"We are custodians of government funds—monies to be spent for the benefit of Filipinos, especially farmers and fisherfolk. Taxpayers' money shouldn't be squandered to line anybody's pockets," he added.

Laurel vowed stiff penalties and sanctions against corrupt officials.



NFA, MGA TRADER YARI SA BIGAS SCAM

Pinaiimbestigahan ni Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. ang mga alegasyon na nagbenta diumano ang National Food Authority (NFA) ng libo-libong toneladang bigas sa ilang mga trader sa presyong ikinalugi ng pamahalaan.

Sa pahayag kahapon, Pebrero 27, sinabi ng DA na bumuo ng grupo ng mga imbestigador si Laurel para masusing

pag-aralan ang mga bintang na binasbasan ng ilang opisyal ng NFA na ibenta ang bigas na nasa mga bodega nito sa halagang P25 lamang ang kilo nang walang bidding kahit pa ang bili ng ahensiya sa palay pa lamang ay nasa P23 per kilo na.

Sabi ni Laurel, hindi pinapalampas ang mga bintang ng katiwalian laban sa mga opisyal ng DA kahit kanino pa ito

galing.

"We do not brush aside reports of impropriety against officials of the Department of Agriculture, regardless of the source. We also welcome any government agency who may wish to conduct their own probe to ferret out the truth," pahayag ni Laurel.

Dagdag niya, pondo ng gobyerno ang pinag-uusapan dito na dapat ay pinakikinabangan

ng mga magsasaka at mangingisda na matagal nang napapabayaang pamahalaan at hindi dapat ito inaaksaya para may mabulsa lamang ang ilan.

"Those who profit at the expense of farmers and fisherfolk as well as Filipino consumers should be meted the harshest penalty under the law," dagdag pa ni Laurel. (Eileen Men-

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NFA rice ibinenta ng palugi, sisilipin ng DA

Ipinag-utos ni Agriculture Secretary Francisco P. Tiu Laurel, Jr. ang malawakang imbestigasyon sa umano'y pagbebenta ng National Food Authority (NFA) ng

libong toneladang NFA rice sa isang negosyante na sobrang baba ng presyo at lugi ang gobyerno.

Bumuo na si Laurel ng panel of investigators para imbestigahan ang alegasyon na ilang opisyal ng NHA ang nagbigay permiso sa bentahan ng milled rice na nakaimbak sa NFA warehouse sa halagang P25 kada kilo nang walang bidding at makaraang mabili ang palay sa halagang P23 per kilo.

"We do not brush aside reports of impropriety against officials of the Department of Agriculture, regardless of the source. We also welcome any government agency who may wish to conduct their own probe to ferret out the truth," sabi ni Laurel.

"We are custodians of government funds—monies to be spent for the benefit of Filipinos, especially farmers and fisherfolk. Taxpayers' money shouldn't be squandered to line anybody's pockets," dagdag ng Kalihim.

Ani Laurel, ilang dekada rin na napabayaang mga magsasaka at mangingisda dahil sa kapabayaang ilang opisyal na matignan ang kanilang kapakanan sa halip ay nagpapayaman gamit ang kanilang puwesto.

"Those who profit at the expense of farmers and fisherfolk as well as Filipino consumers should be meted the harshest penalty under the law," dagdag niya. (Angie dela Cruz)



DA starts cloud seeding amid El Niño

By ROMINA CABRERA

Cloud seeding operations have been conducted over Cagayan Valley to cushion the effects of the strong El Niño, according to the Department of Agriculture.

The DA said sodium chloride was scattered on cloud formations 4,500 feet above the ground in targeted areas.

"This can cushion the initial impact of El Niño. Crops need the precipitation and cooling effect of the rain," Rose Mary Aquino, acting head of the DA regional field office, said.

The department said it has also mobilized a rapid response team to mitigate the impact of El Niño on Mindoro island.

The number of provinces affected by El Niño has climbed to 51, latest data from the Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration showed.

PAGASA said 24 of the provinces have experienced drought as of Feb. 25.

Drought was monitored in Abra, Aurora, Isabela, Metro Manila, Occidental

Mindoro, Pangasinan, Quirino, Rizal, Zambales and Negros Occidental.

PAGASA had earlier declared drought in Apayao, Bataan, Cagayan, Cavite, Ilocos Norte, Kalinga, Palawan, Benguet, Ifugao, Ilocos Sur, La Union, Mountain Province, Nueva Ecija and Nueva Vizcaya.

Drought conditions are characterized by below normal rainfall – a decrease by 21 to 60 percent compared to the average for five consecutive months, or way below normal rainfall for three consecutive months.

PAGASA said the number of provinces experiencing a dry spell has increased to 17.

These are Batangas, Laguna, Masbate

and Oriental Mindoro in Luzon and Antique, Biliran, Capiz, Cebu, Eastern Samar, Guimaras, Iloilo, Leyte, Negros Oriental and Samar in Visayas.

Dry spell was also observed in Lanao del Norte, Sulu and Tawi-Tawi in Mindanao.

PAGASA said 10 provinces experienced dry conditions. These are Bulacan, Bohol, Siquijor, Southern Leyte, Camiguin, Misamis Occidental, Misamis Oriental, Zamboanga del Norte, Zamboanga del Sur and Zamboanga Sibugay.

PAGASA said a strong and mature El Niño would end this month, but the phenomenon will persist until March to May.



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DA not limiting meat importers – farmers' group

By **ROMINA CABRERA**

A farmers' group is slamming meat importers over their threat of higher pork prices.

Meat importers are not being limited by

the **Department of Agriculture (DA)** and they can still freely import, according to Samahang Industriya ng Agrikultura (Sinag).

The Philippines has been importing pork at a much lower tariff of 25 percent instead

of its commitment to the World Trade Organization of 54,000 metric tons per year at 35 percent tariff, Sinag executive director Jayson Cainglet said.

Despite this, consumers have not been reaping the benefits of cheaper pork despite the lower tariff, he added.

