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BACKS OMBUDSMAN'S PROBE OF RICE DEALS

SUSPENDED NFA EXECS, STAFF LINKED TO OTHER QUESTIONABLE TRANSACTIONS—MARCOS

By **Dona Z. Pazzibugan**
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MELBOURNE—President Marcos said the suspended officials and staff of the National Food Authority (NFA) had been involved in other questionable transactions where they acted on their own without the approval of higher authority.

Mr. Marcos gave his support to the decision made on

Monday by Ombudsman Samuel Martires to put NFA Administrator Roderico Bioco and 138 officials and employees on preventive prevention for six months to make way for a investigation into the sale of NFA buffer rice stocks.

"The situation actually does not only involve the anomalous sale of NFA rice," the President said in a video where he replied to questions from Philippine

journalists covering his four-day visit here.

"It also is an examination of some of the procedures within the NFA that were undertaken without board approval, without the proper discussion within the NFA and with the DA (Department of Agriculture) and with the rest of the Cabinet," he said.

"So we have taken the safe measure of suspending all of those who have been shown to

may have been involved in any of these wrongdoings, such as the anomalous sale (of buffer stocks) but also the cavalier way in which the procedures that have been set out in the rules have been ignored," Mr. Marcos stressed.

Aside from the NFA chief, suspended by the Office of the Ombudsman were NFA Assistant Administrator for Operations John Robert Hermano, 12

regional managers, 26 branch managers and 99 warehouse supervisors.

The antigraft body is looking into sale of 75,000 bags of rice that were part of the country's buffer stocks to two rice traders for P93.75 million.

Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. said he would act as NFA officer in charge until the President appoints a new NFA administrator.

The video was released by the Malacañang Presidential Communications Office on Wednesday night (Wednesday afternoon in Manila) after the President left Melbourne after the conclusion of the special summit between Australia and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

The presidential party was expected to arrive in Manila late Wednesday night. INQ

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DA: Rice prices up 36% in a year

By **BELLA CARIASO**

A 36 percent spike in the retail price of rice was recorded on March 1, 2024 compared to the same period last year, according to data from the Department of Agriculture (DA).

Based on price watch monitoring of the DA in Metro Manila markets, the retail price of local regular milled rice went up by as high as P18 per kilo or 36 percent. The retail price of the staple on March 1, 2023 ranged between P32 and P40

per kilo compared to the P50 per kilo on March 1, 2024.

On the other hand, the retail price of local well-milled rice increased by 22 percent or as high as P13 per kilo as the cost on March 1, 2023 ranged

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between P37 and P45 compared to the prevailing price of P45 to P58 on March 1, 2024.

Meanwhile, the retail price of local premium rice also increased by 20 percent or as much as P12 per kilo as the retail price on March 1, 2023 ranged between P42 and P49 per kilo, compared to P50 and P61 per kilo on March 4, 2024.

The retail price of local special rice also increased by eight percent or P5 per kilo as the retail price last year ranged between P48 and P60 compared to P56 to P65 this year.

The Philippine Statistics Authority has reported that rice inflation in February 2024 reached 23.7 percent compared to February last year.

Watchdog group Bantay Bigas spokesperson Cathy Estavillo said the retail price of the staple is expected to further increase despite the expected palay harvest this March.

"That's what (decline in the retail prices of rice) they promised in September when they lifted the price ceiling of P41 and P45 per kilo (for regular and well-milled rice, respectively). They claimed that prices of rice will stabilize with the harvest from October, November and December," Estavillo said.

President Marcos was forced to issue an executive order imposing price ceiling of P41 and P45 per kilo for regular and well-milled rice which took effect on Sept. 5, 2023 amid the sudden spike in prices of the staple food due to tightness in supply.

Marcos lifted the price cap on Oct. 4, 2023, almost a month after its implementation. "What happened during that period, the retail price of rice was the highest in the last 14 years," Estavillo said.

Involuntary hunger also increased by 12.6 percent amid the high retail price of the grains, she added.

She noted that based on monitoring of Bantay Bigas, the lowest retail price of well-milled rice was at P54 per kilo.

"This is very far from the campaign promise of President Marcos of P20 per kilo. Under his administration, the highest price of rice was experienced," Estavillo added.

Estavillo said that the retail price of rice in some areas reached as high as P70 per kilo.

"Many farmers have already harvested in Isabela. It is ongoing in Mindoro. These are the rice-producing provinces. According to the farmers, the retail price in these provinces remains at P60 to P65 per kilo," she noted.

