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DEPT. OF AGRICULTURE

DA probes sale of NFA rice stocks at low prices

By **Jordeene B. Lagare**
@jordeenelagare

The Department of Agriculture (DA) has started an investigation into claims that officials of the National Food Authority (NFA) sold thousands of tons of rice to certain traders at a "disadvantageous" price to the government.

Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. has created a panel to review documents and hold interviews to establish the facts on the supposed sale of NFA rice stocks to unidentified traders without the usual bidding process.

According to the agriculture department, the rice stocks were sold at P25 per kilo when these were purchased, in the form of palay, at P23 per kilogram.

Agriculture Assistant Secretary Arnel de Mesa did not provide more information about the transactions nor identify the officials investigating the claim, but he clarified that Tiu Laurel wanted to establish the facts and determine whether there were really irregularities or the claims were spawned by bureaucratic intrigue.

"[The secretary] wants the truth to come out as soon as possible, what really happened. For all we know, this could only have stemmed from internal squabbles," De Mesa said.

"Actually, there's been a lot of finger-pointing inside and outside



PROBE UNDERWAY An investigation is underway into claims that tons of rice stocks were sold by National Food Authority officials without the usual bidding and at a loss to the government. —INQUIRER FILE PHOTO

the NFA, so the secretary himself announced the investigation to bring out the truth," he added.

On Tuesday, Tiu Laurel said the DA does not "brush aside reports of impropriety" against its officials and any government agency is welcome "to conduct their own probe to ferret out the truth."

He also warned that the "harshest penalty under the law" would be meted out to those who profit at the expense of farmers, fishers and consumers.

Agency's explanation

"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 said.

NFA Administrator Roderico Bioco, however, explained

that the agency was allowed to dispose of aging stocks up to 10 percent lower than the mandated price (floor price of P22.50 per kg up to the maximum mandated ceiling price of P25 per kg) as well as damaged stocks for at least P6.50 per kg.

"The current NFA management was able to responsibly dispose [of] its rice stocks to government accounts by stretching to maximum shelf-life, minimizing the sale of residual volume to other accounts by implementing stricter guidelines and safeguards," Bioco said in a statement posted on the People's Television Network's website on Wednesday.

He added that the NFA Council has been asked to raise the mandated maximum selling price for their old rice stocks because palay prices were much higher than their maximum price, mak-

ing it difficult for the agency to increase or replace its buffer stock.

The NFA said the prevailing prices of clean and dry varieties ranged from P25 to P30 per kg as opposed to its buying price of P23 a kilo.

The agency is mandated to maintain an optimal rice inventory and dispose of it in case of emergencies and calamities under the Rice Tariffication Law. It can source palay only directly from local producers.

The NFA said it is required to keep and release 99.9 percent of its stocks in "good and consumable condition."

As for the sold rice stocks, Bioco explained that while these were sold for P25 per kg, they still need to be remilled before these could be released to consumers.

Other programs

Moving forward, the NFA plans to implement a contract-growing scheme to require farmers who received seeds and fertilizer from the DA to sell 10 percent of their crop, up to 10 bags per hectare per year, at P23 per kg on a clean and dry basis.

The food agency is coordinating with the DA's National Rice Program and the National Irrigation Administration to implement the program which can generate at least 500,000 metric tons of palay for the NFA. **INQ**

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Phl ratifies WTO deal on fisheries subsidies

By CATHERINE TALAVERA
and JASPER EMMANUEL ARCALAS

The Philippines has ratified the World Trade Organization (WTO) agreement on fisheries subsidies, which seeks to curb harmful subsidies like support for illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing (IUUF), bringing the landmark multilateral deal closer to effectivity.

The Philippines became the 70th WTO member-country that deposited its instrument of acceptance of the fisheries subsidies agreement since the deal was forged in June 2022 during the multilateral body's 12th Ministerial Conference.

According to the WTO, 40 more member-countries need to formally accept the agreement since at least two-thirds of the WTO membership, currently at 164, is required in order for the agreement to come into effect.

Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. said the country's ratification of the fisheries agreement showed its commitment in addressing IUUF and support to the conservation and sustainable use of oceans.

Laurel said the entry into force of the agreement would "usher" a "new era of cooperation and collaboration among nations."

"We dedicate this milestone to the Filipino people, the country's fisheries and

aquatic resources, and most importantly the communities that stand to benefit from the WTO agreement," he said in a video message released by the WTO yesterday morning.

"We fervently hope the rest of the WTO membership will be inspired to complete their own domestic ratification processes for the agreement to enter into force in the soonest time possible," he said.

WTO director general Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala said the Philippines demonstrated a "strong endorsement" of the WTO after the country made the formal acceptance of the fisheries subsidies at the start of the fisheries negotiations on the second day of the 13th Ministerial Conference last Feb. 27.

The Philippines' action, Okonjo-Iweala pointed out, showed "dedication" in preserving the oceans, especially for people who rely on the sea for livelihood and food security.

The fisheries subsidies agreement prohibits support for IUUF, bans support for fishing overfished stocks, and ends subsidies for fishing in unregulated high seas, according to the WTO.

The agreement also established the fisheries funding mechanism that seeks to provide developing and

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Phl From B1

least-developed countries with technical assistance and capacity building to meet their obligations under the agreement.

The Philippines stands to benefit from the fund, as it will aid it in improving its capacity and technical knowledge in managing its fisheries resources, according to the agriculture department.



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PH ratifies WTO's fisheries subsidies deal

By KHRISCIELLE E. YALAO

In a bid to protect the country's lush marine resources, develop the fisheries industry and fisherfolks, the Philippine delegation to the World Trade Organization (WTO) has ratified the Fisheries Subsidies Agreement (FSA) on Feb. 27.

Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) Secretary Alfredo E. Pascual and Department of Agriculture (DA) Secretary Francisco P. Tiu Laurel Jr. submitted the Philippines' Instrument of Ratification to WTO Director-General Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala during the 13th WTO Ministerial Conference (MC13) in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates.

Under the FSA, subsidies that will contribute to illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing are prohibited. Subsidies that are related to overfished stocks and unregulated high seas fishing are also banned.

For development of small-scale fisherfolks, the FSA allows more



FISHERIES SUBSIDIES AGREEMENT — Shown in photo (from L to R) are Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) Secretary Fred Pascual, World Trade Organization (WTO) Director-General Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, and Department of Agriculture (DA) Secretary Francisco P. Tiu Laurel, Jr. during the ratification of the Fisheries Subsidies Agreement at the 13TH WTO Ministerial Conference in Dabu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates on Feb. 27, 2024.

flexible subsidy options to developing and least-developed nations, with subsidy provisions of up to and within the exclusive economic zone

(EEZ) for two years from the date the agreement entered into force.

Pascual noted that the agreement also "allows members to grant subsi-

dies for disaster relief under certain conditions to support fisherfolks impacted by natural disasters."

"This is vital to the Philippines, being a climate-vulnerable country, especially since small-scale and artisanal fisherfolks are heavily impacted by strong typhoons and the increasing sea temperatures exacerbated by climate change," explained Pascual.

Technical assistance from the WTO Fisheries Funding Mechanism can also be obtained by the country as a party to the agreement.

Okonjo-Iweala expressed her delight in the Philippines' formal acceptance of the FSA.

"This action demonstrates a strong endorsement of the WTO by the Philippines, as well as its dedication to preserving our oceans for the people who rely on them for livelihood and food security, and for fostering global cooperation in our shared aspiration for sustainability," she said.

Malaya Business Insight



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Modernization to prevent sale of aging rice stocks

THE National Food Authority (NFA) said modernization measures which, among other things, would improve the shelf life of rice, will help prevent the practice of selling old stocks of the grain.

The NFA said the Department of Agriculture (DA) secured funding for a P93-billion modernization

program involving the acquisition of mechanical dryers, silo storage, modern rice mills and warehouses with controlled climate system to handle 1.2 million metric tons of palay equivalent to a 15-day strategic rice reserve.

The agency made this statement after DA Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. ordered an investigation

into allegations the NFA sold thousands of tons of rice to certain traders at a price disadvantageous to government.

NFA said in a statement yesterday "distress selling" through bidding of rice stocks is done instead of re-milling as this entails additional processing, logistics and recovery of loss costs to make the

stocks acceptable to consumers.

"To avoid these costs, NFA can opt to sell at the highest mandated price to qualified commercial buyers on as-is where-is, no-selection and first-in first-out bases and first come-first serve basis, meaning the first buyer gets to buy the oldest

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MODERNIZATION

stocks. In the future, when NFA has modernized, the distress selling could be avoided as the shelf life is longer and there is more time to allow the disposition of the stocks in best condition to the preferred purpose - calamity relief," the agency said.

NFA added the NFA Council allows the disposition of aging

stocks up to 10 percent lower than the mandated price or a P22.50 per kg floor price up to the maximum mandated ceiling of P25 per kg and damaged stocks for at least P6.50 per kg.

"Meantime, NFA management has recommended to the NFA Council to increase the mandated maximum selling price of NFA

rice. The current NFA management was able to responsibly dispose its rice stocks to government accounts by stretching to maximum shelf-life, minimizing the sale of residual volume to other accounts by implementing stricter guidelines and safeguards," NFA said.

Tiu Laurel earlier created a

panel to look into allegations that certain NFA officials allegedly authorized the sale of milled rice stored in the agency's warehouse for P25 per kg without bidding and after purchasing the grains in palay form at P23 per kg.

"We do not brush aside reports of impropriety against

officials of the DA, regardless of the source. We also welcome any government agency who may wish to conduct their own probe to ferret out the truth," said Tiu Laurel, in an earlier statement. DA spokesperson Arnel De Mesa, told reporters yesterday the panel started the review of available documents

and inquiries.

"There's a lot of finger pointing, a lot of them accusing both those inside and outside the NFA. What the secretary wants is the truth so he himself initiated the conduct of a probe and he wants to learn what really happened," De Mesa said. - *Jed Macapagal*



Small fisherfolk to gain from fisheries deal

THE Philippines has ratified the World Trade Organization (WTO) Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies (FSA), a crucial step towards curbing harmful subsidies and safeguarding the world's depleting fish stocks.

The Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) in a statement yesterday said the Philippines deposited its instrument of acceptance of the FSA on February 27 in time for the 13th WTO Ministerial Conference (MC13) in Abu Dhabi.

The Philippines is the 70th member to accede to the FSA whose provision would benefit the country's small-scale and artisanal fisherfolks, who fish within their respective municipal waters.

One such provision in FSA provides flexibility to developing and least-developed countries to provide subsidies up to and within the exclusive economic zone for two years from the date of entry into force of the Agreement.

FSA prohibits subsidies that contribute to illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing, subsidies concerning overfished stocks, and subsidies for fishing in the unregulated high seas.

DTI Secretary Fred Pascual of the Department of Agriculture (DA) Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel, Jr. presented the country's Instrument of Ratification to WTO Director-General Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala.

"The agreement allows members to grant subsidies for disaster relief under certain conditions to support fisherfolks impacted by natural disasters. This is vital to the Philippines, being a climate-vulnerable country, especially since small-scale and artisanal fisherfolks are heavily impacted by strong typhoons and the increasing sea temperatures exacerbated by climate change."

Moreover, the Philippines can avail of technical assistance from



Pascual (left) and Laurel (right) present the document of accession to the FSA to Okonjo-Iweala in Abu Dhabi on February 27.

the WTO Fisheries Funding Mechanism to assist in implementing the disciplines and obligations of the Agreement.

The agreement was adopted at

the 12th WTO Ministerial Conference in June 2022 and will enter into force once two-thirds of the WTO Membership have ratified it.- *Irma Isip*



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PHL signs on to WTO fisheries subsidies deal

THE PHILIPPINES has signed on to the World Trade Organization (WTO) Fisheries Subsidies Agreement (FSA) aimed at curbing harmful subsidies and safeguarding depleting fish stocks.