"Is their importation being restricted? Obviously they are not being limited to import. What are importers complaining about? Is there no end to their greed?" Cainglet told reporters.

Sinag also hit importers and the National Economic and Development Authority for high pork prices, which they blamed on COVID-19, the war in Ukraine and the El Niño phenomenon.

"Is it not enough that local pro-

ducers were penalized and government revenue lost in the last four years, yet consumers did not benefit since pork prices did not decline?" Cainglet lamented.

The DA earlier said it is eyeing to limit the country's agricultural imports by temporarily suspending the minimum access volume (MAV) for pork and corn this year.

"We laud the DA leadership in rejecting the whims of these importers. No one is stopping them from importing and the DA has not ceased from issuing SPSIC," Cainglet said, referring to the issuance of sanitary and phytosanitary import clearances.

President Marcos had issued Executive Order 50, in which pork imports within the MAV are levied with a 15 percent tariff while shipments outside it are slapped with a 25 percent tariff until yearend.



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ON SEA DISPUTE

Marcos to seek Australia's help

BY CATHERINE S. VALENTE AND FRANCO JOSE C. BAROÑA

PRESIDENT Ferdinand Marcos Jr. will seek the support of Australia in resolving territorial disputes in the South China Sea as the Philippines reported the presence of Chinese warships and a helicopter near Bajo de Masinloc (Scarborough Shoal) on Tuesday.

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Marcos to seek Australia's help

The Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) said the President, who will fly to Canberra on February 28 and then to Melbourne on March 4 for a summit of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) and Australia, would seek help at a time when the rules-based international order "is very much under challenge."

On the eve of the President's departure, the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) confirmed the presence of Chinese warships and a helicopter near Bajo de Masinloc.

PCG spokesman for the West Philippine Sea Commo. Jay Tarriela said during its last mission in the area, the **Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR)** spotted three People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy warships near Bajo de Masinloc.

The warships, however, maintained a distance of more than 20 nautical miles from the shoal, he said.

"It is important for us to note that within ... the 12 nautical miles, we have territorial sovereignty over these waters," Tarriela said during a press briefing. "So these Chinese warships have always maintained that they are

outside the 12 nautical miles."

At the same time, the BFAR vessel monitored the presence of a Chinese Navy helicopter flying over the waters of Bajo de Masinloc.

"What the **BFAR ship** and other Filipino fishing vessels do is they try to determine where the helicopter took off," Tarriela said, adding that they thought at first that it came from a China Coast Guard (CCG) ship.

He said the chopper was gray and had "Chinese markings" on its side that translated to "Chinese Navy."

"This is the first time that we have sighted this kind of aircraft in the area," Tarriela said.

Earlier this month, the PCG said China had reinstalled a floating barrier near Bajo de Masinloc in the West Philippine Sea, which is part of the country's exclusive economic zone (EEZ).

Two CCG vessels (3063 and 3064) were also positioned at the entrance to the lagoon, and speedboats were deployed to make sure the floating barriers were well guarded, Tarriela said.

In September 2023, the PCG on the President's orders cut a

300-meter barrier installed by China to keep Filipino fishermen out of the shoal. At the time, it also vowed to "do whatever it takes" to remove any more floating barriers installed by China.

The PCG and BFAR started their regular rotational deployment in Bajo de Masinloc early this month.

The move is part of efforts to secure Filipino fishermen in these waters and to help achieve the government's vision of food security, National Security Adviser Eduardo Año said.

Bajo de Masinloc is located 120 nautical miles west of Luzon, which places it within the Philippines' EEZ.

Oldest partner

In a pre-departure press briefing Tuesday in Malacañang, Foreign Affairs Assistant Secretary Daniel Espiritu said the President's participation at the summit was important as it would give Asean and Australian leaders a chance to discuss geopolitical issues affecting the region.

"If you will remember, Australia is the Asean's oldest dialogue partner. It's also one of

the most active, one of the most dynamic in all fronts — in the political security, economic and socio-cultural pillars of Asean," Espiritu said.

"As the first Asean Leaders level engagement for the year, the summit presents an opportunity for us to present the Philippines' core position on regional and international issues and set the tone for dialogue partner summits later in the year, especially in October," he added.

Espiritu said Marcos is expected to attend the Leaders' Plenary and the Leaders' Retreat, the two main engagements on the Asean-Australia Summit on March 6.

He said the President would take the opportunity to thank Australia for its unwavering support for the rule of law, the 1982 United Nations Conventions on the Law of the Sea, and the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration ruling on the South China Sea.

"The President may also highlight Asean-Australia cooperation on maritime issues, climate and clean energy..., people-to-people exchange, and economic cooperation," Espiritu said.

"At the Leaders Retreat, the President may encourage Australia to remain committed to the peaceful resolution of disputes and to maintain respect for the rules-based international order

and multilateralism, which is currently very much under challenge," he added.

At the same press briefing, Foreign Affairs spokesman Ma. Teresita Daza said the South China Sea issue will be raised, given that both the Philippines and Australia are maritime nations that must ensure peace at sea.

"We have very strong defense and security relations with Australia. They have been partners with us for a long time, even before the official establishment of relations because they were with us as partners during World War 2, and now the relations have actually seen an elevation from comprehensive to strategic partnership," Daza said.

Jamming

In the same public briefing, Tarriela accused China of jamming the tracking signal of PCG and BFAR ships that are patrolling the shoal.

He said it was the third time they noticed that whenever the PCG and BFAR vessels come close to Bajo de Masinloc, they lose their automatic identification system (AIS) signal.

AIS platforms allow maritime authorities to track and monitor vessel movements.

Tarriela said they believe that the CCG is jamming the tracking signal of PCG ships, so the Philip-

pine government will not be able to monitor the movement of its vessels effectively once they are out at sea.

He said the signal jamming almost always happens "in the same hour" when China declares that it has successfully driven Philippine ships away from Bajo de Masinloc.

