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NFA execs dawit sa bagsak-presyong bigas, pinagli-leave ng DA

Pinagbo-voluntary leave ni Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. ang lahat ng mga opisyal ng National Food Authority (NFA) na sangkot sa kontrobersyal na pagbebenta ng buffer stocks ng bigas na umano'y bagsak presyo. Ayon kay Laurel, ito'y habang gumugulong ang imbestigasyon la-

ban sa mga opisyal ng NFA matapos sumingaw ang kontrobersya.

"Of course, we have to presume innocence. We have to be impartial. Until proven guilty, everyone is innocent. But this internal investigation is very important so let's give it time. This internal investigation is just a first step," punto ni Laurel.

NI JOY CANTOS

Sinabi ng kalihim na aaksiyon ang DA base sa resulta ng imbestigasyon sa rice sale na inaasahan niyang matatapos sa lalong madaaling panahon.

Una rito, ang mga NFA officials ay inakusahan sa pagbebenta ng buffer stocks ng bigas ng

NFA na hindi dumaan sa bidding at sa presyong ikinalugi ng gobyerno.

Iginiit naman ng NFA execs na ang rice sale ay sumunod umano sa kinakailangang proseso.

"Whoever is involved here must give the investigating party a chance to do their work properly, without any hindrance. So the best thing is, and

I strongly advise them, to take a leave of absence... at least the heads--the accused and the accuser," ayon pa sa Kalihim.

Anyang pa, sinuman ang mapatunayang may paglabag sa protocols at polisiya ng DA ay patawan ng kaukulang kaparusahan kabilang na ang pagsibak sa mga ito sa serbisyo.



LAUREL WINALIS MGA NFA EXEC

INUTUSAN ni Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. ang mga opisyal ng National Food Authority (NFA) na sangkot sa bentahan ng rice buffer stock sa mga trader na boluntaryong maghain ng leave of absence.

Sinabi ni Laurel na ang pagbakasyon ng mga opisyal ng NFA ay kailangan upang hindi sila makasagabal sa isinasagawang imbestigasyon sa naturang kontrobersya.

"Whoever is involved here must give the investigating party a chance to do their work properly, without any hindrance. So the best thing is, and I strongly advise them, to take a leave of absence... at least the heads—the accused and the accuser," saad ng Agriculture chief sa isang statement.

Bumuo na ng panel si Laurel upang siyasatin na ilang opisyal ng NFA ang nagbenta ng mga bigas na nakaimbak sa warehouse ng ahensiya sa halagang P25 per kilo nang walang bidding matapos na mabili ang mga palay sa magsasaka ng P23 per kilo.

Nagpaliwanag na ang NFA na mandato umano nila ang magbenta ng bigas

sa presyong hindi kataasan.

"The rice we are selling are all sold at the mandated selling price of P25/kg, although aging stocks need to be re-milled before they could be released to the consumers," ayon sa NFA.

Tiniyak naman ni Laurel na magiging patas ang imbestigasyon ng kanyang tanggapan sa rice scam.

"We have to be impartial. Until proven guilty, everyone is innocent," ani Laurel.

"But this internal investigation is very important so let's give it time. This internal investigation is just a first step," dugtong pa niya.

Suportado naman ni Senadora Cynthia Villar, chair ng Senate Committee on Agriculture, Food and Agrarian Reform ang desisyon ni Laurel na pagbakasyunin ang mga sangkot na opisyal.

Ayon kay Villar, dapat ay pagretiruhin na lamang ang mga opisyal at empleyado ng NFA upang mabuwag na ito. Sinikap umano ito ng nakaraang Duterte administration pero kalahati lamang ang naghain ng early retirement.

"Mag-offer na lang tayo ng early retirement," giit ng senadora.

Abante

UNA SA BALITA

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Bakuna sa ASF mabibili na bago matapos taon - DA

Positibo si Department of Agriculture (DA) Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel na available o mabibili na sa bansa ang bakuna laban sa African Swine Fever (ASF) bago magtapos ang taong ito.

Ang ASF na nameste sa hog industry o mga babuyan ay naging problema sa bansa simula pa noong 2019.

Sinabi ni Laurel na ang Vietnamese at American company ay humihingi o naga-apply na sa Food and Drug Administration (FDA) ng accreditation para sa

ASF vaccines.

Samantala isa pang Vietnamese firm at Thai firm ang plano ring mag-apply para maaprubahan ang kanilang mga ASF vaccine ng FDA at maibenta ito sa Pilipinas.

Ang delubiyong idinulot ng ASF sa bansa ay nakapagpapababa sa produksiyon ng lokal na karne ng baboy kung saan sa inventory sa pagtatapos ng taon mula sa dating 12.8 milyong hogs noong 2020 ay bumaba ito sa 9.94 milyong baboy noong 2021.

Samantala sa pag-

tatapos ng Setyembre noong 2023 ang kabuuang inventory ay bumaba sa 9.86 milyon kada ulo ng baboy mula sa dating 10.1 milyon sa kaparehong period noong 2022.