Agriculture Assistant Secretary and spokesman Arnel de Mesa, however, said the retail price of rice is expected to go down this month. "We expect it (retail price) to go down as the palay harvest will peak this March and April. We expect the farmgate price of palay will go down, which in turn drives a decline in the retail price of rice in the

next days and weeks," De Mesa said.

Procedures

In Melbourne, President Marcos yesterday cited the need to look into the procedures of the National Food Authority (NFA) following the suspension of its administrator and several other officials over the supposedly anomalous sale of rice buffer stocks.

"The situation actually does not only involve the anomalous sale of NFA rice. It also is an examination of some of the procedures within the NFA that were undertaken without board approval, without the proper discussion within the NFA and with the DA and with the rest of the Cabinet," Marcos said in a video message sent to reporters.

"So, we have taken the safe measure of suspending all of those who have been shown to may have been involved in any of these wrongdoings such as the anomalous sale but also the cavalier way in which the procedures that have been set out in the rules have been ignored," he added.

The NFA Council yesterday appointed Assistant Administrator for finance and administration Piolito Santos as officer-in-charge amid the six-month preventive suspension of administrator Roderico Bioco and 138 officials and employees of the agency amid the questionable sale of NFA rice to some traders.

Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. presided over the meeting of the council at the NFA main office in Visayas Ave., Quezon City.

At a press conference, Santos said he will serve as OIC "until the President appoints the next administrator of the NFA."

Laurel had announced the suspension of Bioco, NFA assistant administrator for operations John Robert Hermano, 12 regional managers, 26 branch managers and 99 warehouse supervisors all over the Philippines.

The suspension – an implementation of the order issued earlier by the Office of the Ombudsman – stemmed from the sale of 75,000 bags of rice, part of the country's buffer stocks, for P93.75 million.

Santos said that among his priorities is to ensure the resumption of operations of NFA warehouses.

"We discussed during the meeting to reopen the warehouses which were padlocked as the operation of these warehouses will be transferred to the personnel who have no accountability," Santos added.

He said the NFA should resume its normal operation as the peak harvest season has already started.

"We target to procure about 300,000 metric tons to 475,000 metric tons of palay so that we will have buffer stock this year," Santos said.

According to him, the NFA has a total budget of P17.2 billion for palay procurement.

At the same time, he refused to comment on the alleged illegal sale of NFA rice, saying only that the ombudsman and the DA are conducting parallel investigations.

– With Alexis Romero

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El Niño dry spell affects 479 hectares of rice farms in Bicol

LEGAZPI CITY, Albay – The National Irrigation Administration (NIA) reported on Wednesday, March 6, that 479.15 hectares of rice farms in the Bicol region have been affected by the dry spell

due to the El Niño phenomenon.

Engr. Gaudencio M. de Vera, NIA-5 regional manager, said 250.60 hectares of irrigated area in Albay, 114.30 hect-

ares in Camarines Sur, and 80 hectares in Masbate are currently affected. De Vera said the affected farmlands are communal irrigation systems that source water from creeks, rivers, ► **5**

El Niño dry spell affects 479 hectares of rice farms in Bicol 1◀

and small streams.

He said that they are implementing interventions to reduce the impact of the dry spell. Among these are desilting and dredging of rivers, creeks, and streams.

NIA has also augmented water pumps to affected farmers.

De Vera said that 526 farmers were affected by the dry spell in Bicol—302 in Albay, 160 in Camarines Sur, and 77 in Masbate.

Meanwhile, Polangui, Albay Mayor Adrian Salceda, president of the League of Municipalities of the Philippines (LMP)-Albay chapter, said on Tuesday, March 5, that the province is bracing for the impact of the El Niño phenomenon.

“As president of the LMP-Albay,

I already brought to the attention of Department of Agriculture Secretary Frankie Tiu-Laurel the drought affecting at least 425.4 hectares of farms in the 3rd District of Albay. Secretary Laurel and I met on Jan. 25, when weather predictions already suggested an upcoming El Nino,” Salceda said.

He disclosed that LMP-Albay is working with DA to immediately address the needs of affected farmers through the fast-tracked distribution of the Rice Farmer Financial Assistance (RFFA) under the Rice Tariffication Law, endorsement of the local government unit and NIA requests for augmentation of water supply in affected farms, and hastened processing of claims with

the Philippine Crop Insurance Corp. for damaged crops.

“I am also working with the mayors of the affected municipalities of Polangui, Libon, Oas, and Pio Duran, as the situation develops,” he added.