In a statement on Wednesday, the Department of Trade and Industry said that the FSA is expected to benefit small-scale and artisanal fishermen fishing in municipal waters, who are allowed a measure of relief in the form of subsidies during emergencies.

"The agreement allows members to grant subsidies for disaster relief under certain conditions to support fisherfolk impacted by natural disasters," said Trade Secretary Alfredo E. Pascual.

"This is vital to the Philippines, being a climate-vulnerable country, especially since small-scale and artisanal fisherfolks are heav-

ily impacted by strong typhoons and the increasing sea temperatures exacerbated by climate change," he added.

Under the agreement, the Philippines can also avail of technical assistance to help in implementing the FSA.

One of the obligations for countries signing the agreement is to provide an up-to-date electronic link that describes the country's fisheries regimes with references to laws, regulations, and administrative procedures.

The Philippines deposited its instrument of acceptance of the FSA on Tuesday at the WTO's 13th Ministerial Conference in Abu Dhabi, in the United Arab Emirates.

Agriculture Secretary Francisco P. Tiu Laurel, Jr., who presented the instrument of acceptance along with Mr. Pascual, said sign-

ing up for the FSA represents a commitment to address concerns about unregulated and sustainable fishing.

"As the first WTO Fisheries Subsidies Agreement enters into force, this will usher in a new era of cooperation and collaboration among nations," Mr. Tiu Laurel said.

"We fervently hope the rest of the WTO membership will be inspired to complete their own domestic ratification processes for the Agreement to enter into force in the soonest time possible," he added.

First adopted at the 12th WTO Ministerial Conference in June 2022, the agreement will come into force once two-thirds, or 110 members, of the WTO membership have ratified it. The Philippines was the 70th member to accede to the FSA. — **Justine Irish D. Tabile**



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NFA open to DA rice sales probe

THE NATIONAL Food Authority (NFA) said on Wednesday that it is open to the probe by the Department of Agriculture (DA), amid speculations of unauthorized rice selling.

In a statement, NFA Administrator Roderico R. Bioco said that investigation would “press the need to expedite the transformation program of the NFA especially on its modernization program.”

On Tuesday, Agriculture Secretary Francis P. Tiu Laurel, Jr. had ordered the investigation into the alleged selling of thousands of tons of rice to traders at lower prices.

Mr. Tiu Laurel said that he had created a panel to investigate allegations that certain NFA officials allegedly “authorized the sale of milled rice stored in the agency’s warehouse for P25 a kilo without bidding and after purchasing the grains in *palay* at P23 per kilo.” — **Adrian H. Halili**



PHL accedes to WTO accord against harmful fish subsidies

By ANDREA E. SAN JUAN [@andreasanjuan](#)

MANILA has deposited its instrument of acceptance of the World Trade Organization (WTO) agreement on Fisheries Subsidies (FSA), an accord meant to safeguard the world's depleting fish stocks and curb harmful subsidies.

As the 70th Member to accede to the Agreement, the Philippines, represented by Trade and Industry Secretary Alfredo E. Pascual and Agriculture Secretary Francisco P. Tiu Laurel Jr., submitted the country's Instrument of Ratification to WTO Director-General Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala at the 13th WTO Ministerial Conference (MC13) in Abu Dhabi on February 27, 2024.

WTO members adopted the agreement on Fisheries Subsidies at the 12th Ministerial Conference in June 2022. For the Agreement to enter into force, two-thirds or 110 of WTO members must formally accept the Protocol of the Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies

by depositing an "instrument of acceptance" with the intergovernmental organization.

WTO said 40 acceptances remain for the entry into force of the Agreement.

In a statement on Wednesday, the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) said the FSA prohibits subsidies that contribute to illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, subsidies concerning overfished stocks, and subsidies for fishing in the unregulated high seas.

At the same time, the FSA provides "flexibility" to developing and least-developed countries to provide subsidies up to and within the exclusive economic zone (EEZ)

for two years from the date of entry into force of the Agreement.

The Philippine Trade department said this provision benefits the country's small-scale and artisanal fisherfolks who fish within their respective municipal waters.

Pascual said the Agreement allows members to grant subsidies for disaster relief under certain conditions to support fisherfolks impacted by natural disasters. This, he explained, is "vital" to the Philippines which he described as a "climate-vulnerable" country, "especially since small-scale and artisanal fisherfolks are heavily impacted by strong typhoons and the increasing sea temperatures exacerbated by climate change."

DTI also said the Philippines can avail itself of technical assistance from the WTO Fisheries Funding Mechanism to assist in implementing the disciplines and obligations of the Agreement.

Okonjo-Iweala said the Philippines set a "positive tone" as it formally accepted the Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies at MC13.

"This action demonstrates a strong endorsement of the WTO by the Philippines, as well as its dedication to preserving our oceans

for the people who rely on them for livelihood and food security, and for fostering global cooperation in our shared aspiration for sustainability," she said.

For his part, Tiu Laurel said this agreement will "usher in a new era of cooperation and collaboration among nations."

"We dedicate this milestone to the Filipino people, the country's fisheries and aquatic resources, and most importantly the communities that stand to benefit from the WTO Agreement," the Philippines's Agriculture chief said.

According to Article 3.1 of the Agreement on Fisheries Subsidies Ministerial Decision, "No Member shall grant or maintain any subsidy to a vessel or operator engaged in illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing or fishing related activities in support of IUU fishing."

On overfished stocks, the agreement said no member shall grant or maintain subsidies for fishing or fishing-related activities regarding an overfished stock.

WTO explained that a fish stock is overfished if it is recognized as overfished by the coastal Member under whose jurisdiction the fishing is taking place.

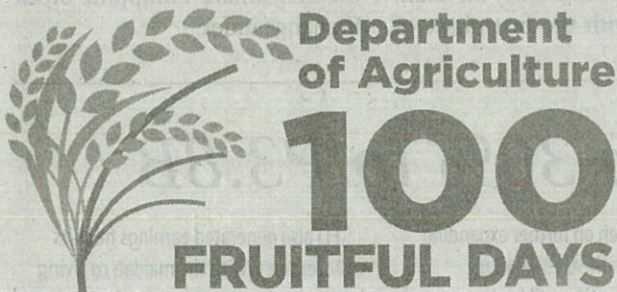


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DA secretary ensures short-, long-term food security

BY CONRAD CARIÑO

THE Department of Agriculture (DA), under the leadership of Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr., had succeeded in securing the country's rice supply and set in motion the modernization of the Philippine agriculture sector.



These were made in response to the marching order of President Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr. to make the Philippines attain food security

This meant that the country's rice supply would be sufficient through the first half of the year, with recent imports and the upcoming harvest that peaked in March and April.

Laurel assured the public of a stable price of rice until June in spite of El Nino.

"We have enough rice supply. So, prices should remain stable through the first half of the year. Our priority now is market stability," Laurel said.

When it comes to local production, the DA reported that palay (unmilled rice) production in 2023 reached 20.06 million metric tons (MT) — the highest harvest ever in the country.

According to the Philippine Statistics Authority's (PSA) latest data, last year's palay output was 1.5-percent higher than the 2022 volume of 19.76 million MT.

"Our goal is to push that rice harvest volume further, but that could be a challenge this year because of the water shortage we expect due to El Niño," Laurel said.

The recorded palay harvest translated to 13.2 million MT of rice, an amount that allowed the country to reduce rice import volume to 3.5 million MT from 3.8 million MT in 2022.

Earlier, the DA noted that rice consumption was estimated

at 13.5 million MT, but a required 50-day buffer meant the country needed an additional 1.85 million MT of rice supply.

Hence, President Marcos ordered the DA to modernize agriculture to increase food production, particularly palay, to ensure food security and increase farmers' income.

The latest PSA data also showed that the agricul-



ture and fisheries sectors remained resilient despite challenges faced in 2023, posting a 0.7-percent growth in terms of production value.

When it came to supplementing the country's rice production, the Philippines signed a 5-year rice supply deal with Vietnam, which ensured a source of 1.5 million to 2.0 million MT of rice a year.

Meanwhile, India had committed to provide additional supply despite the import ban on non-basmati rice.

In December 2023 and January 2024, a total of 750,000 MT of imported rice arrived in the country.

"What we need to guard against now are profiteers, who may attempt to exploit the situation by using El Niño as an excuse to hoard rice supply to push local prices to unreasonably high levels," Laurel said.

Setting modernization in motion

In modernizing the country's agriculture sector, Laurel presented to President Marcos in January the 3-year plan to increase agricultural productivity, lower food cost, ensure food security and develop the agri-fishery industry.

The plan was in response to President Marcos emphasizing the need to improve the agriculture sector, including aquaculture.

"Basically, our three-year plan is to invest in postharvest facilities and to have more recovery for our products and, hopefully, to partly lower the cost of rice and corn," Laurel said.

"Besides that, we have a big digitalization move in order to get more accurate production data for our production. As you know, we need real production data in order to be able to manage the food supply of the country effectively," he added.

➤ Long-term food security B5



The Philippines enters a 5-year rice supply deal with Vietnam, which ensures a source of 1.5 million to 2.0 million metric tons of rice a year. FILE PHOTO



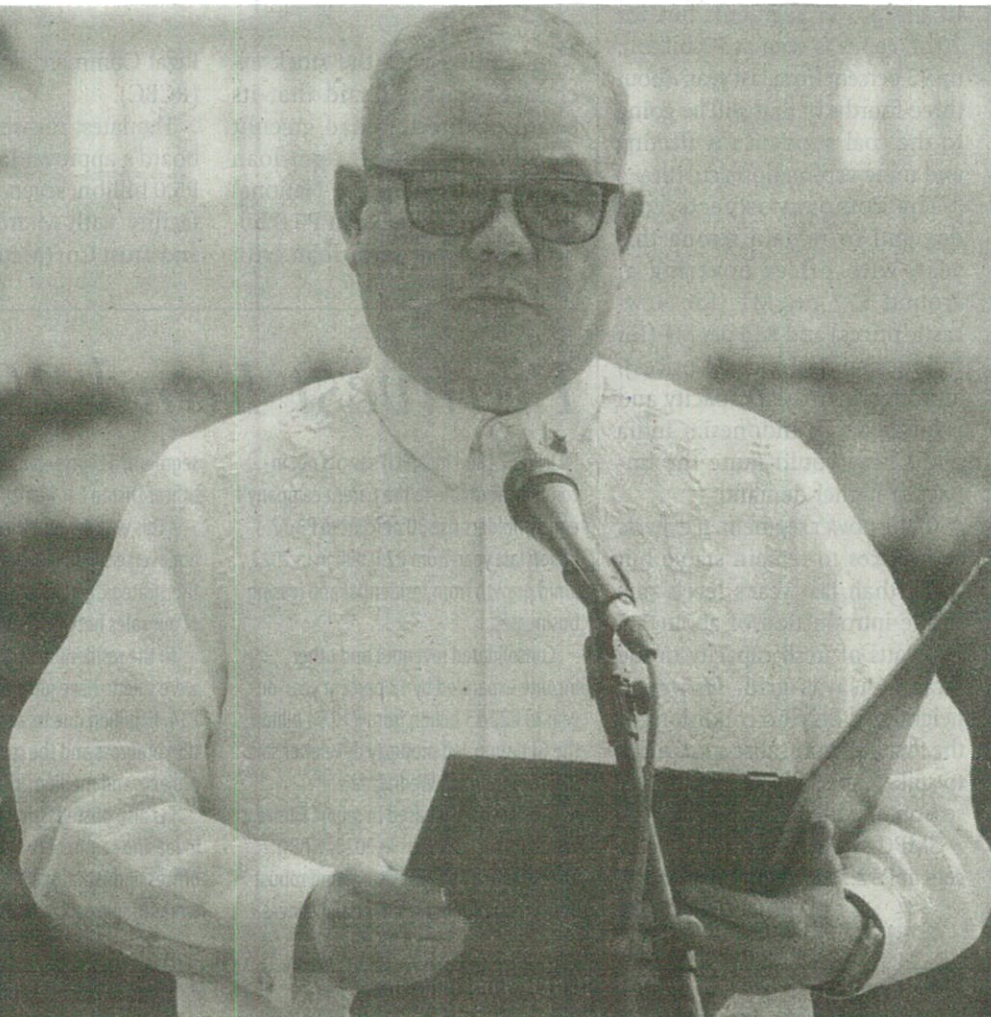
The Philippine Statistics Authority reports a higher palay or unmilled rice output, amounting to 1.5 percent higher rates, compared to 2022. FILE PHOTO

The Manila Times®

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Department of Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. says the country's rice supply would be enough for the first half of the year and the department would prioritize market stability. FILE PHOTO



■ LONG-TERM FOOD SECURITY FROM B4

Laurel said the DA was eyeing the construction of cold storage facilities with 5,000 pallet positions for high-value crops, including vegetables, to address the oversupply of agricultural products in the country.