Binigyang diin ng Kalihim na kung may bakuna laban sa ASF ay inaasahang mapapataas ang produksiyon ng baboy at hindi rin malulugi ang kabuhayan ng mga magbababoy. (Joy Cantos)



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'ROTTEN' RICE DEAL PROBE

AGRICULTURE Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. has urged National Food Authority (NFA) officials being investigated over the alleged improper sale of NFA buffer stock rice at a subsidized price to take a voluntary leave of absence (LOA).

In a statement, Laurel said the concerned officials should allow the Department of Agriculture's (DA) investigating panel to review and assess the matter "without hindrance."

"The best thing is, and I strongly advise them, to take a leave of absence... at least the heads, the accused, and the accuser," he said.

Laurel, however, assured that anyone is presumed innocent, considering the exchange



LAUREL

es of allegations within the NFA.

"Until proven guilty, everyone is innocent. But this internal investigation is very important



so let's give it time," he added.

The agricultural chief further said that the probe is just the first step and DA's suc-

ceeding actions would follow once the investigation results are out.

Although Laurel did not set a deadline, his office said it expects a swift and accurate assessment result.

Earlier, NFA Assistant Administrator for Operations Lemuel Pagayunan disclosed to the People's Television Network the alleged selling of 75,000 bags of NFA rice without the conduct of public bidding.

This allegedly involved more than P93.7 million worth of NFA rice, sold to select millers and traders at the price of P25 per kg.

The DA, meanwhile, said NFA executives claim the sale followed procedures and denied any irregularity. **PNA**



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'Imports, SRA made future worse for RHI unit'

By JASPER EMMANUEL ARCALAS

Sugar and ethanol producer Roxas Holdings Inc. (RHI) took a major hit as increased imports and an alleged instruction from the government to stop refining led to the closure of its wholly owned subsidiary.

The listed company on Friday explained the circumstances behind the permanent ceasing of the operations of Central Azucarera Don Pedro Inc. (CADPI) in Batangas.

RHI said the closure of CADPI and termination of all of its employees would "mitigate" the losses being incurred by the group, including manpower and other fixed costs.

RHI has incurred a net loss of P797 million and P938.9 million during the years ended Sept. 30, 2022 and 2021.

As of Sept. 30, 2022, the company said it has a deficit amounting to P3.92 billion.

Furthermore, RHI said "opportunities" to resume CADPI's normal sugar refining operations have been "affected" and/or "limited" by the "increased" importation of refined sugar by the national government in recent years.

RHI also cited its discussions with the Sugar Regulatory Administration (SRA) as a factor in the permanent closure of CADPI.

According to RHI, it was informed by the SRA that CADPI could only resume offering refined sugar to the public once the country's refined sugar stocks have been depleted.

This, RHI pointed out, would take around eight to 12 months, which would mean that CADPI's sugar refinery would not be operating for that entire duration.

The company said eight to 12 months is "significantly" a long period of "non-generation" income by CADPI.

"Thus, maintaining CADPI's sugar refinery business proves to be extremely difficult and no longer viable," RHI said in a disclosure to the Philippine Stock Exchange recently.

RHI said it is now coordinating the divestment of certain assets of CADPI, including idle assets, to pay its obligations.

RHI added that it has not made any definitive agreement yet with prospective buyers of the assets for sale.

SRA Administrator and CEO Pablo Luis Azcona belied RHI's claims that there was an instruction from the SRA not to allow CADPI's sugar refinery to operate.

Azcona pointed out that the SRA even issued CADPI with a refinery permit on Aug. 23, 2023 that is valid until Aug. 31.

"As of today, we have not received any official communication from CADPI about their refinery status, operation, or plan," Azcona told **The STAR**.

According to Azcona, the only request they got from CADPI was to allow it to import raw sugar for its refining operations.



PH has ample rice supply — DA

PH has ample rice supply — DA 1

By JEL SANTOS

The Philippines has a "very healthy stock and inventory" of rice amid the devastation brought about by the El Niño phenomenon that has caused ₱357.4 million in damage, the Department of Agriculture (DA) said on Saturday, March 2.

Assistant Secretary Arnel de Mesa, DA spokesperson, said the Philippines has no problem in terms of rice supply this year.

He noted that the country received 600,000 metric tons (MT) of imported rice this year that complimented the country's rice stock. ▶ 9

"In terms of our stocks of rice, the Bureau of Plant and Industry report for the first two months of the year showed more than 600,000 rice arrived on average, that's about 300,000 metric tons which is at par with our expected 300,000 MT of imported rice per month," he said in a news forum held in Quezon City. Our production last year was 20.06 million MT plus these new imports of ours," he said.

De Mesa said the Philippines's rice harvest will peak in March and April, boosting the country's current supply.

"So, in terms of supply, we have no problem. We have a very healthy stock and inventory for this year," he said.

Based on DA's Feb. 25 bulletin, the damage caused by the El Niño phenomenon has soared to ₱357.4 million, affecting Ilocos Region, Mimaropa (Mindoro, Marinduque, Romblon, and Palawan), Western Visayas, and Zamboanga Peninsula.

De Mesa said Iloilo is the province most affected by the phenomenon, with ₱127 million worth of agricultural damage.