The CCG recently claimed that it "expelled a BFAR vessel and PCG vessel" that allegedly intruded into their waters.

This claim was dismissed by the Philippine government.

However, a pro-Beijing group, Asian Century Philippines Strategic Studies Institute, said the PCG's allegation of signal jamming was "hurled without evidence."

The group's president, Herman Tiu Laurel, said this "may be a way to cover up the invariable failure to break the CCG blockade of construction materials to BRP Sierra Madre and guarding of the entrances to the Scarborough Shoal lagoon fish sanctuary."

He said the move to get Filipino fishermen to congregate at Scarborough Shoal was aimed at multiplying their numbers to provoke a reaction from the Chinese.

"None of these gimmicks change the fundamentals of the situation and only magnify tensions," he said.



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British Chamber reiterates need to pass anti-agricultural sabotage act

THE British Chamber of Commerce Philippines remains positive towards the passage of the Anti-Agricultural Economic Sabotage Act, as it is key in strengthening the local agricultural sector to help ensure a stable food supply and help fight against inflation.

This optimism is brought about by the fact that the bill is tagged as one of the priorities of President Ferdinand Marcos Jr.'s administration and identified as "urgent," which resulted in its passage on the third and final reading for both the House of Representatives and the Senate last 2023.

Moreover, the British Chamber

supports the Department of Agriculture (DA)'s initiative in forming a Technical Working Group (TWG) to help provide its inputs for both Houses' consideration, as noted by the DA Assistant Secretary for Regulations and TWG Head Paz Benavidez 2nd.

The British Chamber also advocates for the extension of lowered tariffs under Executive Order 50 for agricultural commodities including pork to help augment the country's supply to assist with inflation.

Due to this, the British Chamber expresses its concerns on the reported DA's plan to suspend the



CHRIS NELSON | EXEC. DIR., BCCP

■ In a recent interview, British Chamber of Commerce of the Philippines Executive Director and trustee Chris Nelson calls for the urgent passage of the Anti-Agricultural Economic Sabotage Act. CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

minimum access volume (MAV) for pork that could impact the domestic supply and existing trade agreement with the World Trade Organization, echoing the comments of

the MAV Advisory Council.

Its passage into law is among the priorities of the British Chamber and has consistently advocated for it since last year.



Cloud seeding ops initiated to mitigate El Niño effects

BY VICTOR REYES

THE Philippine Air Force (PAF) yesterday said it has conducted cloud seeding operations to help mitigate the effects of El Niño, a phenomenon that increases the likelihood of below-normal rainfall conditions that may lead to dry spells and droughts.

PAF spokeswoman Col. Maria Consuelo Castillo said the El Niño-related cloud seeding operations were recently launched in the province of Isabela.

"We have continuous efforts in collaboration with DA (Department of Agriculture) and LGU (local government unit) of Isabela," said Castillo.

"Recently, a cloud seeding operation was conducted using a chartered plane with Air Force weather officers and technicians facilitating the operations," she also said, adding that the operation was successful and produced rain in the area.

In a situational report yesterday, National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council (NDRRMC) said the cost of dam-

age to agriculture due to El Niño was already at P810.71 million.

More than half of the agriculture damage was recorded in Western Visayas with P487.48 million, followed by Mimaropa (P319.75 million), Calabarzon (P2.75 million), and Zamboanga Peninsula (P71 million).

The NDRRMC said El Niño has affected 12,493.79 hectares of crops.

Meanwhile, Castillo told a press briefing at Camp Aguinaldo that the Air Force may also conduct cloud seeding operations in Benguet to suppress forest fires that have been ongoing over the past days.

Air Force helicopters have been helping in putting out the fire through heli-bucket operations by conducting 15 sorties a day, said Castillo.

"We also have plans for cloud seeding operations. It might happen this week... Hopefully, the cloud seeding will be able to help address the fire in Benguet... Using PAF aircraft (LC 210), we intend to produce clouds that can potentially bring in rain in Benguet and help prevent the spread of the forest fires," she said.



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16 irrigation works done in Bulacan

THE NATIONAL Irrigation Administration (NIA) said on Tuesday that it has turned over 16 irrigation works to irrigators associations (IA) in Bulacan.

"About 15 IAs with 4,466 farmer-beneficiaries will benefit from 2023 completed projects of Bulacan (Irrigation Management Office)," the NIA statement said.

As of 2023, the NIA has completed 68% of its national irrigation development commitments, servicing an estimated 2.11 million hectares, with 1.1 million hectares still to be irrigated.

NIA Administrator Eduardo G. Guillen told *BusinessWorld* earlier that the agency is seeing a possible 2% increase in irrigated lands this year. — **Adrian H. Halili**



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MAYOR Jeannie Sandoval (center), along with representatives of the Departments of the Interior and Local Government, Department of Labor and Employment and Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources, leads the awarding of 20 motorized boats to members of four Malabon City-based fishermen associations.

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Four fishermen associations receive 20 boats in Malabon

FOUR associations of fishermen in Malabon City were awarded with motorized boats from the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR), Department of the Interior and Local Government (DOLE), and the local government on Monday, as part of Mayor Jeannie Sandoval's goal to help address the livelihood concerns of Malabueños.

Mayor Jeannie led the very first awarding of boats to the Malabueño fishermen groups at the Malabon City Amphitheater.

According to Public Employment and Services Office Head (PESO) Ms. Luziel Balajadia, the groups of fishermen came from Barangays Tañong, Hulong Duhat, Concepcion, and Ibaba and will each receive five boats (20 boats in total).

She said that the motorized boats were also

built using fiberglass reinforced plastic boats by Malabueño fishermen who were trained by BFAR.

They created the boats for about 20 days, receiving P610 per day as salary under DOLE's Tulong Panghanapbuhay sa Ating Disadvantaged/Displaced Workers (TUPAD) program.

Aside from the boats, they also received 40 fishing nets that they can use when doing their livelihood.