He said extending the shelf life of vegetables by putting them into cold storage chains was seen as an "immediate action" to solve overproduction, which he stressed was a "result of poor planning and [coordination] with the market."

He noted that around P1 billion was be allotted for the establishment of four cold storage facilities in Luzon.

"If we try to solve the problem as soon as possible, assuming 2025, I need an additional P5 billion to address the vegetable cold storage issue of the whole nation," Laurel said.

He also said an allotment of P93 billion is needed for the construction of postharvest facilities in the next 3 years.

"(For the) postharvest facility alone, we need P93 billion in the next 3 years in order to save P10.7 billion a year on wasted rice and corn, because we're losing about 12.7 to 15 percent of our rice production due to a lack of postharvest facility. So, for the postharvest facilities for rice and corn,

Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. presented to President Marcos in January the three-year plan to increase agricultural productivity, lower food cost, ensure food security and develop the agri-fishery industry.



The Philippine Statistics Authority notes that the fishery sector remains resilient with a 0.7-percent growth in terms of production value. FILE PHOTO

we need P93 billion," Laurel said.

The DA has established around 268 cold chain facilities nationwide as of November last year.

By June 2028, the DA targeted to complete an additional 47 cold chain facilities.

Laurel said irrigation of 1.2 million hectares of farm lands, planted mainly with rice, would

require P1.2 trillion in capital spending.

"We [really need] to fund these projects. But, we must build bigger. We have three designs — small, medium and large, not mini," he said.

Laurel said integrated rice mill and warehouse complexes must be built, which would cost around P90 billion over several years. This would

reduce an estimated 15 percent in losses in rice due to the lack of postharvest facilities.

Such establishments would save around P10.7 billion worth of rice or an additional 23 days of rice inventory, which was equivalent to around 10 percent of rice imports based on last year's figures.

PH ratifies WTO pact on fisheries subsidies

BY JANINE ALEXIS MIGUEL

THE Philippines has ratified a World Trade Organization (WTO) agreement on fishing subsidies, joining 69 other countries that have signed up for a global deal aimed at curbing overfishing and promoting ocean sustainability.

The country's "instruments of acceptance" were presented by Trade Secretary Alfredo Pascual and Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel to WTO Director-General Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala during the trade body's ongoing ministerial conference in Abu Dhabi, the United Arab Emirates.

Under the agreement, subsidies that contribute to illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing are prohibited, as well as incentives related to depleted fish stocks. Subsidies associated with fishing in the unregulated high seas are also prohibited.

Developing and least-developed

countries, meanwhile, are allowed to provide subsidies up to and within their exclusive economic zones for two years from the date the agreement takes effect.

"This is vital to the Philippines, being a climate-vulnerable country, especially since small-scale and artisanal fisherfolks are heavily impacted by strong typhoons and the increasing sea temperatures exacerbated by climate change," Pascual said in a statement released by the Trade department.

The country can also avail of technical assistance from the WTO Fisheries Funding Mechanism to assist in implementing the agreement.

The Fisheries Subsidies Agreement (FSA) was adopted in 2022 but has yet to take effect. WTO rules call for two-thirds of its members to ratify the deal, and 40 more acceptances are needed, the trade body said.

Okonjo-Iweala, in a separate statement, said the ratification "demonstrates a strong endorsement of the WTO by the Philippines, as well as its dedication to preserving our oceans for the people who rely on them for livelihood and food security, and for fostering global cooperation in our shared aspiration for sustainability."

➤ Fisheries B3

■ FISHERIES FROM B1

PH ratifies

Tiu Laurel, meanwhile, was quoted by the WTO as saying that the agreement was a "significant milestone in our continuing effort to show our country's com-

mitment to address the global concern over illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, and the conservation and sustainable use of our oceans."

The FSA is widely expected to be the only breakthrough to be made at the Abu Dhabi meeting although Okonjo-Iweala said that she was "cautiously optimistic"

about striking deals on both subsidies and agriculture.

Many eyes are trained on India — which is often described as obstructionist in trade talks — which along with several countries want further concessions, including transition periods that others consider to be too long.

WITH A REPORT FROM AFP



NFA pumiyok sa bentahan ng P25 per kilong bigas

Nagpahayag ng kahandaan ang National Food Authority (NFA) sa inutos na imbestigasyon ng Department of Agriculture (DA) tungkol sa umano'y hindi tamang pagbebenta ng bigas ng ahensiya.

Ipinag-utos ni Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. ang imbestigasyon dahil sa libo-libong tonelada ng bigas umano ang ibinebenta ng NFA sa presyong ikinalulugi ng gobyerno.

Paliwanag naman ni NFA Administrator Rod Bloco na mandato ng ahensiya ang panatilihin ang 99.9% nilang stock sa maayos na kondisyon. Ibinenta umano nila ito sa halagang P25 kada kilo.

Pero ang mga lumang stock ay dapat i-remill bago ito ulit ibenta sa mga konsyumer.

Inirereserba naman umano ang freshly milled na bigas para sa calamity relief, at ang mga natira ay

kailangang ma-dispose para sa inventory management purpose.

"Distress selling is the period after 3 months that would normally require NFA to remill, which entails additional processing, logistics and recovery loss costs, to make the stocks acceptable to consumers. To avoid these costs, NFA can opt to sell at the highest mandated price to qualified commercial buyers on as-is where-is, no-selection, and first-in first-out bases," ayon pa sa pahayag ng NFA.

Pinapayagan din umano ng NFA Council ang pagbebenta ng 10% na mas mababa sa mandated price ng mga lumang stock ng bigas.

Aabot ito sa P22.50 kada kilo na floor price hanggang sa maximum mandated ceiling na P25 kada kilo.

Ang mga damaged stock naman ay aabot sa P6.50 kada kilo. **(Natalia Antonio)**

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NFA rice sale sans bidding investigated

AGRICULTURE Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. has ordered an investigation into the alleged "improper" sale of National Food Authority (NFA) rice.

In a news release, Laurel said the Department of Agriculture's (DA) panel of investigators has been tasked to verify reports that certain NFA officials have "authorized" the sale of milled rice without bidding.

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

Laurel also urged other agencies to look at the matter, adding that the allegation involved the selling of "thousands

of tons of rice" at a "disadvantageous" price.

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

According to the DA, initial reports claimed that the pailay

(unhusked rice) in question, bought by the NFA at PHP23 per kilogram (kg), were milled then sold at PHP25/kg without proper bidding.

PNA



LAUREL



Marcos finds China actions in WPS getting 'worrisome'

By Julie M. Aurelio
@JMAurelioINQ

President Marcos has expressed worry that the growing presence and assertiveness of China's forces in the West Philippine Sea (WPS) might further stoke tensions between Manila and Beijing and escalate an already volatile situation in those waters.

"It's really worrisome. Before, it's just the China Coast Guard that's making moves in our area. Now their Navy and fishing boats are joining them, so the situation is really changing," Mr. Marcos said.

The President noted the recent sightings of warships of the People's Liberation Army-Navy as well as China's alleged jamming of the automatic identification signals of ships of the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) and the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) near Panatag (Scarborough) Shoal.

But the Chief Executive said the Philippines would continue to defend its sovereign rights to ensure that Filipino fisherfolk can keep making a living in their

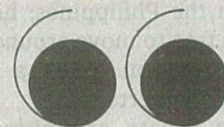
traditional fishing grounds.

"We just want to enforce what everybody is doing. For us, we will continue, we will just really defend our maritime territory. We continue to support all our fisherfolk who make a living from these fishing grounds and we will continue to help them," he said shortly before he flew to Australia's capital of Canberra on Wednesday morning for a two-day state visit.

Unfriendly acts

In an interview with reporters at Villamor Air Base in Pasay City, Mr. Marcos assured Filipino fishers in the West Philippine Sea that the government would defend the country's maritime territory in spite of the increased presence of Chinese vessels.

Mr. Marcos reiterated his position that the country would not budge an inch despite the unfriendly acts of Chinese vessels, which are known to shadow or block the Philippine government's ships in the West Philippine Sea, or the waters within the country's 370-kilometer exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in the South China Sea.



It's really worrisome. Before, it's just the China Coast Guard that's making moves in our area. Now their Navy and fishing boats are joining them, so the situation is really changing

Ferdinand Marcos Jr.
President

On the President's orders, the PCG and BFAR began rotational deployments and patrols around Panatag Shoal, also called Bajo de Masinloc, a tra-

ditional fishing ground among Filipino fisherfolk.

Over the weekend, the PCG accused China of jamming the tracking signal of PCG and BFAR ships, preventing the vessels from transmitting their positions at sea.

"Despite whatever else happens, if they block us, if they shadow us, we will just continue doing what we are doing. That's our job, to help fishermen who have been fishing there for generations," Mr. Marcos said.

"That's the basic principle there: The fishermen must be allowed to fish in their traditional fishing grounds which belong in the maritime territory of the Philippines," the President said.

Jamming signals

He made the remarks following the Philippine Navy's allegation of an increase in interference on the electronic capabilities of Philippine ships deployed on rotation and resupply missions in the West Philippine Sea.

Commodore Roy Vincent Trinidad, Navy spokesperson

for the West Philippine Sea, said such "electronic interference," like the jamming of tracking and communication signals, had been going on for the past three to four years.

However, he could not directly say if China was behind the electronic interference.



The Philippines has filed diplomatic protests against China over a number of maritime incidents, including Chinese ships harassing or blocking Filipino fishers from reaching their fishing grounds, and launching water cannon attacks on Philippine resupply boats headed toward a remote military outpost in Ayungin (Second Thomas) Shoal.

In 2016, an arbitral tribunal in The Hague, the Netherlands, voided China's sweeping claims in the South China Sea while upholding the Philippines' sovereign rights to fish and explore resources within its EEZ, a ruling Beijing does not recognize.