"Coming in second is the province of Oriental Mindoro which recorded ₱56 million losses" he added.

Financial aid for farmers, fishers

To cushion the effects of El Niño, De Mesa said the Agricultural Credit

Policy Council has allotted ₱500 million for affected farmers and fishers.

"Each farmer can get ₱25,000 as an aid. This has no interest at collateral," he said. In addition, the DA spokesperson said the Philippine Crop Insurance Corporation has allocated ₱1.8 billion for the insurance claims of farmers affected by the dry spell.

Farmers in areas devastated by El Niño can get up to ₱21,000 of insurance claims, De Mesa said.

"Aside from these aids, fuel assistance was also distributed at ₱3,000 each. Our Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources has ₱500 million, our regional field offices also have ₱500 million which is available nationwide," he said. "Also included is the distribution of shallow tube wells and solar-powered irrigation systems."

It was recalled that the DA recently announced that hybrid rice seeds have been distributed to non-vulnerable areas in Western Visayas for maximization of production to compensate for the losses.

As such, the agriculture department said it will provide various vegetable seeds in Western Visayas and Ilocos Region.

High-value crops distributed

The agency said high-value crops or HVC—including peanuts, legumes,

and other crops that require less water—are being procured for Region IX and given to farmers who choose to switch to other crops.

Water sources for irrigation in affected areas in Region VI rely on tributaries that are currently drying up due to drought, the DA noted.

According to the DA, a list of El Niño-affected farmers will be endorsed to the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) and Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) for other forms of assistance, including financial support.

The agriculture department is targeting to produce 20 million metric tons (MT) of palay this year.

Despite the dry spell, De Mesa said the government is still bullish to produce 20 million MT this year, banking on government measures to mitigate the impact of El Niño.

The DA is currently implementing "Alternate Wetting and Drying" which uses less water for farming, and "Quick Turn Around" or QTA, which allows immediate rice replanting right after harvest.

The agency said the AWD is a water-saving technique that rice farmers can implement to reduce their water use in irrigated fields.

QTA, meanwhile, is a method in which all rice farmers replant immediately after harvest rather than waiting for the months of the following planting season to begin.

DA posts a bumper yield: 11 undersecretaries



SUNDAY
STORIES

MARLEN V.
RONQUILLO

THE late Fernando Lopez held the vice presidency twice: from 1949 to 1953 and from 1965 to 1972. Breaking tradition, he chose the low-key Cabinet position of secretary of the Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources (DANR) instead of the usually high-profile position of Foreign Affairs chief in each of his terms. But following tradition, he had two undersecretaries.

The DANR existed at a different time—before bloating the bureaucracy became the norm in government. The current generation of students of public administration will be surprised to find the sheer immensity of the DANR's mandate. It had literal dominion over what are now the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Environment and Natural Resources and over two dozen sub-Cabinet agencies now under those departments.

The sheer breadth of the DANR's mandate was in dramatic contrast to its lean and mean leadership. There was a secretary at the top and two undersecretaries to support him. Only a handful of bureaus functioned under the DANR. But the lean and mean organizational structure did not, in any way, impact the effectiveness of the DANR, which took charge of concerns that started from rice production to issuances of so-called timber licensing agreements, known then as logging concessions.

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■ RONQUILLO FROM A1

DA posts a bumper yield: 11 undersecretaries

The DANR also oversaw irrigation services, fisheries, land management, environmental protection, water management, the then-critical sugar industry that exported the commodity to many parts of the world, and many other vital operational and administrative duties.

A Martial Law-era presidential edict split the DANR in 1974 into two separate ministries, as departments were called then: Agriculture and Natural Resources. While the Martial Law government started on an agency-creation binge, the major ministries, at least, tried to follow tradition, which was to have two or three deputy ministers, even for the frontline Cabinet agencies. The longest-serving Agriculture minister during that time, Arturo "Bong" Tanco Jr., had only three deputies: Domingo Panganiban, Orlando Sacay and Manuel Lim Jr. The same is true of his neighbor, Natural Resources Minister Teodoro Q. Pena.

The lean-at-the-top leadership of the major government departments evaporated in the 21st century as the hiring of four or five undersecretaries became the norm. An undersecretary with no definitive function to perform is usually called "Usec for special concerns," whatever that means. It probably meant a general factotum to

whoever is the department secretary.

Even with that hiring binge, what recently took place at the DA remains unprecedented in the annals of public administration. There are now a total of 11 undersecretaries at the DA, the most in its history and in the history of Cabinet staffing. A cursory Google search of the current structure of the DA identified all the offices of the 11 undersecretaries: Operations; Fisheries; Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao; DA Bureaus; Attached Agencies and Corporations; Livestock; Special Concerns; Inspectorate and Enforcement; Finance; Administration; and Policy, Planning and Regulations.

For comparison, I looked at the staffing structure of the most important executive office in the world's biggest economy, the US State Department. The incumbent secretary of state is officially defined as "the first Cabinet official in the order of precedence and the first in the presidential line of succession." Right now, current Secretary of State Anthony Blinken gets support from two deputy secretaries and six undersecretaries with specific portfolios. Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen, the chief steward of a nearly \$27 trillion

economy, has about the same support staff as Mr. Blinken.