"During the (Covid-19) pandemic, na-stop talaga yung kanilang pangigisda. So, isa ito sa mga naging advocacy natin, sa ilalim ng termino ng Mayor Jeannie Sandoval, na bigayan naman ng atensyon ang ating mangingisda. Dahil sa Malabon City, isa sa pangunahing pangkabuhayan nila ay ang pangigisda, kaya very masigasig tayo na mabigyan sila ng bangka," Ms. Balajadia said.



DA, DND, PAF lalabanan epekto ng ng El Niño

NAGSANIB-pwersa ang Department of Agriculture (DA), Department of National Defense (DND) at (Philippine Air Force) para labanan ang epekto ng El Niño sa bansa.

Unang hakbang na ginawa ng mga ito ang cloud seeding operation sa Cagayan Valley Region

o ang paglalagay ng asin sa ulap.

Nagsasagawa rin ang mga ito ng alternate wetting-and-drying method para mabawasan ang ginagamit na tubig sa mga sakahan.

Inilunsad naman ang solar irrigation system para matubigan ang mga sakahan na nakakaranas

ng tagtuyot.

Sa tala ng Disaster Risk Reduction and Management ng DA, nasa P357 milyon na ang naging pinsala sa agrikultura ng El Niño kung saan nasa 7,668 magsasaka at 6,523 hektarya ng palayan ang apektado.

Kabilang dito ang mga palayan, maisan at

iba pang taniman sa Ilocos Region, Western Visayas at Zamboanga Peninsula.

Samantala, nakatakda ring magbigay ng kabuhayan at tulong pinansyal ang Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD). (Natalia Antonio)



Agri exec pumiyok, smuggled sibuyas binebenta online

KINUMPIRMA ng Bureau of Plant Industry (BPI) nitong Martes na binebenta sa mga digital platform ang umano'y smuggled na sibuyas.

Ayon kay BPI director Gerald Glenn Panganiban, nakipag-ugnayan na sila sa mga awtoridad para maaresto ang nagbebenta online ng mga puslit na sibuyas.

"Rest assured that we are coordinating with the proper authorities, law enforcement units. As soon as we received the information, we already coordinated with them," wika ni Panganiban sa isang press conference sa Maynila.

Nagpadala na aniya sila ng liham sa Philippine National Police (PNP) hinggil sa online selling ng mga smug-

Abante
NEGOSYO

gled sibuyas at nangako naman silang aaksiyunan nila ito.

Balak daw ng PNP na maglabas ng memorandum sa mga regional office at mga lokal na pulisya na tumulong sa pagtunton at pagberipika sa pinangagalingan ng mga smuggled sibuyas.

"We are really aware [of this situation] and we take this opportunity para ipaalam sa mga tao na 'yun nga kung iyan ay walang proper na documentation at hindi na-inspection, ay maaaring may risk sa ating health kung ating ikkonsumo," ani Panganiban.



Smuggled onion traders laugh, PH farmers weep

RAMPANT sale of smuggled onions online causes Filipino farmers to lose between P10K to P15K income per month.

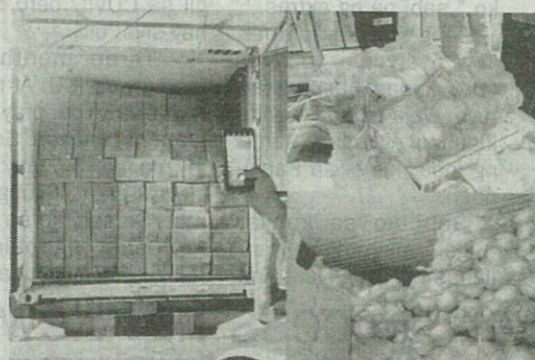
This was revealed by AGRI Party-list Representative Wilbert Lee yesterday in a press conference.

"Nalulugi ang ating farmers ng P10,000 to P15,000 per month per hectare. Kung dati kumikita sila ng ganito, ngayon nalulugi na sila dahil nga posamganang yari ganito," Lee said.

The lawmakers said they have been receiving complaints from consumers about the bad quality of onions they purchased online.

"The Bureau of Plant and Industry (BPI) also found out that some of the smuggled onions have E. coli, posing danger to the health of Filipino consumers," said Lee.

He explained that he



cannot blame the consumers as onions online are sold cheaper than the local onions sold in the markets which cost between P50 to P150 a kilo.

But he warned Filipino consumers of the health risks of patronizing smuggled onions as they do not have sanitary and phytosanitary import clearances.

Smuggled onions can be purchased online for as

low as P20 per kilo, which is way cheaper than local onions in the market.

For his part, BPI Director Glenn Panganiban said the Department of Agriculture is now coordinating with different agencies to crack down on online sellers of smuggled onions and other agricultural products.

Lee has filed House Resolution 1600 request-

ing that the chamber's proper committee investigate the online selling of illicit agricultural products which deprives local farms of income and endangers public health.

Lee also pushed for the amendment of Republic Act No. 10845 or the Anti-Agricultural Smuggling Act of 2016 to impose harsher penalties on agricultural smugglers, hoarders, price manipulators, cartels, and government officials and employees that commit this crime.

Under the proposed law, any individual who engages in smuggling, hoarding, profiteering, cartelizing, and other acts of market abuse shall face a punishment of up to life imprisonment and a fine of up to six times the fair market value, as well as the amount of taxes, tariffs, and other charges evaded. Arlene Rivera



PINOY FISHERS NOW FEEL SAFER IN WPS

THE Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) said Monday more Filipinos are now fishing in the Bajo de Masinloc, also known as Scarborough shoal.

During the Bagong Pilipinas Ngayon briefing, BFAR spokesperson Nazario Briguera said Filipino fishing vessels increased as the government intensified its presence in the area.

"Kumpara natin nung nakaraang misyon na nasa 21 Filipino fishing boats lang, nitong huling misyon, nasa 44 fishing boats na ang nandoon at nakatanggap ng suporta mula sa pamahalaan," he said.