Unlike his predecessor Rodrigo Duterte, who cultivated warm ties with China, Mr. Marcos has repeatedly invoked the 2016 Hague ruling. INQ

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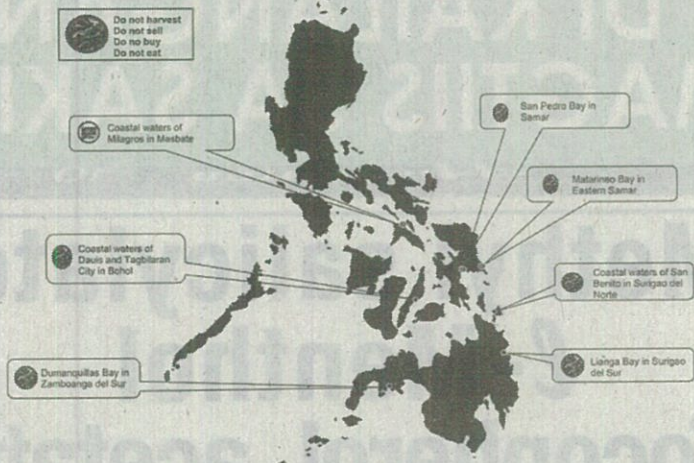


BAGONG PILIPINAS
Tagapagtatag ng Malinis at
Masaganang Karagatan

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Shellfish Bulletin No. 04
Series of 2024
27 February 2024

Shellfishes collected and tested from coastal waters of Milagros in Masbate; coastal waters of Dauis and Tagbilaran City in Bohol; San Pedro Bay in Samar and Matarinao Bay in Eastern Samar; Dumanquillas Bay in Zamboanga del Sur; Lianga Bay in Surigao del Sur; and coastal waters of San Benito in Surigao del Norte are still positive for Paralytic Shellfish Poison (PSP) or toxic red tide that is beyond the regulatory limit.




Do not harvest
Do not sell
Do not buy
Do not eat

All types of shellfish and *Acetes sp.* or alamang gathered from the areas shown above are NOT SAFE for human consumption. Fish, squids, shrimps, and crabs are safe for human consumption provided that they are fresh and washed thoroughly, and internal organs such as gills and intestines are removed before cooking.

The following areas continue to be **FREE from toxic red tide**: coastal waters of Cavite, Las Piñas, Parañaque, Navotas, Bulacan, and Bataan (Mariveles, Limay, Orion, Pilar, Balanga, Hermosa, Orani, Abucay, and Samal), in Manila Bay; mariculture areas in Infanta, coastal waters of Bolinao, Anda, Alaminos, Sual, and Wawa, Bani in Pangasinan; mariculture areas in Rosario, and Sto. Tomas in La Union; coastal waters of Pampanga; Masinloc Bay in Zambales; Pagbilao Bay, Pagbilao, and coastal waters of Walay, Padre Burgos in Quezon; Honda, and coastal waters of Inner Malampaya Sound, Taytay in Palawan; coastal waters of Mandaon in Masbate; Sorsogon Bay, and Juag Lagoon, Matnog in Sorsogon; coastal waters of Borongon, San Dionisio in Iloilo; Sapián Bay (Ivisan and Sapián in Capiz; Mambuquiao and Camanci, Batán in Aklan); coastal waters of Altavas, Batán, and New Washington in Batán Bay, Aklan; coastal waters of Pontevedra; Panay; Pilar; Roxas City and President Roxas in Capiz; coastal waters of E.B. Magalona, Talisay City, Silay City, Bacolod City, Hinigaran, and Victorias City in Negros Occidental; Tambobo, and Silt Bays, Siaton; and Bais Bay, Bais City in Negros Oriental; coastal waters of Daram, Calbayog, and Zumarraga, Cambatutay, Irong-irong, Maqueda and Villareal Bays in Samar; coastal waters of Guluan in Eastern Samar; coastal waters of Leyte, Calubian, Ormoc, Sogod, and Carigara Bay and Cancabato, Tacloban City in Leyte; Tantanang Bay in Zamboanga Sibugay; Murcielagos Bay in Zamboanga del Norte and (Sapang Dalaga, and Ballangao) in Misamis Occidental; Panguil Bay, Tangub City, and coastal waters of Ozamiz City in Misamis Occidental; coastal waters of Baroy in Lanao del Norte; Taguines Lagoon, Benoni, Mahinog in Camiguin; Balite, and Pujada Bays, Mati City in Davao Oriental; Tagabuli Bay in Davao del Sur; Malalag Bay in Davao Occidental and Davao del Sur; coastal waters of Hinatuan, and Cortes, and Bislig Bay in Surigao del Sur.

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E-SB-2024-0227-04
(PDI - Feb. 29, 2024)



Task force: El Niño seen to spare only 2 provinces

NIA chart shows Batanes, Sarangani escaping drought, dry spell; exec says 80 other areas across PH to suffer impact of weather phenomenon by April

By Melvin Gascon
@melvingasconINQ

The effects of strong El Niño will impact up to 80 of the country's 82 provinces which may persist until June, an official of the multiagency task force said on Wednesday.

Communications Assistant Secretary Joey Villarama, spokesperson for Task Force El Niño, said the impact of water shortage had begun to be felt in two more regions this week, with farmers reporting damage to their dried-up farmlands.

"The last time I [presented a report], I mentioned 41 provinces were already affected. As of Feb. 25, this number has gone up to 51, and it is projected to further increase to 73 then up to 80 provinces, before it will again go down to just over 50," he said.

Villarama announced this just as the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council reported that the prolonged dry spell had damaged an estimated P810 million worth of crops in the country.

He did not identify the only two provinces that will not be impacted by El Niño, but a chart provided by the National Irrigation Administration (NIA) showed that only the island province of Batanes and coastal Sarangani province will be spared its effects.

"Last week, we received reports of crop damage in Regions 6 (Western Visayas) and 9 (Zamboanga Peninsula); this week, the damage is being reported in Regions 1 (Ilocos) and 4-B or Mimaropa (Min-



UPLAND BLAZE Traces of a grass fire are still visible at Villa Verde Trail along the San Nicolas (Pangasinan)-Santa Fe (Nueva Vizcaya) Road in this photo taken on Feb. 18. Forest fires have been reported in northern Luzon's mountains since January amid dry conditions accompanying El Niño. —WILLIE LOMIBAO

doro, Marinduque, Romblon and Palawan)," he said.

Losses

While crop damage has been reported in Oriental Mindoro and Occidental Mindoro, these are still considered insignificant, Villarama said.

"The projection of NIA is about 275,000 hectares (ha) nationwide will be damaged by El Niño, but at the moment, it is still at 6,600 ha," he said over government television program "Bagong Pilipinas Ngayon."

"But we are not discounting the fact that this will not cause any impact on our harvest because we are still in the early stages of the dry harvest season," Villarama added.

According to projections of the Department of Agriculture (DA), the worst effect of El Niño will be felt in the country in

April, with a total of 80 provinces seen to experience "drought," "dry spell" and "dry condition."

Of these, 41 provinces will experience drought, 31 will be under a dry spell, and eight will have dry conditions, according to the DA.

The Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration (Pagasa) says an area is experiencing drought if rainfall condition is "way below normal" (more than 60-percent reduction from average) for three consecutive months or is "below normal" (21-percent to 60-percent reduction from average) for five consecutive months.

Pagasa says a dry spell is characterized by three consecutive months of below normal or two consecutive months of way below normal rainfall conditions while dry condition occurs

during two consecutive months of below normal rainfall.

By May, 40 provinces will still be experiencing drought, consisting of 17 provinces in Luzon, 14 in the Visayas and nine in Mindanao, the DA said.

Nineteen provinces will be under dry spell, according to the agency's projections: eight in Luzon, two in the Visayas and nine in Mindanao.

The effects of El Niño will continue to wane in June, with only 10 provinces still experiencing drought, and only one—La Union—having dry conditions, data from the DA showed.

State of calamity

The DA, Villarama said, is calling on local governments in drought-stricken areas to declare their localities under a state of calamity to trigger mechanisms that would allow the government to assist affected farmers.

A declaration of a state of calamity will authorize the national government to tap the quick response fund, he said, which is supposedly used to provide added funds of up to P5,000 for farm inputs, or fuel subsidy.

The Department of Social Welfare and Development, through the Assistance to Indigents in Crisis Situations program, and the Department of Labor and Employment, through its cash-for-work program, may also come to the aid of farmers whose main concern is their daily sustenance, Villarama said.

Such calamity state declaration may also allow the local government to provide cash aid from local funding, he said. INQ



'El Niño-hit provinces may increase to 80'

By ALEXIS ROMERO and SHEILA CRISOSTOMO

Up to 80 provinces may be affected by El Niño as warmer temperatures are expected in April and May.

Citing a projection by the **National Irrigation Administration**, Presidential Communications Assistant Secretary Joey Villarama at a public briefing aired over state-run *People's Television* said 275,000 hectares of agricultural land may be affected by drought.

Villarama, also the spokesman for the government's El Niño task force, noted that as of Feb. 25, the number of provinces affected by El Niño has reached 51.

He said the number of affected provinces is seen to "increase to 73, then reach 80 before it goes down again to 50 plus."

"The effects of a strong and mature El Niño will persist until May and June. We will see what

we can do," Villarama said.

He said the Department of Agriculture (DA) is urging concerned local government units to declare a state of calamity for them to access the quick response fund and receive assistance from the national government.

Villarama said the DA has provided an initial financial aid to two towns in Mindoro, which were severely affected by drought.

At a briefing of the House committee on agriculture and food, Ma. Ana Liza Solis, acting chief of the Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration (PAGASA)'s climatology and agrometeorology division, said higher temperatures would be

experienced "in an instance" in valley areas in Northern Luzon and some mountainous areas in lowland Mindanao.

She said the maximum temperature in Metro Manila would range from 36 to 38 degrees Celsius in April and 36.5 to 38.3 degrees Celsius in May.

Citing PAGASA's latest climate outlook, Solis said six to nine tropical cyclones are expected to occur in the country from March to August.

She said 30 provinces – 25 in Luzon and five in the Visayas – are expected to experience drought in March.

In April, 42 provinces – 27 in Luzon, 12 in the Visayas and three in Mindanao – will experience dry spell.

"Mature El Niño is expected to continue and show signs of weakening. But despite weaken-

ing... it will have an impact on various sectors in the country," Solis said.

Agri damage

Meanwhile, damage to agriculture due to El Niño in Cagayan Valley and Ilocos Norte has reached P198 million as of yesterday.

Danilo Arade, Ilocos Norte provincial rice coordinator, said damage to rice production in Bacarra, Bangui, Banna, Burgos, Dingras, Nueva Era, Pasuquin, Piddig, Batac and Laoag was estimated at P18 million.

In Cagayan Valley, losses in corn production were pegged at P180 million.

In a report to Gov. Eugenio Jose Lacson, the office of the provincial agriculturist said damage due to drought in the province has reached P55 million. – **With Bella Cariaso, Jun Elias, Gilbert Bayoran**

Date: FEB. 29, 2024 Page: 124



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NFA defends sale of cheap rice; farmers slam 'mafia'

By BELLA CARIASO

The National Food Authority yesterday defended the sale of rice to some traders, saying the NFA is allowed to dispose of aging stocks amid the alleged anomalous sale of rice to traders.

"The NFA Council allows the NFA management to dispose of aging stocks up to 10 percent lower than the mandated price and the damaged stocks," the NFA said in a

statement.

"The current NFA management was able to responsibly dispose of its rice stocks to government accounts by stretching to maximum shelf-life, minimizing the sale of residual volume to other accounts by implementing stricter guidelines and safeguards," the NFA added.

The NFA said the agency is mandated to keep and dispose of 99.9 percent stocks in good and consumable condition.

"The rice we are selling are all sold at the mandated selling price P25 per kilo, although aging stocks need to be remilled before they could be released to the consumers," it said.

"Freshly milled stocks within three months after selling are reserved for calamity relief and leftovers of more than three months after milling shall be disposed for inventory management purposes as per NFA guidelines before the

Turn to Page 4

NFA From Page 1

stocks become unfit for human consumption," it added.

Farmers' group Samahang Industriya ng Agrikultura (SINAG) however said that a mafia still operates inside the NFA.

"This (controversy) erupted, obviously, there is still a mafia inside. The Department of Agriculture (DA) should determine if this is new or still the old one," SINAG executive director Jayson Cainglet told

The STAR.