Agriculture Secretary Francis Tiu Laurel 3rd has more undersecretaries than Mr. Blinken, who leads a department with a presence across much of the planet and whose everyday major and mundane decisions influence war and peace, famine and plenty, and stability and tumult in many parts of the globe. The DA, too, has a global presence and an embarrassing one: the ever-increasing number of countries from which we import rice to feed our people. Right now, we are even importing rice from war-torn Myanmar and chaotic Pakistan.

The 11 undersecretaries of Mr. Tiu Laurel are an assault on the earlier proclamation of President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. to do "rightsizing," which simply means the creation of a lean and mean bureaucracy and the purging of personnel bloat in government. The moral ground upon which the "rightsizing" move is based has crumbled with Mr. Tiu Laurel's appointment of those 11. How can the Marcos administration justify the firing of government casual workers, whose economic lifeline is the starvation they get from being contractual employees, in the context of Mr. Tiu Laurel's 11 undersecretaries

and eight assistant secretaries?

Each of these 19 deputies receives above-average pay. They have service cars and drivers, all paid for by government. These officials also have assistants, and top support officers also get service cars and drivers.

The bloat carries costs. What if the substantial money paid to sustain the DA's bloated top management were devoted to capital expenditures and funding new programs instead?

The most relevant question, one that begs for a real answer, is this: Why does Tiu Laurel need 11 undersecretaries and eight assistant secretaries? In the new organization of the DA, even the "spokesman" now enjoys the rank of undersecretary. During the time of Bong Tanco at the DA, there was no position for "spokesman," and the one who did the yeoman's job at the press office was the late Ato Faustino, whose salary was just three notches above a clerk and who was not even a division chief.

Probably, this all boils down to the appointment of a billionaire to head the DA. What he wanted, he got, and the DA has set a record on bureaucratic bloat as a result.

In a previous column, I wrote that appointing billionaires to government posts was a "bad idea." I am now changing that. It is a terrible idea.

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The choice between brine and wetlands



AN aerial photo of a 1,000-hectare abandoned, underutilized, and underdeveloped fishpond in Zamboanga City turned over by the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources to the Department of Environment and Natural Resources. International ocean conservation advocacy nongovernment organization Oceana is calling for the immediate reversion of such fishponds to mangrove forests. PHOTO COURTESY OF DIUVS DE JESUS/OCEANA PHILIPPINES



By JONATHAN L. MAYUGA

AS the Philippines struggles to revive its moribund salt industry, experts have warned against increasing the areas dedicated to the production of the so-called white gold, citing its adverse environmental impacts.

On Wednesday, environmental group Wetlands International Philippines warned against the proposal to convert abandoned, underdeveloped and underutilized (AUU) fishponds into salt farms.

The aggressive promotion of salt farming is emerging as the latest threat to the already dwindling mangrove forest cover and wetland ecosystems in the Philippines.

Wetlands, according to the Biodiversity Management Bureau (BMB), are important habitats and staging grounds of migratory shorebirds or water birds, and their destruction weakens global conservation efforts for these endangered species.

Dwindling mangrove forest

IN its Philippine Forestry Statistics 2020, the Forest Management Bureau (FMB) said the country's mangrove forest cover is down to just 300,411 hectares, from as much as 500,000 hectares in the 1920s, mainly due to conversion to aquaculture areas and deforestation.

Mangroves are often harvested for various uses, for construc-



"We are already in a race against climate change. If we lose any more mangroves, the more vulnerable our country will be to coastal flooding, erosion and storm surges."—Dr. Annadel Cabanban, Country Manager of Wetlands International Philippines [FACEBOOK.COM/WETLANDSINTERNATIONALPH](https://www.facebook.com/WETLANDSINTERNATIONALPH)

tion material purposes, for nipa and wood for fuel. Charcoal making has also been identified as a major cause of deforestation.

According to the 1990 Forestry Statistics Report of the DENR-FMB, there are 75,000 hectares of fishponds in the Philippines. Many fishponds in the Philippines, however, are now classified as AAUs.



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IN Barangay Santa Isabel, Kawit, Cavite, a salt farmer diligently harvests dried salt from the remaining salt beds, highlighting the challenges faced by the Philippines' stagnant salt industry. NONIE REYES

Reviving salt industry

IN May last year, the House of Representatives' agriculture and food panel approved a bill aiming to arrest the declining local salt production industry by boosting production and mandating stronger government and financial support for salt farmers.

House Bill 1976 or the Philippine Salt Industry Development Act, aims to draw up a government strategy that will upscale local salt production to achieve salt self-sufficiency and shield the country from the global supply chain vulnerabilities.

The measure also seeks to pro-

vide funding, training, technical support, trade and export assistance to salt farmers and producers to achieve salt production targets and decrease reliance on imports.

However, environmentalists said converting more areas to fishponds is "a bad idea," considering it might lead to the conversion of more areas into salt farms.

From fishponds to salt farms?