"Lumalakas na ang loob ng mga mangangisda na pumalaot doon sa lugar at ito ang layunin ng ating Pangulo," Nazario added.



He also underscored the diversion of maritime actions of the Chinese Coast Guard and Chinese maritime militia since the onset of their regular patrols.

"Sa halip na ang nagkakaroon ng intimidasyon ay yung mga mangangisdang Pilipino,

nako-concentrate yung intimidasyon o yung pang-haharang doon sa ating barko," he added.

The BFAR, in partnership with the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG), recently concluded yet another successful mission in the Bajo de Masinloc via BRP Sanday. **PNA**



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Bulacan farmers to benefit from 16 completed projects

By Joel dela Torre

THE National Irrigation Administration (NIA) has turned over 16 completed projects to irrigators groups of Bulacan that will benefit close to 5,000 farmers.

NIA Deputy Administrator for Engineering and Operations engineer Josephine Salazar led the simple turnover ceremony held at a covered court in Tambubong, San Rafael, Bulacan Monday.

It was followed by IA consultations and contract signing with the Bulacan Irrigation Management Office (IMO).

Salazar, who is also the concurrent NIA Region III manager, said that the completed projects, which cover calendar year 2023, will benefit a total of 4,466 farmers from 15 IAs of the province.

She was joined by the Provincial Government and Local Government Unit (LGU) officials of Bulacan, NIA Region III Bulacan IMO in turning over the 16 completed projects such as the BUSPAN Solar Pump Irrigation Project in Bustos, Repair and Rehabilitation of Angat-Maasim

River Irrigation System (AMRIS) in San Rafael, ANBUSPA Solar Pump Irrigation Project in Bustos, Alagao Communal Irrigation System (CIS) in San Ildefonso, Cacarong CIS in Pandi, Maligaya CIS and Sibul CIS in San Miguel.

"Nagpapasalamat ako na natupad ang ating mga pangarap nang ipagkaloob sa amin ang proyekto para sa ating mga magsasaka. Patuloy pa rin pong pagkalooban ng mga nararapat na biyaya at proyekto ang aming samahan upang maipagpatuloy ang aming misyon na mapanatili ang sustainability ng ating agrikultura. Lubos kami nagpapasalamat sa patuloy na suporta at tulong ng NIA," CIS provincial federation president Rodrigo P. Villacorta said in his acceptance message.

And while NIA sees the farmer-irrigators as its main partners in pursuing the construction and development of irrigation projects nationwide, a consultative meeting was conducted for its ongoing and existing projects and future projects moving forward to CY 2025.

Issues and concerns

of IA officials and members were also raised and addressed in the said forum.

"Kaya po tayo nandi to ngayon para ikonsulta po namin sa inyo ang aming mga programa. Maganda ba 'yong inisip ng NIA? Anoba 'yong mas maganda? S'yempre po dapat manggaling sa inyokasipokayo ang 24/7 na nasa bukid. Kami pong mga empleyado ng NIA ay nakaagapay lamang pero ang nakakaramdam kung ano 'yung pangangailangan pagdating po sa pansakahan ay kayo," Salazar emphasized.

Partner government agencies of NIA also graced the event such as the Department of Agriculture Regional Field Office III (DA RFO III), National Food Authority (NFA), Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE), Philippine Center for Postharvest Development and Mechanization (Phil-Mech), Philippine Rice Research Institute (Phil-Rice), and Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), which also presented their plans and programs for FY 2025 that may assist farmers and fisherfolks.

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NEWS

Over 3K fishers yet to be paid for oil spill

Frustration has mounted among fisherfolk in Oriental Mindoro's coastal villages who are waiting to be recompensed for the massive oil spill from the sinking of MT Princess Empress in 2023. A year after the ecological disaster caused P41.2 billion in losses, a fishers' group leader from Pola said only 627 of more than 4,000 claimants from his town had been given any form of payment as of Feb. 16. —STORY BY MADONNA T. VIROLA

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Only 627 of 4,000 fishers compensated for oil spill

By **Madonna T. Virola**
@InqNational

CITY OF CALAPAN—Local fisherman Aldrin Villanueva, 54, of Pola town in Oriental Mindoro province, expressed frustration at the delayed restitution for coastal villages that bore the brunt of the massive oil spill from MT Princess Empress in 2023.

It has been a year since the fuel tanker sank in the waters off neighboring Naujan town, yet Villanueva and other Pola fisherfolk who rely on the sea for their livelihood are still waiting for full and proper compensation.

The town of Pola was considered “ground zero” of the oil spill, which has caused P41.2 billion in environmental and



BACK TO FISHING Fishermen in Barangay Lazareto in Calapan City, Oriental Mindoro, take their boat to shore after another day of fishing on Tuesday, now that the almost six-month fishing ban is over. They, however, could not forget how the oil spill from MT Princess Empress gave them sleepless nights after it disrupted their livelihood. Photo at right, taken in March last year, shows Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) personnel collecting water samples from the site where the tanker sank off Naujan town. —**MADONNA T. VIROLA/PCG PHOTO**



BY THE NUMBERS

Feb. 28, 2023—The MT Princess Empress sinks in waters off Naujan town, Oriental Mindoro.

800,000—Liters of oil contained within the submerged tanker

9—Towns in Oriental Mindoro province placed under state of calamity

172,928—People affected by the oil spill in Mimaropa (Mindoro, Marinduque, Romblon, Palawan), Calabarzon (Cavite, Laguna, Batangas, Rizal, Quezon), and Western Visayas

regions as reported in March 2023

16,930—Fisherfolk impacted as reported in March 2023

P1.5 million—Worth of humanitarian assistance by the Department of Social Welfare and Development as of March 2023

P41.2 billion—Cost of damage to the environment and livelihood of fisherfolk in areas affected, as reported in February 2024

SOURCE: INQUIRER ARCHIVES

PHILIPPINE DAILY INQUIRER

BALANCED NEWS + FEARLESS VIEWS

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economic losses, according to a Center for Energy, Ecology, and Development (CEED) report.