"If this is true, this means that officials were using the agency to earn money. It does not even reflect on the retail prices. Somebody is benefiting from this, meaning, the reported mafia inside the NFA is still existing so there is a need to finally unmask these (individuals)," Cainglet added.

DA probe

Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. has ordered an investigation of the alleged

anomalies in the sale of cheap rice by the NFA.

Agriculture spokesman Arnel de Mesa said the allegations on the corruption of certain officials at the NFA came from inside and outside the agency.

"The secretary wants the truth to come out as it is possible that it was purely internal squabbles and not related to sale of NFA rice. All of these are being considered in the investigation," De Mesa added.

He gave assurance that Laurel will not tolerate corrup-

tion within the DA, and that officials of NFA continue to perform their functions while the investigation is ongoing.

"There is no case yet," De Mesa said.

Cainglet expressed confidence that Laurel will not tolerate the alleged anomalies at the NFA.

For her part, rice watchdog group Bantay Bigas spokesperson Cathy Estavillo backed the investigation being conducted by the DA.

Estavillo added that under

Republic Act 11203 or the Rice Tariffication Law (RTL), the NFA's only mandate is to buy palay for buffer stocking for calamities and emergencies.

"It is not allowed to sell rice," Estavillo said.

Federation of Free Farmers national manager Raul Montemayor said that as a general rule, NFA is supposed to dispose of its buffer stock only during calamities and emergencies.

"However, the implementation rules and regulations of the

RTL also allowed such disposal in cases when the stored stocks are about to deteriorate so that they can be replaced with newer stocks. How these deteriorating stocks are disposed of is the issue here. When can the stocks be considered deteriorating?" Montemayor said.

He said he received reports that during past administrations of the NFA, large volumes of newly bought stocks were sold at low prices to favored traders and clients.

- With Ramon Efren Lazaro



Presence of Chinese warships in WPS worrisome – Marcos

By HELEN FLORES

The presence of Chinese navy vessels in the West Philippine Sea is "worrisome," but the Philippines will not be deterred in defending its maritime territory and protecting its fishermen, President Marcos said yesterday.

The Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) confirmed on Tuesday the presence of Chinese warships and aircraft in the vicinity of Bajo de Masinloc, also known as Panatag or Scarborough Shoal.

"It's worrisome because there are two elements to that: one is that previously only China's Coast Guard was moving in our area. Now, there is navy that has come and the fishing boats," Marcos told reporters before leaving for a two-day state visit to Canberra, Australia.

"So the situation is changing, but – well, it's clear for us, we don't really – we just watch, of course, what everybody is doing, but really for us, we'll continue, we just defend our maritime territory. We continue to support all of our fishermen, fisherfolk who make their living from these fishing grounds," he said.

Marcos said the government would continue to patrol Philippine-claimed territories and gave assurance of Filipino fishermen's continued access to their traditional fishing grounds.

"And despite whatever else happens, we are being blocked, what, there is shadowing, we will continue to do what we do because that is our job, our job is to help the fishermen who have been fishing there for a long time, for several generations," Marcos said in Filipino and English.

At a public briefing on Tuesday, Commodore Jay Tarriela,

PCG spokesman for the West Philippine Sea, said during the last mission of the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) they were able to monitor the presence of three People's Liberation Army navy warships in the vicinity of Panatag Shoal or Bajo de Masinloc.

Tarriela said a Chinese aircraft was also spotted by BFAR patrolling over Panatag.

"This is the first time we have seen a Chinese aircraft patrolling over the airspace of Bajo de Masinloc in the recent time," Tarriela said.

Maritime zones law

Lauding both houses of Congress for their legislative work, National Security Adviser Eduardo Año said the Philippine Maritime Zones Act that has passed third and final reading in the Senate will definitely help enforce the 2016 arbitral award rejecting China's expansive maritime claims in the West Philippine Sea.

With such a law in place, he said the government can more effectively protect the country's maritime domain in accordance with both international and domestic rules on territories and maritime boundaries.

"This marks a significant step forward in safeguarding our nation's maritime interests and asserting our sovereign rights over our maritime domains," Año said in a statement yesterday.

"Most importantly, this implements in domestic legislation the 2016 arbitral award that the Permanent Court of Arbitration ruled in favor of the Philippines," he stressed.

Año noted that the Philippine Maritime Zones Act "not only

reaffirms the country's sovereign rights over the nation's exclusive economic zone but also establishes clear guidelines for the delineation of maritime zones, including sea lanes, air routes and the utilization of natural resources within our jurisdiction."

"The Philippines is an archipelagic and maritime nation, and our seas play a vital role in our economic prosperity and national security," he said.

Año said the National Security Council thanks the Senate led by Senate President Juan Miguel Zubiri and Senate special committee on maritime and admiralty zones chairman Sen. Francis Tolentino for advancing the passage of Senate Bill 2492 last Monday.

The Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) also welcomed yesterday Senate approval of the Philippine Maritime Zones Bill, underscoring it is a crucial step for the Philippines to put its archipelagic house in order and to harmonize its domestic law with the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.

The bill codifies the status and regime of the waters inside the archipelagic baselines, redefines the extent of Philippine territorial sea and claims a 24-nautical mile contiguous zone, among others.

"We look forward to its enactment so that the Philippines could effectively enforce its relevant domestic laws and related international laws to protect its marine and fish resources, preserve and conserve its marine environment and enhance maritime safety and security," the DFA said. – With Michael Punongbayan, Pia Lee-Bravo

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Shellfish Bulletin No. 04
Series of 2024
27 February 2024

Shellfishes collected and tested from **coastal waters of Milagros in Masbate; coastal waters of Dausi and Tagbilaran City in Bohol; San Pedro Bay in Samar and Matarinao Bay in Eastern Samar; Dumanquilas Bay in Zamboanga del Sur; Lianga Bay in Surigao del Sur; and coastal waters of San Benito in Surigao del Norte** are still **positive** for Paralytic Shellfish Poison (PSP) or toxic red tide that is beyond the regulatory limit.

All types of shellfish and *Acetes sp.* or *alamang* gathered from the areas shown above are NOT SAFE for human consumption. Fish, squids, shrimps, and crabs are safe for human consumption provided that they are fresh and washed thoroughly, and internal organs such as gills and intestines are removed before cooking.

The following areas continue to be **FREE from toxic red tide**: coastal waters of Cavite, Las Piñas, Parañaque, Navotas, Bulacan, and Bataan (Mariveles, Limay, Orion, Pilar, Balanga, Hermosa, Orani, Abucay, and Sarnal) in Manila Bay; mariculture areas in Infanta, coastal waters of Bolinao, Anda, Alaminos, Sual, and Wawa, Bani in Pangasinan; mariculture areas in Rosario, and Sto. Tomas in La Union; coastal waters of Pampanga; Masinloc Bay in Zambales; Pagbilao Bay, Pagbilao, and coastal waters of Wala; Padre Burgos in Quezon; Honda, and coastal waters of Inner Malampaya Sound, Taytay in Palawan; coastal waters of Mandaon in Masbate; Sorsogon Bay, and Juag Lagoon, Matnog in Sorsogon; coastal waters of Borongan, San Dionisio in Iloilo; Sapián Bay (Ivisan and Sapián in Capiz; Mambuquiao and Camanci, Batán in Aklan); coastal waters of Altavas, Batán, and New Washington in Batán Bay, Aklan; coastal waters of Pontevedra; Panay; Pilar; Roxas City and President Roxas in Capiz; coastal waters of E.B. Magalona, Talisay City, Silay City, Bacolod City, Hinigaran, and Victorias City in Negros Occidental; Tambobo, and Siit Bays, Siaton; and Bais Bay, Bais City in Negros Oriental; coastal waters of Daram, Calbayog, and Zumaraga, Cambatutay, Irong-irong, Maqueda and Villareal Bays in Samar; coastal waters of Guluan in Eastern Samar; coastal waters of Leyte, Calubian, Ormoc, Sogod, and Carigara Bay and Cancabato, Tacloban City in Leyte; Tantanang Bay in Zamboanga Sibugay; Murcielagos Bay in Zamboanga del Norte and (Sapang Dalaga, and Baliangao) in Misamis Occidental; Pangull Bay, Tugub City, and coastal waters of Ozamiz City in Misamis Occidental; coastal waters of Baroy in Lanao del Norte; Taguines Lagoon, Benoni, Mahinog in Camiguin; Balite, and Pujada Bays, Mati City in Davao Oriental; Tagabuli Bay in Davao del Sur; Malalag Bay in Davao Occidental and Davao del Sur; coastal waters of Hinatuan, and Cortes, and Bislig Bay in Surigao del Sur.

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Date: FEB. 29 2021 Page: B3



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Managing the impact of El Niño

As the El Niño phenomenon persists in the Philippines, the need to take more proactive measures is further highlighted to help the country weather its impact, especially with the looming dry season.

The Department of Agriculture in its most recent report said the damage of El Niño on the country's crops has reached P357.4 million with over 8,000 farmers in various regions affected. Rice – our staple grain—took the worst hit followed by corn and other high-value crops, according to the government.

Z-FACTOR



JOE
ZALDARRIAGA

In light of this, the Climate Change Commission of the Philippines has urged Filipinos to take proactive measures to help mitigate the impact of El Niño. State weather bureau PAGASA had said that its impact could soon be felt in more provinces which means that the damage to the agriculture sector is expected to worsen in the coming months.

The heightened vulnerability of the agricultural sector has made it imperative for us to recognize the need to collaborate on efficiently adopting a multi-faceted approach to improve our country's resilience in the face of this challenge.

Dry spells and reduced rainfall are major threats not only to the livelihoods of our farmers but they also endanger food security. It also puts pressure on the government's campaign to promote the growth of the agricultural sector.

While the government has long implemented large-scale measures to prepare for and address the effect of El Niño, the cooperation of ordinary Filipinos will play a big role in mitigating its impact.

A vital yet simple way for addressing El Niño is by practicing energy efficiency to mitigate power demand—which historically increases during the dry season. Simple measures such as unplugging appliances when not in use, ironing clothes in large batches and

using LED lights and inverter appliances can already help promote resilience to extreme weather patterns and yield savings for Filipino consumers as well.

As responsible citizens, we must do our part in preserving our resources through mindful consumption.

The private sector on the other hand can do so much more in terms of energy efficiency— an area where our collective action can result in significant contributions to addressing extreme weather phenomenon.

For example, companies as an immediate action can harness solar energy to help power their operations—a greener option that results in a multitude of benefits. On the long-term, businesses can heavily integrate sustainability in their business operations to reduce energy costs and enhance their own resilience to climate risks.

On the part of the government, active support to sectors – such as agriculture – that are heavily affected by climate-related risks are much needed. For example, water management interventions will greatly benefit farmers whose crops are at high risk of damage due to El Niño.

By investing in energy-efficient technologies today, we collectively improve our country's resiliency to future climate-related challenges. Beyond its immediate impact, embracing energy efficiency as a way of life empowers our communities to adopt sustainability for a cleaner and greener future which benefits all of us.

The realization of this vision however requires concerted actions from all levels of society. It is no secret that the Philippines is among the most vulnerable to the impact of climate change and therefore it is incumbent upon us to continuously enhance our disaster preparedness and resiliency measures.

Beyond the environmental impact, embracing energy efficiency aligns with our government's goals of sustainable economic growth for job creation and improved opportunities for Filipinos.

As we confront the challenge posed by El Niño, let us continue to advocate for energy efficiency, and active collaboration between the public and private sector to weather this obstacle. With proactive measures, our communities can become more resilient and sustainable to face future climate-related risks.