AUU fishponds that used to be thriving mangrove areas are now being eyed for conversion into salt farms.

Environmental advocate Jimely Flores, a fisheries and ma-

rine scientist, highlights concerns regarding salt farming on ponds, emphasizing its adverse effects on biodiversity. Flores warns that this practice is susceptible to the accumulation of nano and microplastics, along with other harmful contaminants.

Converting AUU fishponds into salt farms, she said, is not a good option, adding that abandoned fishponds can economically be best used for extensive aquaculture of native species or just be reverted into mangrove areas.

She said there are best practices in small-scale salt farming, which is done on raised bamboos



or raised tiled platforms.

"Bamboo is less capital-intensive and does not need a fixed space. But it is not on a commercial scale," she said. She cited Iloilo where salt farmers use bamboo for salt making.

In northern Philippines areas like Ilocos, Flores said the practice is cooking seawater collected from the sea. But this, she said, is energy intensive but with renewable energy, it might be feasible although they combined it with the mined salt from Australia.

Revert fishponds to mangrove

MEANWHILE, instead of entertaining the idea of converting these idle fishponds into salt farms, the group called on the government to rehabilitate the country's coastal and marine ecosystem by fast-tracking the reversion of these fishponds back to mangroves to enhance the country's natural defense against tsunamis, storm surges and sea-level rise, and boost the replenishment of the country's fish stock, Wetlands International said.

Specifically, Wetlands International urged the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) to revoke and transfer all fishpond lease agreements for AUU ponds back to the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR). This action aims to facilitate mangrove reforestation efforts under the purview of the DENR.

DENR, DA-BFAR mandate

"THE Department of Environment and Natural Resources originally had jurisdiction over many of the

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mangrove areas that were lent to the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources under the Department of Agriculture (DA-BFAR) for aquaculture production. However, many of those fishponds have been idle or largely underutilized for over five years," Dr. Annadel Cabanban, Country Manager of Wetlands International Philippines, said in a statement.

Cabanban said under the Philippine Fisheries Code, as amended, BFAR is required to return the lease agreements for aquaculture areas of unutilized fishponds back to the DENR so that the areas can be reverted to their original mangrove state or functions, she added.

Section 49 of Republic Act No. 8550 mandates the DENR, in coordination with the Department of Agriculture, local government units, other concerned agencies, and Fisheries and Aquatic Resources Management Councils, to identify AUU fishponds covered by Foreshore Lease Agreements to be reverted to their original mangrove state or functions.

Meanwhile, Section 99 of RA 10654 likewise prohibits any person from converting mangroves into fishponds or for any other purpose.

Climate change

"WE are already in a race against climate change. If we lose any more mangroves, the more vulnerable our country will be to coastal flooding, erosion and storm surges," said Cabanban.

Cabanban said the new proposal of the DA-BFAR to use AUU ponds as salt farms is a new threat to mangroves.

"Mangroves need brackish water and can hardly survive or grow in conditions too high in salinity. So salt farming and mangrove survival are unlikely to coexist," she explained.

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Costly and tedious proposal

ACCORDING to Cabanban, converting salt farms back to mangrove forests will be tedious and costly.

"Some studies say that mangrove restoration can still happen in former saltbed areas, but it is costly and tedious," she said.

Moreover, she said it would only allow species that can tolerate high salinity. It will not be reverted to a multispecies mangrove area.

"We thus urge the DA-BFAR to thoroughly reconsider and revise its draft FAO 197-2 as it may exacerbate the further degradation of mangroves," Cabanban said.

According to Cabanban, excessive water salinity can stunt the mangroves' growth, reduce biomass, and impair photosynthesis. It can also interfere with the way the mangroves' roots absorb water and nutrition from the ground, which makes it difficult for the mangroves to survive.

A better alternative

INSTEAD of using the AUU fishponds for salt farming, Wetlands International Philippines recommends implementing the Associated Mangrove Aquaculture (AMA) approach as a mangrove-friendly aquaculture strategy.

"The Associated Mangrove Aquaculture is both mangrove-friendly and socioeconomically viable. It adapts the restoration of mangroves along waterways and a win-win situation for sustainable use," said Cabanban.

AMA restores mangrove greenbelts in the estuary along inland waterways and protects adjoining fishponds. It uses mangroves' ability to enhance biodiversity in an area to increase aquaculture production and is a more sustainable alternative to the silvofishery systems, which are being practiced by some fish

farms in the Philippines.

Wetlands International Philippines said it is working to pilot the AMA approach in the Philippines as a means of reconciling the need to restore mangroves and ensure ample fisheries supply.

Blue carbon projects

ANOTHER opportunity the Philippine government should consider is developing robust, high-quality blue carbon projects following the Ecological Mangrove Restoration guidelines, suggested Cabanban, adding that a ratio of 4:1, mangrove area to fishpond, along the coastline is one aquaculture practice in a blue carbon project or economy.

"This presents a timely opportunity to secure sustainable financing, including access to carbon markets, that conserves critical ecosystems while enhancing livelihoods and resilience. Policy reforms, institutional coordination, and local governance support are vital for project success," said Cabanban.