Interviewed by phone on Tuesday, Villanueva, president of the Pola Municipal Fisheries Aquatic Resources Management Council and head of fisherfolk group Lapian ng Mangingisda sa Batuhan, said several affected fishers told him they had not received full payment, including aid from the International Oil Pollution Compensation (IOPC) Funds.

The IOPC Funds, financed by contributions paid by entities that receive certain types of oil by sea transport, "provide compensation for oil pollution damage resulting from spills of persistent oil from tankers," according to its website.

Of more than 4,000 claimants from Pola, only 627 received initial payment on Feb. 15 and

Feb. 16, according to Villanueva, a resident of Batuan village.

The fisherman said he received only P14,000 of the P54,000 in compensation to which he was entitled.

The full amount was supposed to represent lost income "when fishing for two months during peak season," before the oil spill that had resulted in a five-month fishing ban.

Princess Empress, departing from Bataan en route to Iloilo with 20 crew members on board, began sinking on Feb. 28 last year, because of an overheated motor tanker and rough sea conditions.

Remove sunken tanker

By March 1, the tanker had been submerged off Naujan town. In 10 days, the slick had spread to Antique and Palawan provinces.

Aside from the yet-to-be-received compensation, the fisherfolk are worried about further ecological damage due to the tanker that remains underwater, threatening the Verde Island Passage (VIP).

The VIP, known as the "center of global shorefish biodiversity," spans 1.14 million hectares and is home to 60 percent of all known shorefish species, over 300 coral species, and thriving reef formations along the coastlines of Batangas, Romblon, Marinduque, Occidental Mindoro, and Oriental Mindoro provinces.

Villanueva said the fishers were concerned that the sunken vessel, over time, might release the remaining oil believed to still be inside it. Holes in the main body or hull of the vessel had been sealed to keep the remainder of the 900,000 liters of

industrial fuel from spilling out.

There is a long-standing appeal among Pola officials and residents to have the sunken tanker removed, Villanueva said.

'Felt for generations'

A commemoration program will be conducted in Pola today, the anniversary of the disaster, to remind the public of the first marine environmental crisis under the Marcos administration.

The CEED report, which was released on Feb. 26, estimated that the oil spill caused P40.1 billion in environmental damage and P1.1 billion in socioeconomic losses.

On Tuesday, the group Protect Verde Island Passage called on San Miguel Corp. (SMC) to compensate all those affected by the oil spill.

The tanker owned by RDC

Reield Marine Services had been chartered to carry industrial oil by SMC subsidiary SL Harbor Bulk Terminal Corp.

"The effects of the oil spill will be felt for generations. It will take a long time for the environment to truly recover and for fishermen to get back the income, equipment, and ways of life they lost due to the oil spill," said Fr. Edwin Gariguez, lead convener of Protect VIP.

Coast Guard's role

In a legal opinion dated Feb. 15, the Department of Justice (DOJ) said the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) was mandated to facilitate the preparation of claims for compensation for the damage due to the oil spill.

Justice Undersecretary Raul Vasquez cited Republic Act No. 9483 or the Oil Pollution Compensation Act of 2007, which laid down the role of the PCG in the filing of compensation claims.

"It is understood that if the

shipowner's insurer is willing to pay the claims, no such action in court need be filed, as the claims can be directly filed with the insurer," Vasquez said.

Last week, the DOJ recommended the filing of falsification charges against the owners and corporate officers of RDC, two crew members of Princess Empress, a member of the Maritime Industry Authority and a private individual.

No charges for the environmental damage have yet been filed.

A year after the oil spill, fishing activities are back to normal in Oriental Mindoro. But the "catch has dwindled to about five to seven kilos from about 20 kilos caught using nets," said Villanueva.

This meager catch is still to be "distributed among two to three fishers in a small boat," he said. —WITH REPORTS FROM JANE BAUTISTA AND INQUIRER RESEARCH INQ



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PALAWAN CAPITAL CITY IS ASF-FREE

SHARP RISE IN PORK PRICES ALARMS PUERTO EXECS

By **Geraldford Ticke**
@InquirerLuzon

PUERTO PRINCESA CITY— The city council has expressed concern over the sudden rise of pork prices in the market and that of the local farm gate price of hogs.

Councilor Luis Marcaida III raised the issue during their regular session on Monday, which was brought to his attention by vendors and consumers at the public market.

Prevailing pork prices at the city's public market now range from P340 to P350 per kilo, compared to P270 to P280 per kilo last week, which, Marcaida said in his privilege speech, was "worrisome," considering that Palawan is among the few provinces in the country that is free from the African Swine Fever (ASF) disease that has crippled the

hog raising industry in other parts of the country.

Price ceiling

Councilor Elgin Damasco, during Monday's session, also expressed concern about the farm gate price of livestock, with owners opting to sell their products to buyers from outside the city for a higher price.

Damasco said he had talked to the City Legal Office about the possibility of passing an ordinance that would impose a price ceiling for pork products at the farm gate but was advised they do not have the power to do so.

While pork prices at public markets were soaring, Damasco said farmers and livestock raisers were complaining that the local buyers were "pressuring them for cheaper prices, when their farm gate price

is already too low."

Dr. Indira Santiago, City Veterinary Office head, said in an interview on Monday that they met with hog raisers six months ago who asked to put a P150-per kilo ceiling on live pigs but no consensus was reached since the traders did not show up during the meeting.

Before Palawan was certified as ASF-free, the live weight price went as low as P90 per kilo but it suddenly went up when buyers from other provinces came after the declaration of the city as ASF-free, said Santiago.

The city has very little locally made pork product since only few farmers, mostly backyard raisers, are engaged in livestock farming.