WIDESPREAD HEAT, DROUGHT — Parched patches of land, like this rice field in Bulacan, could soon become a common sight in the country as the El Niño phenomenon is expected to peak this month with over 35 percent to 50 percent of the country experiencing drought due to below-normal rainfall conditions. (Mark Balmores)



El Niño to affect 80 provinces

Gov't task force says 275,000 hectares of farms may be impacted

By RAYMUND ANTONIO

The Task Force El Niño said on Wednesday, Feb. 28, that it expects some 80 provinces and 275,000 hectares of farms would end up being affected by the El Niño phenomenon that has

been causing devastation to the country's agricultural sector.

As of Feb. 25, Task Force El Niño spokesman Joey Villarama confirmed that the number of affected provinces is up to 51 from the earlier reported 41.

"The last time I was here I mentioned 41 provinces are affected.

Actually, as of Feb. 25, it's already 51. It will increase to 73, then it will reach 80 before it decreases again to 50 plus," he said during the Bagong Pilipinas briefing. "We also said the effects of strong and mature El Niño will persist until May to June."

Among those added to the initial

list of 41 provinces are provinces from Region 1 and 4B (Mimaropa), particularly Mindoro Oriental and Mindoro Occidental.

Villarama said the current reports on the devastation of farmlands were just a "small part" as this only showed 6,600 hectares of affected farms.

He cited the **National Irrigation Administration's (NIA)** projection that around 275,000 hectares of farms will be affected by El Niño.

The official assured that the government has enough supply of rice and food, and called on affected areas to declare a state **► 4**

El Niño to affect 80 provinces ◀

of calamity so that the national government can come in and provide aid.

Currently, he said two towns in Mindoro Oriental and Mindoro Occidental have already declared a state of calamity, which means the quick response fund from the Department

of Agriculture (DA) can be activated for rehabilitation of agricultural land and additional farm input.

As for the farmers' daily needs, there will be cash assistance from the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) and the cash-

for-work program by the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE).

He also noted that DA officials already went to Mindoro province to provide ₱5,000 worth of rice assistance and fuel subsidy.

Earlier, the official cited that 17

provinces are affected by the dry condition—10 provinces under a dry spell, and 14 provinces experiencing drought.

Those experiencing drought are: Apayao, Benguet, Cagayan, Cavite, Ifugao, Ilocos Norte, Ilocos Sur, Kalinga, La Union, Mountain Province, Nueva Ecija, Nueva Vizcaya, Palawan, and Pangasinan.

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PAF, DA complete cloud seeding ops to mitigate El Niño effects

By REX ANTHONY NAVAL

THE Philippine Air Force (PAF) on Wednesday announced that its 900th Air Force Weather Group (AFWG) partnered with the Department of Agriculture (DA) and the Bureau of Soils and Water Management for cloud seeding missions to mitigate the harsh effects of El Niño.

PAF Spokesperson Col. Ma. Consuelo Castillo said cloud seeding operations officially started in February 25.

"Utilizing a civilian Piper Navajo aircraft, personnel of the 900th AFWG successfully dispersed over 800 kilograms of sodium chloride onto cloud formations across

Southern Cagayan and Northern Isabela on February 25 and 26," Castillo said in a statement.

She said cloud seeding operations are being conducted to supplement crop water needs during periods of low rainfall.

Department of National Defense (DND) Secretary Gilberto C. Teodoro Jr. earlier ordered all military camp commanders to conserve water.

"In line with President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr.'s directive for government intervention, Secretary Teodoro said 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," the DND said.

Teodoro's water conservation order to the military was handed down during the second meeting of Task Force El Niño held February 12 at the Office of Civil Defense (OCD) in Camp Aguinaldo, Quezon City.

There, the DND chief emphasized the need to support and practice daily the government's water conservation policy as the country starts to experience the effects of El Niño.

"Secretary Teodoro emphasized the need to repair facilities, such as leaking pipes to prevent additional water wastage. He also added that all military personnel and their dependents living inside military

camps 'must do their part in the whole-of-government approach to mitigate the El Niño effects,' the DND said.

Last December, the Department of Science and Technology (DOST) projected that 65 out of the country's 82 provinces will suffer drought due to El Niño.

The DOST said the number of drought-affected provinces could reach 65 by May. The agency noted that majority of global climate models suggest that El Niño will likely persist until the second quarter of 2024.

The DA, however, made an assurance that the country has ample supply of rice and other basic food commodities.



Chinese warships worrisome – Marcos

BY CATHERINE S. VALENTE, BERNADETTE E. TAMAYO

PRESIDENT Ferdinand Marcos Jr. on Wednesday said the reported presence of Chinese warships and a helicopter near Bajo de Masinloc (Scarborough Shoal) was "worrisome," but the Philippines would continue to defend its maritime territory.

In a chance interview before departing for Australia, Marcos said the situation in the disputed waters had changed because of the presence of China's navy.

"It's worrisome because there are two elements to that. One, before it was just the Chinese coast guard moving in our area; now, it is the navy with the fishing boats. So the situation is changing,"

Marcos told reporters.

"We just watch, of course, what everybody is doing, but really for us... we [will] just defend our maritime territory. We continue to support all of our fishermen... who make their living from these fishing grounds," he added.

The Philippines has fishing rights in the Bajo de Masinloc or

➤ **WorrisomeA8**

■ WORRISOME FROM A1

Chinese warships worrisome

Scarborough Shoal, an international court in The Hague ruled in 2016, but China continues to ignore that decision.

Meanwhile, the Philippine ambassador to the United States said the "real flashpoint" in the region could be in the West Philippine Sea (WPS) and not in the Taiwan Strait, adding that skirmishes in the area sometimes made the President lose sleep.

"You know, whenever there's something that happens [in the West Philippine Sea], it concerns him," said Ambassador Jose Manuel Romualdez. "And he said it publicly that it keeps him awake at night whenever there's any skirmish that happens in the West Philippine Sea."

Romualdez made the remark on Wednesday during the general meeting of the Consular Corps of the Philippines.

"My opinion is, the real problem and the real flashpoint is in the West Philippine Sea," Romualdez said.

In an interview later. He said China's treatment toward Taiwan "is more calculated."

He said Beijing would not make a move on Taiwan because the Taiwanese are ready to protect themselves.

"In my view — and I agree with many assessments made by people in Washington — [Chinese President] Xi [Jinping] is not going to make that move unless he is absolutely sure that he will not [meet] the resistance that [Russian] President [Vladimir] Putin is now facing in Ukraine," Romualdez said.

He said just one major accident as a result of the skirmishes in the WPS could lead the country to invoke the Mutual Defense Treaty with the United States, then "all hell breaks loose."

"We want to avoid having to find a situation where we will have to call each other saying, 'We want to invoke the Mutual Defense Treaty. You have to defend us because the Chinese are already on our shores,'

he said.

On Tuesday, Commo. Jay Tarriela, Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) spokesman for the West Philippine Sea, said during the last mission of the **Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR)** monitored the presence of three People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy warships near Bajo de Masinloc.

However, Tarriela said the warships maintained a distance of more than 20 nautical miles from Bajo de Masinloc.

"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."

The BFAR vessel also spotted a Chinese Navy helicopter that flew over the waters of Bajo de Masinloc.

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



Biotech corn marks 20 years in PH

BY LEANDER C. DOMINGO

A FORUM organized by the Southeast Asian Regional for Graduate Study and Research in Agriculture (Searca) commemorated 20 years of the commercial planting of biotech or Bt corn in the Philippines.

The forum was titled "20 Years and Onward: Advancing the Future of Philippine Yellow Corn" and held earlier this month with the cooperation of Bayer Crop Science in the Philippines.

Attended by individuals from the academe, industry, business chambers, farmer groups, non-government organizations and the government, the forum looked back at key enabling policies as well as the situation of yellow corn across the country's value chain for the crop.

The forum was co-organized with the Philippine Seed Industry Association (PSIA), University of the Philippines Los Baños (UPLB) Weed Science Society of the Philippines, Biotechnology Coalition of the Philippines (BCP), National Corn Program (NCP), CropLife Asia and CropLife Philippines (CLP), Philippine Feed Millers Association (PFMA) and Philip-

pines Partnership for Sustainable Agriculture.

Searca Director Glenn Gregorio said the forum assessed the sector's opportunities, challenges and competitiveness.

"Also discussed were key actions and recommendations on how to ensure its continuous advancement amid the pressures arising from people's consumption, supply chain issues and the natural environment," he said.

During the event, Glenn Paniganban, the director of the Department of Agriculture-Bureau of Plant Industry, said the Philippines was among the first countries in Asia to adopt Bt corn, a genetically modified (GM) crop and implement a regulatory framework on genetically engineered crops.

In his examination of the 20-year journey of yellow corn, Abraham Manalo, BCP executive director, underlined the crucial role of

policy in promoting the technology and supporting the growth of Bt corn adoption over the years.

"Regulations should be stringent, science-based, but streamlined. There should also be other policies to back up these regulatory issuances to allow a policy environment that is evidence-based. Yellow corn stands on solid ground today because of our regulations. But our continued battle cry is for safe and responsible use of modern biotechnology," Manalo said.

According to Candido Damo of the NCP under the Department of Agriculture, about 90 percent of yellow corn in the country is GM, and that Bt corn has significantly increased its yield over the years as farmers continued adopting the biotech crop despite a decrease in planting hectareage.

Role of government and private sector

Damo said the government's interventions to boost the industry include capacity-building, providing large-scale postharvest machinery and facilities to farmer organizations, providing quality seeds and fertilizers, strengthening linkages with the livestock and

poultry racers, and connecting farmers directly to the market.

To ensure the quality and integrity of GM corn seeds, Ramon Abadilla, CLP executive director, said it is the private sector's role "to practice strong stewardship, especially in farming, insect-resistance management, educating farmers on the proper use of their products and gathering feedback from the market."

"Expanding the yellow corn value chain is an opportunity for farmers to have higher-value crops and convert corn not only for feeds but also for industry inputs such as ethanol, hydrocarbon and bioplastics," Abadilla added.

Identifying the challenges and opportunities affecting the industry, Gabriel Romero, PSIA executive director, said the stewardship of seeds is critical in maintaining the integrity of their environmental traits and allowing farmers to continually access high-quality planting materials.

"Seed companies and technology developers should include farmers in the consultation process to ensure they deliver what the farmers need," Romero said.

To address the concerns on crop protection use, Analiza Ramirez of the UPLB Institute of Weed

Science, Entomology and Plant Pathology said "stewardship should be a whole-of-nation approach."

"Farmers are accountable for their crops; the government provides funding and policy support for the technology; and the academe and the industry partner to produce science-based innovations," Ramirez said.

Emphasizing the importance of fostering partnerships among different stakeholders, PFMA President Edwin Mapanao noted the need to strengthen the distribution network through consolidators and clustering so farmers can be easily linked to the industry.

Ilinas Ivan Lao, Bayer Crop Science country commercial lead, explained that the future of corn farming is regenerative agriculture aimed at increasing productivity and income while renewing the environment.

Lao said innovations such as Bayer's Preceon Smart Corn System, which includes short-stature corn and digital farm insights, and modern breeding techniques will enable this future.

Meanwhile, a farmer-leader and biotech advocate from Cebu, Adriel Dave "Farmer AD" Alvarez, noted that an effective agriculture development agenda of mid- and

upper-strata farmers should also be prioritized along with small-holder farmers.

Alvarez said there is a need for increased support for extension workers who will assist and train farmers and consolidators not only in farming and production but also more on agribusiness, market and linkages development.

"This is something we need in the Philippine agriculture ecosystem. A vibrant yellow corn industry will happen if all stakeholders are getting their economic bottom line. Technology is maximized if farmers can access it and make profits out of their operations. Small-scale farming alone cannot do that," he added.

Reaffirming Searca's support for the industry, Gregorio said the center remains steadfastly committed to convening knowledge creation and utilization activities that guide the development of policy recommendations to sustain and advance the gains of agricultural innovations like Bt corn in an increasingly complex environment.