The 3rd District of Albay is the province’s rice granary and responding to the ongoing drought protects the people of Albay from hunger and high food prices, Salceda said. (Niño Luces)

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DA will focus on reviving local cacao industry—Laurel

THE Department of Agriculture (DA) said it will revive the cacao industry to prop up the income of farmers who rely on the sector for their livelihood.

Data from the DA's Registry System for Basic Sectors in Agriculture showed that there are 74,428 Filipino cacao farmers as of March 6.

"The (DA) shall focus on the revitalization of the local cacao industry, through its High Value Crops and Development Program [HVCDP] and other operating units," Agriculture Secretary **Francisco Tiu P. Laurel Jr.** said in a statement.

"Some of the cacao trees are now being cut because farmers are not making much money from cacao since they do not really know how to process it after harvesting."

The DA said the HVCDP provides cacao planting materials and farm inputs, conducts capacity-building initiatives for cacao farmers and extension workers, builds cacao technology demonstration sites, distributes farm machineries and equipment, and builds irrigation facilities.

Laurel said he and Ambassador of Israel to the Philippines Ilan Fluss visited the Filipinas Cacao Heritage Reserve last March 5.

He said he witnessed the best agricultural practices and innovation for the local cacao in the 13-hectare cacao farmland in Barangay Bunggo, Calamba, Laguna.

Since 2022, it has partnered with the Embassy of Israel in the Philippines for the provision of technical assistance. It employs a team of licensed Filipino agriculturists, foresters, agricultural

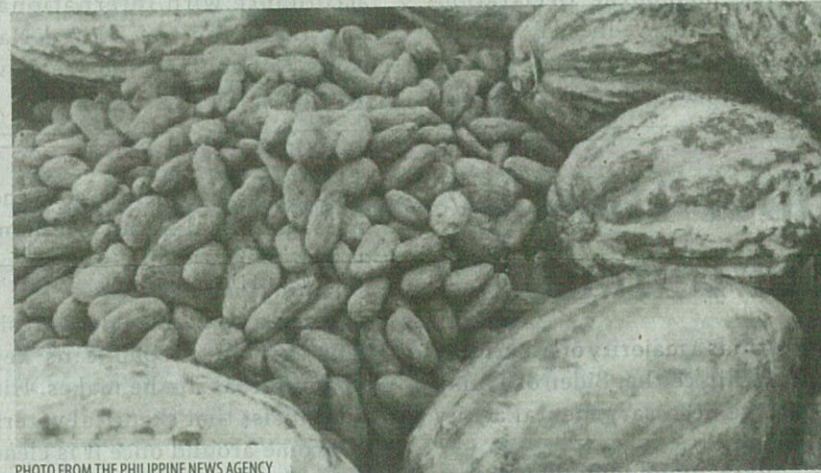


PHOTO FROM THE PHILIPPINE NEWS AGENCY

and biosystems engineers, and agri-technicians under the mentorship of Israeli experts in cacao production.

The DA said the collaboration also sparked the successful rehabilitation and revival of a 90-year-old Criollo cacao tree in Barangay

Bunggo, which local historical accounts state originated from Mexico. The tree now serves as the cacao farm's source of planting materials.

During Laurel's visit, both Filipino and Israeli teams demonstrated the integrated pest management

techniques, drip irrigation facilities, weather monitoring system, cacao breeding and grafting initiatives, composting practices, and other Israeli practices and technologies applied in the cacao farm.

The DA noted that the Philippines is one of the countries in Asia that has a competitive advantage on cacao production given its strategic location and climatic condition. The 2 million hectares of coconut farms ideal for cacao intercropping supplement the industry's competitive advantage.

Despite its competitive advantage, the Philippine cacao production averages only 10,000 metric tons (MT) to 12,000 MT from the 20,000 to 25,000 hectares of land planted with cacao, according to an industry roadmap prepared by the DA.



House to look into sale of NFA rice to traders

By JOVEE MARIE N. DELA CRUZ

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THE House Committee on Agriculture and Food will open on Thursday its probe on the alleged improper disposition of National Food Authority (NFA) rice stocks.

In a news briefing, House Committee on Agriculture and Food Chairman Wilfrido Mark Enverga said, as instructed by Speaker Ferdinand Martin Romualdez, there will be no sacred cows in the upcoming probe.

"Nothing will be left untouched, nothing will be swept under the rug. Every aspect of the issue would be thoroughly investigated without fear or favor," said Enverga, echoing the chamber's commitment to uncovering the truth behind the reported irregularities in the sale of NFA rice stocks.