She pointed out that when the buyers from Iloilo came, the farm gate price increased from P150 to P180-P190 a kilo. **INQ**



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Oriental Mindoro town declares state of calamity

CALAPAN CITY: The local government of Bulalacao, the southernmost town of Oriental Mindoro, has declared a state of calamity due to the effects of the El Niño phenomenon to its agriculture.

Bulalacao Mayor Ernilo Villas announced the declaration on Tuesday, February 27, based on the recommendation of the Municipal Agriculturist Office (MAO) and the Municipal Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Office (MDRRMO).

In a telephone interview with Bulalacao agriculture officer Rommel de Guzman on Tuesday, he said that out of the 539 hectares of farmland planted with palay (unmilled rice), 325 hectares had already dried up because of the drought.

This, he said, forced farmers to feed the palay to carabaos.

He added that for each hectare of land, a farmer can harvest at least P50,000 worth of palay.

"The loss could reach P16.250 million," de Guzman said.

"While our onions which comprise 550 hectares, 335 hectares are affected. With each hectare, the projected

harvest is P200,000 ... that is roughly P67 million in losses."

The official said that with the declaration, the local government can use the 5 percent mandatory calamity fund.

Farmers, meanwhile, can also file a claim with the Philippine Crop Insurance Corp. (PCIC) while waiting for the recommendation of the local government on what assistance should be extended to the farmers coming from the calamity fund.

"We would have an executive session this week with the mayor and other stakeholders to determine what kind of assistance the LGU would extend. Would it be financial or in kind like food packs," de Guzman added.

The southern part of the province has experienced extreme heat this year. Most of the farmers in the towns of Roxas, Mansalay and Bulalacao have switched to less water-dependent crops like onions, monggo beans and ginger.

Still, de Guzman said, these crops still require some amount of water.

IRE JOE V.C. LAURENTE



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Severe El Niño

PARCHED soil and heat-damaged crops as a result of El Niño have forced local authorities to declare a state of calamity in Bulalacao, Oriental Mindoro.

PHILIPPINE STAR/EDD GUMBAN

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PCG may file insurance claims for oil spill damage, says DOJ

By JOEL R. SAN JUAN
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THE Department of Justice (DOJ) ruled that the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) has the authority to consolidate and file claims for insurance amounting to more than P5 billion in connection with the damages caused by the oil spill from the sunken M/T Princess Empress.

In a three-page legal opinion signed by DOJ Undersecretary Raul Vasquez "for the secretary of justice," the justice department said that under Republic Act (RA) 9483 or the "Oil Pollution Compensation Act of 2007," the PCG "plays an important role in the filing of compensation claims arising from an oil spill incident."

The National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council (NDRRMC) said that as of September 2023, more than 40,000 families from 264 barangays in Oriental Mindoro were affected by the oil spill and that the amount of social assistance provided by the government has already reached P790 million.

Meanwhile, the estimated cost of damage to aquaculture has amounted to around

P4.9 billion.

The DOJ noted that under Section 17 of RA 9483, an action for compensation on account of pollution damage may be brought before the regional trial court against the owner of the polluting ship or the insurer or other person providing financial security of the owner's liability for pollution.

The said provision further states that the PCG is mandated to investigate any incident, claim for compensation or violation of RA 9483 and thereafter file the necessary case with the trial court.

The PCG's role in initiating claims for insurance in relation to the oil spill incident, according to the DOJ, is further bolstered in the implementing rules and regulations (IRR) of RA 9483 dated April 12, 2016.

The DOJ noted that Section 3 of the IRR outlines the functions and duties of the PCG with respect to filing claims for insurance.

Specifically, the IRR tasked PCG to verify and certify the correctness of the claims for compensation of local government units (LGUs) or individuals affected by oil pollution damage; assist LGUs concerned in the preparation of their claims for compensation; assist individual claimants in

the preparation of their respective claims; and consolidate all claims for the clean-up compensation and file the appropriate action with the trial court.

Furthermore, the PCG is tasked to provide the complainant necessary technical evidence or any assistance, whether testimonial or documentary, insofar as the claim for compensation or violation of RA 9483 is concerned and assist any person suffering from pollution damage in presenting a claim to the International Oil Pollution Compensation Funds (IOPC).

"Hence, based on the pertinent provisions of the Act and its IRR, it is the PCG that has been mandated to assist the affected individuals, communities and entities in the preparation of their claims for compensation," the legal opinion stated.

"This legal mandate of the PCG can include the act of consolidating the compensation claims, in preparation for filing an action for compensation against the ship owner or its insurer with the Regional Trial Court, or with the IOPC Fund in case the damage exceeds the owner's limited liability under 1992 International Convention on Civil Liability for Oil Pollution," it added.

However, if the ship owner's insurer is willing to pay the claims, the DOJ said the filing of a suit before the RTC is no longer necessary as the claims can be directly filed with the insurer.

The DOJ issued the legal opinion upon the request of Undersecretary Ariel Nepomuceno, Executive Director of the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council (NDRRMC) Executive Director.

In his letter-request, Nepomuceno sought the DOJ's opinion as to which specific government agency will facilitate the consolidation of the claims for insurance in connection with the oil spill that adversely affected the areas of Calabarzon (Cavite, Laguna, Batangas, Rizal and Quezon), Mimaropa (Mindoro Occidental, Mindoro Oriental, Marinduque, Romblon and Palawan) and Region 6.

Nepomuceno noted that the oil spill resulted in costly response operations for the containment of the oil spill, siphoning of oil from the sunken vessel, the provision of social assistance to the affected communities by the various government agencies and long-term environmental impact.



Davao City builds warehouse, Bio-laboratory for farm inputs

DAVAO CITY—The city government opened a warehouse to store agriculture inputs, including seeds and seedlings, and a farm laboratory to facilitate the distribution of inputs needed by farmers in the northern barangays.

The City Agriculturist's Office (CAgrO), on Tuesday inaugurated the new storage facility and a Bio N Laboratory in Barangay Malagos, Baguio District, and 30 kilometers northwest of downtown Davao.