"The next chapter for the Philippine corn industry will need collective action, a multistakeholder approach to expand what we have experienced in the past 20 years," he said.



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BFAR, Cagayan fisheries office give assistance to Calayan fisherfolk

IN a move to implement various programs under the **Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR)** in Region 2 (Cagayan Valley), the BFAR Regional Fisheries Training and Fisherfolk Coordination Division, along with the Cagayan Provincial Fishery Office, conducted a three-day validation and assessment activities in the third week of February.

BFAR Region 2 Director Angel Encarnacion said the event included the fuel discount program, registration of fisherfolk and fishing boats, Typhoon "Egay" fishing boats rehabilitation program, aquaculture technology demonstration (pond-based culture of freshwater species) and development of a salt industry.

Encarnacion said that the fuel discount program aims to assist fisherfolk "to ease their burden with the price hike of petroleum

products such as gasoline and diesel."

He said that petroleum products are the main operational cost in fishing activities and P3,000 in cash assistance was given to each registered fisherfolk with a registered boat.

The BFAR said the event also included the conduct of validation and evaluation on-site for the recipients of the aquaculture technology demonstration, wherein proposed sites for the final validation were submitted to the municipal agriculturist officer for finalization and approval of the bureau's regional director.

Meanwhile, the development of the salt industry in Region 2 has started, aiming to revitalize production of the commodity in the region.

"The bureau's first step in realizing this goal is the profiling of

the salt industry in the region," Encarnacion said, adding that the salt industry team is set to conduct a region-wide assessment of existing local producers.

He said this includes the old producers who had stopped engaging in salt production on Calayan Island as the first site.

According to BFAR, the result of the profiling will provide a database on the number of local salt producers in each province.

"This will also determine the needed inputs for the establishment of salt-making or salt production projects geared toward increasing total regional salt production," Encarnacion said.

"With these proactive activities, the bureau's commitment is to work for sustainable fisheries development and empower fisherfolk toward productivity and efficiency," he added.

LEANDER C. DOMINGO



■ Photo shows some of the fisherfolk from Calayan Island who were given assistance by the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources. CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

REMATE

ANG DIARYO NG MASA

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P180M mais napinsala ng El Niño sa Region 2

NABABAHALA ang mga magsasaka dahil umaabot na sa P180 milyon ang pinsalang dulot ng El Niño phenomenon sa Region 2 provinces.

Ayon kay Paul Vincent Balao, El Niño Action Officer ng Department of Agriculture sa Region 2, pinakaapektado ang mga pananim na mais dahil rain fed ang mga ito.

Base sa datos, ang partially damaged na mga pananim ay nasa 8,737 hectares habang ang totally damaged ay nasa 276

hectares.

Ang mga partially damaged ay nasa 50% pataas pa rin ang maaani habang sa totally damaged ay nasa 10% o wala nang maaani dahil natuyot na ang mga pananim.

Posibleng madagdagan pa ang ektaryang mapipinsala dahil sa patuloy na nakararanas ng tagtuyot ang rehiyon.

Nagsasagawa na ng cloud seeding operation ang nasabing ahensya na pinondohan pa noong nakaraang taon bilang

paghahanda sa El Niño.

Samantala, sa forecast ng PAGASA, ang northern portion ng Isabela at southern portion ng Cagayan na nasa 240,000 hectares ang direktang maaapektuhan ng tagtuyot.

Ipinagmalaki ng nasabing ahensya na kahit may El Niño o anomang kalamidad ay tiwala pa rin silang nasa 1 million metric tons ang produksyon ng mais ngayong cropping season dito sa Lambak ng Cagayan.

REY VELASCO

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PAF at DA, nag-cloud seeding sa mga pananim vs El Niño

Nagsagawa na ng cloud-seeding operations ang Philippine Air Force, Department of Agriculture Region 2 at Bureau of Soils and Water Management upang matulungan ang mga magsasaka laban sa El Niño.

Nabatid na Pebrero 25 nang simulan ng mga natur-

ang government agency ang cloud seeding kasabay ng tumitinding init ng panahon.

Gamit ang civilian Piper Navajo aircraft, nagpakalat ng 800 kilo ng sodium chloride sa kaulapan ng Southern Cagayan at Northern Isabela ang mga kawani ng 900th Air Force Weather

Group (AFWG) nitong Linggo at Lunes.

Layon ng cloud seeding operations na makalikha ng ulan para tulungan ang mga magsasaka sa gitna ng nararanasang tagtuyot bunsod nang umiiral ng El Niño phenomenon sa bansa.

Dagdag ng PAF at DA,

hindi dapat na masayang ang mga pananim ng mga magsasaka kaya gagawa sila ng paraan upang magtuluy-tuloy ito.

Malaking halaga at pagod ang iginugol ng mga magsasaka sa pagtatamin kaya dapat lamang na isaliba. (Doris Franche-Borja)



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Fisheries, Bulacan airport projects seen poised to resume after lifting of freeze on reclamation

THE Philippine Reclamation Authority (PRA) said three reclamation projects have a good chance of resuming this year when the suspension on reclamation projects is lifted, including fisheries-related projects in Bacoor and Navotas and a logistics project that forms a part of the Bulacan airport development.

"The Bacoor project is only 90 hectares, but it will have a big impact since it addresses food security... I think (it may resume) within this quarter or

next quarter," PRA Assistant General Manager for Reclamation and Regulation Joseph John M. Literal said in a briefing.

Mr. Literal is referring to the Bacoor Inner Island Project. The second is the 15.62-hectare reclamation works at the Navotas Fish Port Complex, while the third is the 650-hectare air support facility for Bulacan Airport.

The PRA said it's currently expecting the review of the Bacoor project, a joint venture with Frabelle Fishing Corp., to

be completed by the Department of Environment and Natural Resources within the quarter.

Asked about the status of the Navotas project, he said the review of the engineering design and pre-construction documents is expected next.

For the Bulacan airport project, he said the site is now being prepared as a logistics hub for the airport rather than the mixed-use development originally planned.

Mr. Literal also added that the 148-hectare Manila Solar

City project has a Notice to Proceed, also making it well-placed to receive approval to resume.

He said Manila Solar City's pre-construction documents are currently under review by the PRA, while the proponent is working on meeting the requirements of the Environmental Compliance Certificate.

At the briefing, the PRA reported a 2023 unaudited asset value of P150 billion, buoyed by improved appraisals. — **Aubrey Rose A. Inosante**



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PHILIPPINE STAR/EDD GUMBAN

Growth in agri goods prices slows down to 9.6% in 2023

PRICES of agricultural goods rose 9.6% in 2023, led by the crops and fisheries sub-indices, the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) said.

In its agriculture producer price index (PPI) report, the PSA said that the 2023 reading represented a slowdown from the 17.9% rise in 2022.

During the fourth quarter, the farm PPI fell 3.1% from a year earlier, after having grown 29.7% in 2022 and 7.9% during the third quarter.

Northern Mindanao posted the strongest rise in agriculture PPI for 2023 at 16.8%, while Zamboanga Peninsula lagged at 0.3%.

The Bicol Region posted a 3.4% decline in farm prices during the year.

The crops sub-index rose 13.5% in 2023, slowing from the 20.8% reported a year earlier.

Cereals and root crop prices rose 10.8% and 17.4%, respectively. Fruits posted price growth of 4%, while commercial crop prices rose 15.8%.

Condiments posted 68.9% price growth in 2023, reversing the 20.6% decline a year earlier.

The PSA said that fisheries prices rose 0.9%, slowing from the 8.6% posted the prior year, as prices fell starting in the second quarter.

Price growth in aquaculture products was 4%, while commercial fisheries increased 2.3%. Prices of marine municipal fisheries products rose 0.3%.

Prices of inland municipal fisheries products fell 19%.

Meanwhile, livestock and poultry prices fell 1.2% in 2023. —

Adrian H. Halili



Agri producer prices post steepest drop in 4 yrs

By CAI U. ORDINARIO
X@caiordinario

THE Producers Price Index (PPI) for the agriculture sector in the fourth quarter of 2023 fell at its steepest rate in 4 years, according to data from the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA).

The PSA said the PPI for agriculture contracted 3.1 percent in the fourth quarter of 2023. This is the steepest decline in the PPI for agriculture since the fourth quarter of 2019, when it dropped by 6.8 percent.

However, the country's average annual growth rate for the PPI for agriculture in 2023 was in the positive territory as it expanded

by 9.6 percent.

"PPI measures the average change over time of prices received by farmers, livestock and poultry raisers and fisherfolks for the sale of their agricultural products relative to a base year," PSA said.

The data also showed the quarter-on-quarter growth rate of PPI for agriculture dropped further to 2.8 percent in the fourth quarter



PHOTO FROM WWW.DA.GOV.PH

of 2023 from a 0.1-percent decline in the third quarter 2023.

At the country level, the annual growth in the PPI for crops posted a 4-percent decline in the fourth quarter of 2023 from a

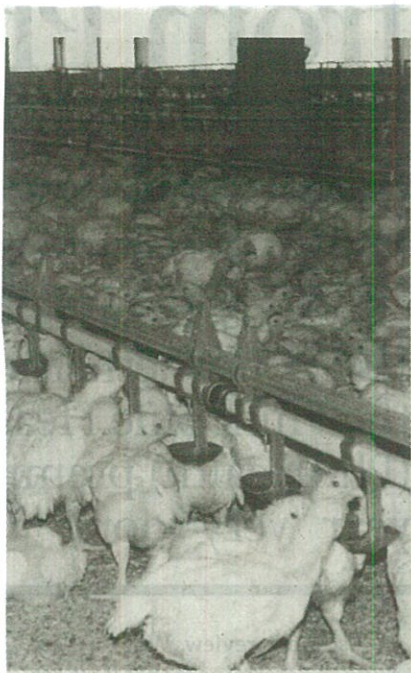
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12.3-percent annual increase recorded in the previous quarter.

In the same period of the previous year, its annual growth was recorded at 38.2 percent.

The PSA said four out of eight

commodity groups recorded annual contractions during the fourth quarter of 2023.

These commodity groups are beans and legumes which contracted 16.7 percent; fruit vegetables, 25.6 percent; leafy vegetables, 25.8 percent; and commercial crops, 15.4 percent.

Meanwhile, faster annual growths were registered in the PPI of cereals at 15.2 percent in the fourth quarter of 2023 from 12.5 percent in the third quarter of 2023.

The PSA said the root crops at 20.3 percent in the fourth quarter of 2023 from 15.3 percent in the third quarter of 2023.

The PPI of fruits posted an 8-percent increase in the fourth quarter of 2023 from a 3.4-percent annual decline in the previous quarter.

The data also showed the annual increment in the PPI of condiments slowed to 4 percent from

142.7 percent. Quarter-on-quarter, the PPI for crops dropped to 4.4 percent in the fourth quarter of 2023 from 0.7 percent increment in the third quarter of 2023.

In terms of livestock, the PPI posted a 2.5 percent annual increment in the fourth quarter of 2023 from an annual decline of 2.2 percent recorded in the previous quarter.

In the fourth quarter of 2022, its annual growth was registered at 9.3 percent.

The faster annual growth in the PPI for livestock and poultry during the fourth quarter of 2023 was due to the higher annual growth observed in the PPI for livestock at 6.4 percent in the fourth quarter of 2023 from an annual decline of 3.9 percent in the previous quarter.

Meanwhile, the PPI for poultry registered a 4.6 percent year-on-year decline from 1.1 percent increase in the previous quarter.

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Ifad member-states approve plan to reduce hunger, poverty in rural areas

THE Philippines and 177 other member-states of the International Fund for Agriculture (Ifad) recently adopted an ambitious agenda to improve the production, incomes, food security and resilience of more than 100 million rural people over three years.