"Mangrove forest rehabilitation in fishponds can be a strategy for increased blue carbon investments. So we recommend the DENR, DA-BFAR, other related agencies, and our policy makers to come up with the policy and implementing rules and regulations for increased blue carbon investments in the Philippines," Cabanban said.

She suggested encouraging corporate social responsibility programs and public-private partnerships focused on mangrove and seagrass rehabilitation, ecotourism, and blue carbon ventures.

"We are willing to work with all involved agencies, groups and communities for solutions that would ensure both food security and mangrove conservation and rehabilitation," Cabanban assured.



P500M ayuda ikinasa sa mga sapol ng El Niño

Nakahanda ang pamahalaan na magbigay ng credit at insurance assistant sa mga magsasaka at mangingisdang apektado ng tagtuyot sanhi ng El Niño phenomenon sa bansa.

Inihayag ito ni Department of Agriculture (DA) Assistant Secretary Arnel de Mesa sa isang news forum sa Quezon City nitong Sabado, Marso 2.

"Ang gobyerno natin ay naglaan na ng P500 million na credit assistance, this is P25,000 per affected farmer and fisher and then 'yong ating insurance claims about P1.8 billion maximum of P20,000 ang puwedeng ipamahagi," ayon kay De Mesa.

Maliban dito, sinabi ni De Mesa na sinusubaybayan din ng DA ang pamamahagi ng P5,000 cash ayuda sa mga

magsasaka ng palay at P3,000 fuel subsidy sa parehong mga magsasaka at mangingisda na ibinigay sa ilalim ng 2024 national budget.

Sa pinakahuling datos ng DA noong Pebrero 25, tinatayang nasa P357.4 milyon na ang pinsala sa agrikultura ng El Niño.

Nakita ang mga nasirang pananim sa mga sakahan sa Ilocos, MIMAROPA, Western Visayas at Zamboanga Peninsula.

May kabuuang 7,668 magsasaka na ang naapektuhan ng El Niño habang nasa 6,523 ektarya ng mga lupang sakahan ang sapol ng dry spell.

Kabilang sa mga napinsala ay mga palay, mais at iba pang mga pananim. (Riz Dominguez)

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Marcos eyes Basilan as food, fisheries production center

President Marcos wants to transform Basilan – a province once wracked by violence and terrorism – into a food and fisheries center of the country.

"Basilan's new role is now the war against hunger. You have a land area twice the size of Singapore, blessed with a rich

soil, above all more or less typhoon-free, which makes you an ideal bulwark in our fight for food security," Marcos said during a peace offering ceremony held at the Kasanyangan Monument in Sumisip town yesterday.

"When your agri-fisheries potentials

are unlocked, the whole country, not only Basilan, not only BARMM (Bangsamoro Administrative Region in Muslim Mindanao) but the whole country will benefit," the President said.

"Your future and fate are therefore
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intertwined with the nation's. Please be assured that we will play our role as partner of Basilan's great leap forward," he said.

Basilan is home to rubber plantations. Copra and rice are also the province's major produce and farmers' main source of income.

The President also vowed more assistance to rebels, including livelihood and housing, to convince more of them to return to the fold of the law.

During his visit to Basilan, Marcos also witnessed the ceremonial destruction of 400 illegal firearms and distributed eight motorcycles donated by the United Nations Development Program to support the livelihood of former members of the Bangsamoro Islamic Armed Forces, Abu Sayyaf Group, and civilian gun owners.

Marcos said the province and its partners have facilitated the surrender of more than 400 firearms in exchange for livelihood opportunities, the documentation of more than 4,000 high-powered and small weapons, and the

processing of almost 200 license to own and possess firearms, all through the Small Arms and Light Weapons and Assistance for Security, Peace, Integration and Recovery for Advanced Human Security in BARMM program.

At the signal of the President and Basilan Gov. Hajiman Hataman-Salliman, a road roller crushed the loose firearms that were laid on the concrete road at the foot of the peace monument.

"We are still trying to bring those who are still fighters to come down from the mountains and to join society," the President said in a media interview when asked if the illegal weapons destruction conducted in Basilan would be replicated in other parts of Mindanao.

"And we, for our part, will continue to support everything that they need in terms of housing, in terms of livelihood, in terms of schools, in terms of infrastructure. And that's the role that we will play," he said.

Marcos met with the governors of BARMM to formalize an alliance to ensure continuous support for the region.

The Chief Executive declared that Basilan, once tainted by violence and terrorism, is now a zone of peace "made possible not by military might but more so by people saying no to violence."

Marcos described the destruction of firearms as a testament to the commitment of all stakeholders to peace.

"I'm the first President to be able to come here because this was ground zero in the time of the fighting. And so, it is a very clear landmark on the progress we have been making in bringing peace to the Southern Philippines," he said.

Marcos cited an ongoing process under the auspices of the United Nations, the European Union and other international organizations to continue the decommissioning of weapons.

Marcos recognized the peace efforts of the provincial government of Basilan, Office of the Presidential Adviser on Peace, Reconciliation, and Unity; Armed Forces of the Philippines, Philippine National Police; as well as community, religious leaders and volunteers.