Two multi-purpose vehicles were also turned over to the warehouse facility, the city information office said.

The storage facility cost P7 million and holds reserves of agricultural inputs, such as seeds and fertilizers, as these await distribution to farmers, the information office said. The P3.5-million Bio N Laboratory mixing plant would be producing Bio N microbial inoculants and Bio N concentrate to be used by farmers as supplementary fertilizer.

The vehicles were worth P4 million "to ensure smoother and

faster distribution of agriculture inputs to farmers."

CAgrO head Edgardo Haspe said the budget for these new assets were taken from the city's Local Disaster Risk Reduction Management Fund.

"Our storage facility has fertilizers, seeds, and others that are needed by our farmers, especially now that there is risk of El Niño," Haspe said. "At the same time, we also had calamities recently so this will enable us to give immediate support to our farmers," he added.

Haspe said the Bio N organic fertilizer to be produced in the mixing plant would reduce the farmers' need by half to buy commercial fertilizers. "This is especially useful as the prices of commercial fertilizer continue to inflate in the global market."

The CAgrO has stored in the facility 200 bags of upland rice, 180 bags of corn seeds, and bags of various vegetable seeds. It also holds 2,125 bags of different kinds of fertilizers and 620 liters of fertilizer concentrate that are ready for distribution. *Manuel T. Cayon*



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NEWS BRIEF

Mga pork importer sinita sa taas-presyo

Binatikos ng Samahang Industriya ng Agrikultura (SINAG) ang banta ng mga pork importer na magtataas muli ang presyo ng baboy.

Puna ni SINAG Executive Director Jayson Cainglet, nasa 54,000 tonelada lamang ng imported pork ang dapat nakakapasok sa bansa sa mas mababang taripa na 35% ngunit mahigit ng 10 ulit pa ang inaangkat na baboy ng bansa sa mas mababang taripa na 25% at pinalawig pa ito muli sa ilalim ng Executive Order No. 50 nito lamang Disyembre 2023.

"Pinipigilan ba ang pag-import nila? Obviously they are not being limited to import. Ano pa ang inirereklamo ng mga importer? Wala na ba silang kabusugan," hirit ni Cainglet kahapon.

Aniya, apat na taon nang mababa ang taripa ng baboy ngunit hindi naman bumababa ang presyo nito.

Aniya, sinisi dati ang COVID-19 pandemic ng mga importer at ng National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA) kung bakit mahal presyo ng baboy. Pagkatapos ay kanila namang sinisi ang paglusob ng Russia sa Ukraine at idinahilan na rin ang El Niño. **(Eileen Mencias)**

Malaya Business Insight

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Soybeans, corn climb

SINGAPORE- Chicago soybeans gained more ground on Tuesday, rising almost 1 percent as the market was supported by short-covering and expectations of lower output in Brazil, although ample world supplies kept a lid on prices.

Corn rose to its highest in almost two weeks, while wheat gained for a second straight session.

"There is some support and buying at these levels," one Singapore-based grains trader said. "US has a lot of sell and there is stiff competition from South America for soybeans and corn, so we don't

see a big upside in prices."

The most-active soybean contract on the Chicago Board of Trade (CBOT) added 0.92 percent to \$11.55-3/4 a bushel. Corn rose 0.1 percent to \$4.22 a bushel and wheat gained 0.4 percent at \$5.77-1/4 a bushel.

Corn touched its highest since Feb. 15 at \$4.24 a bushel earlier on Tuesday.

Agricultural markets, including soybeans, corn and wheat, are being underpinned by bargain-buying and covering of shorts, after suffering losses since the beginning of the year amid plentiful supplies. - *Reuters*



London insect farm hatches plan for greener way to feed animals

LONDON — Buzzing underneath a set of railway arches in central London are hundreds of thousands of little flies, showcasing insect-farming technology that could help fight climate change.

At its research center, eight-year-old startup Entocycle is aiming to show how the process of turning protein-rich bugs into food for chickens and pigs could be adopted on a large scale.

The flies themselves feed on almost any food waste and are better for the planet than traditional animal foods such as soy, which have a much higher carbon footprint, explains founder and chief executive Keiran Whitaker.

"We cut down rainforests to produce soy, we overfish the oceans to catch fishmeal, and then they get turned into protein feed that gets shipped all over the world again to feed the animals," he says. "It's incredibly unsustainable."

Insect protein has become a popular alternative in recent years across agriculture and aquaculture as demand for animal feed surges, with companies including US food giant Cargill adopting the use of insect feed.

Entocycle, which Mr. Whitaker expects will become profitable later this year, aims to bring an industrial-level efficiency to insect farming, designing hardware that includes precise measuring devices, robotic arms and a temperature-controlled setup for breeding insects.

With the rumble of trains overhead and the acrid scent of

fly feces hanging heavy around the office, engineers and biologists in white lab coats are preparing for a significant expansion of Entocycle's research center over the coming weeks.

At the heart of the effort is the humble and tiny black soldier fly, widely recognized for its potential to help fight climate change by being a more environmentally friendly protein source.

"It is the quickest, cheapest, most sustainable insect to farm and it's a non-disease, non-pest species found all over the world," Mr. Whitaker says of the insect, which gets turned into packageable protein during its wriggly, worm-shaped larva phase.

Most of the reared black soldier flies at its London center become insect protein.

But a small proportion are bred in a humid insectary, where they will chomp for days on food waste — organic matter derived from out-of-date sandwiches to barley discarded by local breweries — before laying hundreds of eggs, enabling the cycle to continue.

British entomologist George McGavin, who calls the black soldier fly the superstar of the edible insect industry, says insect farming can help produce "seriously large amounts of protein" in a small space and in very little time.

"Insect farming actually offers a very viable alternative — and one which is efficient, relatively easy to do, and without any ecological risks that I can see," Mr. McGavin says. — **Reuters**