During the second day of Ifad's annual Governing Council Meeting, government leaders adopted a report and resolution for the 13th replenishment of IFAD's resources.

Ifad said 68 member-states have committed an unprecedented \$1.34 billion in support of a 3-year program of work (2025-2027).

Pledges already exceed the total \$1.28 billion pledged for the 12th replenishment of Ifad (2022-2024). In the coming months, Ifad expects more pledges as it works to mobilize \$2 billion in new funding to implement a \$10-billion program of work.

"Your investments will create jobs and

opportunities and increase resilience. IFAD is an excellent and very effective vehicle against food insecurity, climate change and biodiversity loss," said Alvaro Lario, president of IFAD.

"They are fundamental investments in creating shared prosperity and resilience in the world's most vulnerable communities."

Lario encouraged member-states who have not yet pledged to do so in the coming months. "The conversation will continue. The momentum is there. This \$1.34 billion is record breaking but not enough to achieve the target we have."

Among the 68 member-states that have made pledges in the current replenishment cycle, 45 made their highest pledge ever and 14 of those pledges have increased their commitment by more than 50 percent since the last pledging cycle.

To support small-scale farmers and

their efforts to build resilience in the face of growing challenges, the Ifad13 report and resolution adopted by Member States set three main priorities for the fund: Ifad will increase its focus on fragile contexts, scale-up investments in biodiversity and climate resilience for small-scale farmers, and further leverage engagement with the private sector.

Priorities have been determined based on a year-long consultation process with its Member States and stakeholders and careful analysis of today's multiples global crisis.

About 3.1 billion people, nearly half of the global population, live in the rural areas of developing countries. These areas are home to over 80 per cent of the world's extreme poor.

Ifad noted that violent conflict has spiked dramatically in several regions. By 2030, almost 60 percent of the world's poor will live in countries classified as fragile or affected by conflicts.

"Climate change and biodiversity extinction are accelerating. As global temperatures continue to rise, leading to worse living conditions for millions of people worldwide, the poorest are the most vulnerable and will be the most severely impacted. Today close to 700 million people live in extreme poverty."

Ifad said official development assistance and developing countries' financing will not suffice to close the finance gap for climate adaptation, to end hunger and make food systems more sustainable, resilient and equitable.

"Engagement and financing from private sector stakeholders ranging from global investors to local small and medium enterprises will be necessary. Estimates find that between \$33 and \$50 billion in additional finance per year until 2030 will be needed to fight hunger globally."

The Manila Times®

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Tanudan farmer tops 2024 Kalinga coffee contest

TABUK, Kalinga: The cup of coffee brewed from the robusta beans of farmer Pablo Dao-wan was the winner in the 2024 Kalinga Coffee Quality Competition.

Sourced from Barangay Lay-asan in Tanudan, the winning coffee garnered a cupping score of 82 with cupping notes of dried berries, mangosteen, honey, tamarind, orange, pineapple and citrus.

Bagging second place is Crispin Gayagay, also from Tanudan, whose coffee beans got a cupping score of 80.1 with flavor notes of caramel, nutty, cinnamon, tangerine, citrus, prunes and tea-like.

In third place is Jonathan Itong, whose robusta from Lubuagan, garnered a cupping score of 80 with cupping notes of roasted peanuts, dark

chocolate and caramel.

Meanwhile, the lone entry in the arabica category submitted by Lioba Busway from Upper Uma, Lubuagan, received special citation as it garnered a cupping score of 83.5. The coffee had cupping notes of tangerine, tamarind, lemon, passion fruit, tea-rose and honey.

Busway's coffee beans sold at a whopping P700 per kilogram (kg) at the post-competition auction. Dao-wan's Robusta sold at P230 per kg, much higher than the usual farmgate price of P150 to 160 per kg, according to Jeffrey Pasikan, Department of Trade and Industry-Kalinga coffee program focal person.

First launched last year, the Kalinga

Coffee Quality Competition not only serves as leverage for coffee farmers to earn higher profits, but a platform to recognize those who follow good agricultural practices, thereby helping elevate the quality of Kalinga coffee and contribute to the revival of the industry.

"The ultimate aim is to give due credit and recognition to the Kalinga farmers who endeavor very well to continue the coffee agriculture and adhere to all the government assistances, trainings ng nait-ited," Pasikan said.

The competition, with its strict rule that entries must be of Kalinga origin, also aims to boost production of local varieties, the supply of which is being threatened by the influx of imported

coffee from Vietnam, Pasikan said.

"The idea is to support and protect the authenticity of Kalinga coffee because we all know that the supply of Kalinga coffee is dwindling," he explained.

The 2024 Kalinga Coffee Quality Competition was a collaborative effort of the Kalinga Provincial Coffee Council composed of national line agencies, the private sector, the provincial government and the city and municipal local governments. It was one of the highlights of the 29th Kalinga Founding Anniversary and 5th Bodong Festival.

Pasikan hopes that the 2025 edition will see the participation of all coffee farmers from all the municipalities of Kalinga.

PIA

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■ Photo shows the winners of the 2024 Kalinga Coffee Quality Competition during the awarding ceremony on Feb. 15, 2024. KALINGA PROVINCE PHOTO



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Taiwan envoy open to cooperation with MMSU

TAIWAN Ambassador to the Philippines Wallace Minn-Gan Chow led a delegation visiting the Ilocos Norte-based Mariano Marcos State University (MMSU) on February 22 to explore potential collaborations in agricultural development.

Chow, together with Taipei Economic and Cultural Office (TECO) officials, was warmly welcomed by MMSU President Shirley Agrupis through a courtesy meeting at the MMSU Ferdinand E. Marcos Hall.

The MMSU Strategic Communication Office said the delegation from Taiwan and officials of the university discussed possible partnerships and inspected agricultural production sites and assessed innovations in agriculture products within Ilocos Norte.

Agrupis expressed interest in the collaboration, stating that Batac's vast agricultural lands can be explored, while the university's research-based food products such as black garlic, tomango (tomato and mango) ketchup and kamangeg (mountain potato) can be commercialized.

One of the MMSU agriculture initiatives that the university president presented was the agri-fishery aspect of the Promoting Research and Innovation to Strengthen Transformation of Industries and Enterprises, or Pristine.

Sheila Baquiran, MMSU university accommodation chief, said the TECO officials had the opportunity to visit the MMSU Food Innovation Center, National Bioenergy Research and Innovation Center and the university's vegetation cover in front of the College of Agriculture, Food And Sustainable Development.

Chow also expressed his appreciation and support toward MMSU for future collaborative opportunities in education and agriculture.

LEANDER C. DOMINGO



NCR, 80 probinsya makakaranas ng tagtuyot

Nagbabala kahapon ang Task Force El Niño na maaaring makaranas ng tagtuyot ang nasa 80 probinsya, maging ang mga residente sa National Capital Region (NCR).

Ayon kay Task Force El Niño spokesperson at Presidential Communications Office (PCO) Assistant Secretary Joey Villarama, ang bilang ng mga lalawigan na kasalukuyang apektado ng El Niño ay tumaas na

sa 51 mula sa dating 41 nitong Pebrero 25.

"Tataas pa iyan to 73 and then aabot ng 80 bago bumaba ulit sa 50 plus. So, sinabi natin na ang effects ng strong and mature El Niño ay magpe-persist until May to June, so tingnan natin kung ano po 'yung puwede pang gawin," paliwanag ni Villarama sa Bagong Pilipinas press briefing nitong Miyerkoles, Pebrero 28.

Tiniyak naman ni Villarama na sa ngayon ay sapat ang paghahanda ng mga ahensiya ng gobyerno sa mga posibleng magiging epekto ng El Niño sa suplay ng tubig, pagkain, enerhiya at sa kalusugan.

Batay sa pagtaya, ang Metro Manila at 24 na lalawigan ay maaaring makaranas umano ng tagtuyot sa katapusan ng Marso.

Samantala, nabatid na nasa 6,600 ektarya ng mga lupang pang-agrikultura na rin ang apektado dahil sa El Niño. (Dolly Cabreza)

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Soybeans, corn climb

CANBERRA- Chicago soybean futures rose on Wednesday but remained near their lowest levels since November 2020, as cheap South American supply made US beans less competitive in export markets and speculators bet on further price declines.

Corn futures also inched higher but plentiful supply held prices near their lowest since 2020, while wheat fell as bumper Russian production continued to loom over the market.

The most active soybean contract on the Chicago Board of

Trade (CBOT) was up 0.3 percent at \$11.44 a bushel after dropping as low as \$11.34 on Monday.

Beans are pouring into the market as the harvest progresses in top producer and exporter Brazil, whose crop has not been as badly hit by adverse weather as many analysts feared a few months ago.

"The trend for soybeans is down and it will keep going down," said Rabobank analyst Vitor Pistoia, adding that his bank forecast prices falling to \$11 by the end of the year. **-Reuters**

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India defends agri, fishing subsidies that rich nations want curbed

INDIA arrived at meetings of the World Trade Organization (WTO) defending agricultural and fishing assistance that the most populous nation provides to ensure food security and jobs, setting the stage for a contentious second half of a four-day negotiating forum.

In a statement after a day that included talks on fisheries, India demanded that nations be allowed to provide subsidies for small-scale angling that occurs within areas of the sea that belong to sovereign nations, to help protect the livelihoods of 9 million families that depend on fishing. A separate release argued in favor of relaxing subsidy rules for public procurement of grains at pre-determined prices.

WTO trade ministers gathered this week in Abu Dhabi have been pushing to complete a crackdown on excessive fishing that builds on one reached at their last biennial meeting in 2022. WTO Director-General Ngozi Okonjo-

Iweala has said subsidy limits that ensure fishery sustainability are important to 260 million people who depend on oceans for their livelihoods.

The government in New Delhi called for a focus on limiting state aid for distant-water fishing, where nations catch seafood beyond their own territories—a form of large-scale fishing that's dominated by China, the European Union, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan.

"Any comprehensive agreement on fisheries subsidies should keep in mind the interests and welfare of the fishing community that depends on the marine resources for their livelihood and sustenance," the Indian delegation said in a statement.

As most officials appeared at opening events of WTO's 13th ministerial on Monday, many eagerly anticipated the arrival Tuesday of India's commerce minister Piyush Goyal.

WTO rules require a consensus of all members, meaning a lone holdout among its more

than 160 nations can block an agreement. That's one reason why the Geneva-based institution has just two major multilateral deals including the original fisheries agreement in its nearly 30-year history.

Election year

WHILE a hard-line stance is a tactic India has used in the past to extract concessions on other trade issues, it's still an important bellwether for the week's WTO meeting given demands for the organization to be reformed. India's positions are also important to watch given the country is among a number of big economies where elections are taking place this year.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi enjoys widespread popularity but farmers demanding guaranteed prices for their crops have staged protests in the north Indian states of Punjab and Haryana this month.

While opposing a second agreement on

fishing subsidies, India also has yet to adopt the first agreement reached in 2022. Still short of ratification, the original pact—hailed by the WTO as a major advance for ocean sustainability—prohibits government support for illegal fishing, fishing of depleted stocks and fishing on the unregulated high seas.

Okonjo-Iweala on Monday praised the advance toward ratification, with 70 countries having taken sufficient domestic steps to recognize it. That leaves roughly 40 more for it to reach the two-thirds approval needed to enter force. She said she was "cautiously optimistic" about reaching an agreement on fisheries this week.

In an interview after the fisheries negotiations on Tuesday, Malaysia's Trade Minister Zafrul Aziz said that if nations remain apart on the definitions for subsidies, the next stage of the agreement may not fully close until the next ministerial meeting, which in theory would be in two more years. **Bloomberg News**