– Helen Flores, Roel Pareño



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ASF vaccine available by yearend

By **JASPER EMMANUEL ARCALAS**

The wait for the vaccine for African swine fever (ASF), which has decimated over three million pigs in the country, would be over within the year, according to Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr.

"The good news is there are already vaccines that are on the way that may be accredited within the year by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) with

assistance from the Department of Agriculture," Laurel said.

He disclosed that two companies – a Vietnamese and an American – are now seeking regulatory approval from the FDA for their vaccines, while two other firms from Vietnam and Thailand are planning to apply.

"Hopefully, we can eradicate ASF by next year," he said. Laurel's statement came about two weeks after the FDA revealed it has yet to receive any applications for domestic

use of ASF vaccine.

The FDA created a task force in 2023 dedicated to the evaluation of ASF vaccines in the country.

The country has been grappling with ASF since confirming in 2019 the first outbreak of the trans-boundary animal disease.

The reduction in domestic hog population has caused pork retail prices to soar to unprecedented levels, forcing the government to reduce tariffs to augment local supply with foreign stocks and arrest

price spikes.

Local hog production has sustained its 2023 recovery, but is still at a rate lower than what producers and government officials had hoped, as threats of ASF have deterred repopulation efforts.

Data from the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) also showed hog output growing by 3.3 percent to 1.79 million metric tons in 2023, the highest in three years, from 1.74 million MT in 2022.

The volume rose for the second

consecutive year since production plunged to 1.69 million MT in 2021 after ASF decimated the country's pig population.

Despite the increase, hog production last year was nowhere near the 2.25 million MT average output from 2016 to 2019, before the onslaught of ASF.

Experts said the absence of an authorized, commercially available ASF vaccine is one of the reasons behind the slow repopulation of hogs in the country.



Marcos vows to make Basilan PH's food, fisheries production center

PRESIDENT Ferdinand Marcos Jr. on Saturday vowed to develop Basilan, once a "conflict area," into a thriving food and fisheries production center, which would help the country attain food security and a lasting peace.

In his speech during the "Panabang si Kasanyangan" peace offering ceremony in Sumisip, Basilan, Marcos said that despite the dawn of peace in the region, there is still work to be done and various stakeholders must continue seizing the momentum to attain long-lasting peace.

"Basilan's new role is now the war against hunger. You have a land area twice the size of Singapore, blessed with a rich soil, above all more or less typhoon-free, which makes you an ideal bulwark in our fight for food security," Marcos said.

"It must be woven now into the fabric of social life. In the case of Basilan, the harnessing of its potentials — a land blessed with resources and a people rich in talent — is the key to enduring peace, one that is based on common progress and shared prosperity," he added.

Once Basilan's agri-fisheries potentials are unlocked, not only Basilan and Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) will benefit, but also the whole country, the President said, stressing it will put the province at

the front and center of the administration's national goals.

"All that is needed is to help Basilan to become a genuine food and fisheries production center. The national government will assist in this new challenge that you are facing," he said.

"This makes Basilan no longer an island far south, but a very strategic island in the front and center of our national goals and our transformation," the President added.

Its future and fate are therefore intertwined with the nation's, Marcos said, assuring its government and people "that we will play our role as partner of Basilan's great leap forward."

"Our presence in today's event reaffirms the truth that what was once a Ground Zero of war, is now turned into an epicenter of peace," Marcos said.

"A province that was once tainted by violence and terrorism is now a zone of peace, made possible not by military might alone but more so by a people saying no to violence," he added.

Basilan is home to rubber plantations, with major cooperatives and thousands of farmers and small plantations assuming a key role in rubber production.

Copra and rice are also the province's banner products, which are

the farmers' main source of income.

During his visit, the President led the distribution of eight motorcycles donated by the United Nations Development Program to former rebels to support their livelihood.

He also witnessed the symbolic destruction of 400 illegal firearms surrendered by former rebels through the current peace efforts.

"This is the kind of peace that we are witnessing in Basilan, of various faiths working together, because people chose not to let diversity be a cause of division, but used it as a source of strength and solidarity," Marcos said.

"So, amid these triumphs, it is just fitting that a year ago you unveiled the Kasanyangan Monument. It is not just a memorial of the hard road to peace, or a manifesto of never going back to the path of violence, but a reminder of the long journey ahead that we have yet to undertake. But by your actions, you have indeed honored the ideals this monument stands for," he added.

The President recognized the peace efforts of the provincial government of Basilan, the Office of the Presidential Adviser on Peace, Reconciliation and Unity, the Armed Forces of the Philippines, the Philippine National Police, the community, religious leaders and volunteers.

He also thanked the initiatives

of international partners and allies, particularly the United Nations, the European Union, and the Japanese and Australian governments for their unending support to the pursuit of a just and amicable peace.

"Peace is totally achieved not when the sound of gunfire has ended. It is when the clamor for better lives has been met. This is the kind of peace that we see that dawned of here in Basilan. This is the kind of peace where the depressing tally of the casualties of war has been replaced by the statistics of human development," Marcos said.

"The kind that endures because it uproots the causes of people's discontent that purveyors of violence may want to exploit. This is the kind of peace that draws strength from the free will of the people instead of commanding their allegiance by force," he added.

Meanwhile, Marcos ordered the national and local government agencies to push for the development of Basilan and other areas that were once considered as "conflict areas" in the Philippines.

Speaking to reporters, the President emphasized that true peace does not end by cessation of violence but developing Basilan and former conflict areas.

"Although the ceremonies that we have here [are] really very

simple, it is a symbol of a very important day because this is a testament to the commitment of all stakeholders to peace," Marcos said during a media interview.

"As I said in my speech, when we talk about peace, it does not only mean the cessation of the violence, what it also means is that we continue — that we, the national government and the local governments, and the autonomous government, all work together to make sure that the livelihood and the progress will come to Basilan and all of the other provinces who are once areas of conflict," he added.

Marcos said bringing developments to Basilan and other former conflict areas in the Philippines "is the most important thing" and a very significant milestone for the Philippine government.

"That is, it is a very significant also. I'm the first President to be able to come here because this was ground zero in the time of the fighting. And so, we can — it is a very clear landmark on the progress we have been making in bringing peace to [the] Southern Philippines," he said.

While Marcos acknowledged that it was not the first time he witnessed the decommissioning of illegal firearms.

He clarified, however, that there is already an ongoing process

under the auspices of the UN, the EU and other international organizations to continue decommissioning of weapons.

The President said the government and its stakeholders are continuing their efforts to convince rebels to return back to the fold of the law.

"So, it will continue. We are still ongoing in the process, and we are still trying to bring those who are still fighters to come down from the mountains and to join society," Marcos said when asked if it was the first time he witnessed the decommissioning of firearms.

"And we, for our part, will continue to support everything that they need in terms of housing, in terms of livelihood, in terms of schools, in terms of infrastructure. And that's the role that we will play," he added.

Marcos said that he also had a meeting with the governors of the BARMM who "are coming together to formalize an alliance to make it very clear the support that the governors will bring to the autonomous government, to BARMM."

"And that's the role that we will play," Marcos said, referring to the meeting with BARMM governors. "And I think that is also another very important step in the continuing road to peace."

CATHERINE S. VALENTE

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Diskarte sa pagtugon vs El Niño pinag-aaralan na

Dahil sa magkakaibang uri ng epekto sa bawat rehiyon, pinag-aaralan na ng pamahalaan ang ibat-ibang klase ng pagtugon sa El Niño.

Sa isang ambush interview sa Sumisip, Basilan, inihalimbawa ni Pangulong Ferdinand Marcos Jr. ang epekto ng nararanasang El Niño sa Southern Mindanao na matindi ang pagbaha habang sa Luzon at Visayas lalo na sa Western Visayas ay matindi naman ang tag-tuyot at kulang na kulang sa supply ng tubig.

Kaya paliwanag ni Marcos, ibang diskarte ng pagtugon ang kailangan mai-apply sa Mindanao lalo na ang Southern Mindanao na nilulubog sa tubig baha.

"So we will continue to do that and what we are trying to do especially now because we are trying to develop the livelihood the agri-fisheries as I mention all of this will need a good supply of fresh water of irrigation and also fresh supply of water for consumers and that infrastructure we will now have to start to built," ayon pa sa Presidente.

Matatandaan na kamakailan lamang ay nag-punta ng Agusan del Sur ang Pangulo at personal na ininspeksiyon ang lawak ng pinsalang idinulot ng magkasabay na lakas ng ulan at shearline na nag-dulot ng malawakang pagbaha. (Gemma Garcia)

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Anti-agri smuggling bill lulusawin ng Kamara

ISINIWALAT ni Senador Cynthia Villar ang pagnanais ng Kamara de Representantes na magpasok ng mga pagsusog sa panukalang Anti-Agricultural Economic Sabotage Act na posibleng magpalabnaw sa panukala.

Sinabi ni Villar na hindi pa makapagpulong ang bicameral conference committee hinggil sa naturang panukala dahil sa napakabigat na kahilingan ng House panel.

"Marami silang gustong palitan eh pero 'yong pagpapalit naman nila mawawala 'yong bisa ng batas kaya we have to talk," paglalahad ng senadora sa interview ng DWIZ nitong Sabado.

Aniya, ayaw na niyang maulit ang pinasa nilang Anti-Agricultural Smuggling Act of 2016 (Republic Act 10845) na wala namang nakulong kahit isa man lang.

Abante NEGOSYO

"Nag-fail na kami the first time. We don't want to fail the second time," diin ni Villar.

Sinabi ni Villar na higit sa 12 probisyon ng Senate Bill 2432 ang gustong amiyendahan ng House panel pero tinayak ng senadora na hindi siya papayag dito.

Layon ng SB 2432 na susugan ang RA 10845 upang mas maging mataas ng tatlong beses ang multa sa halaga ng agricultural at fishery products na pinuslit sa bansa.

Ituturing na economic sabotage ang smuggling ng produktong agrikultura kung ang pinagsamang halaga nito ay umaabot sa tatlong milyon.