He said lawmakers' determination to conduct a comprehensive inquiry will leave no room for any untoward influence or protection of implicated parties.

Enverga and Rep. Robert Raymund Estrella filed House

Resolution 1611, directing the Committee on Agriculture and Food to conduct an inquiry into the alleged improper disposition of NFA rice stocks to investigate the authorization of the sale of rice stocks to selected traders in violation of existing rules and procedures.

The inquiry came on February 12, 2024, when NFA Assistant Administrator for Operations Lemuel R. Pagayunan submitted a comprehensive report to the NFA Council.

The report, titled "Report on Administrator Bioco's Improper Disposition of NFA Rice Stocks to Selected Rice Traders," contained document citations authorizing regional managers to release specific volumes of NFA rice bags to certain traders.

Enverga said the report alleged that the rice sold to the mentioned traders, totaling 75,000 bags, was initially deemed "aging and deteriorating" stocks but was subsequently found fit for human consumption.

He also said the sale to pre-selected buyers without proper authorization from the NFA Council

is "violated rules and guidelines governing the proper disposition of NFA stocks."

According to Enverga, the selected rice traders who bought the said stock at a price much lower than the prevailing price of P1,250 per bag have allegedly re-bagged the stocks and sold them at much higher prices.

The resolution noted that the NFA is entrusted with the efficient and effective acquisition and maintenance of rice stocks, ensuring their proper disposition before the quality deteriorates and becomes unacceptable or unsafe.

Under Republic Act 11203, the NFA is mandated to ensure food security by maintaining sufficient buffer stocks sourced solely from local farmers.

The term "buffer stock" is defined as the optimal level of rice inventory to be maintained at any given time for emergency situations and to support government disaster relief programs during natural or man-made calamities.

NFA policies

AGRI Party-list Rep. Wilbert T. Lee



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said he filed House Resolution No. 1625 to probe the current policies of the NFA and its implementation regarding the optimal utilization of their goods and proper disposal methods.

"There is a need to identify any gaps or loopholes in the existing policies of NFA. *Kailangang linawin ang mga polisiya, tuldukan ang mga kalakaran na ugat ng katiwalian, at panagutin ang mga corrupt na dumadagdag lang sa pasanin ng taumbayan,*" he said.

"*Sa panahon na hrap ang ating mga magsasaka sa ani dahil sa epekto ng El Niño, kailangan natin ng mamumuno sa NFA na walang bahid ng korapsyon. Kung maayos lang sana ang pamahahala ng buffer stock ng bigas, mababawasan ang pag-angat natin nito.*"

Lee urged President Ferdinand R. Marcos, Jr. to purge corrupt officials and employees of the NFA to restore public trust in the agency.

The lawmaker made the call after NFA Administrator Roderico Bioco and 138 other NFA officials and employees were suspended by the Office of the Ombudsman for

their alleged involvement in the anomalous sale of the government's rice buffer stocks.

"*Malaking kasalanan ang paglulustay sa supply ng bigas, lalo pa napakamahal ng presyo ng pagkain at mga pangunahing bilihan ngayon,*" he said.

"In order to restore the trust of the public in the NFA, there needs to be a revamp and the first step to that is to remove all officials involved in anomalies," he added.

Appointment

AGRICULTURE Secretary Francisco P. Tiu Laurel Jr. said Wednesday that the NFA Council appointed Piolito Santos, NFA assistant administrator for finance and administration, as officer-in-charge (OIC) of the agency.

Santos' appointment as NFA OIC-Administrator follows the preventive suspension imposed by the Ombudsman on Monday against 139 officials and employees in connection with the ongoing investigation into the controversial disposition of rice buffer stocks in a transaction allegedly disadvantageous to government.

Laurel announced Santos' designation as acting administrator during a zoom meeting with NFA employees, where he also urged over 2,000 workers of the agency to focus on their jobs and not be distracted by the ongoing Ombudsman investigation.

"The NFA is a very important government agency, especially during calamities and other disasters as well as in the lives of millions of poor Filipinos. We cannot lose heart during this challenging time for the NFA and DA family."

Santos is career service officer who has spent four decades with the NFA and is scheduled to retire in May. He has a bachelor's degree in Agriculture Business major in Agriculture Economics from the Isabela State University and a master's degree in business administration and a doctorate in Organization Development and Planning from Northeastern College.

The passage of the Rice Tariffication Law in 2019 removed NFA's rice trading function. It was limited to maintaining a national buffer stock equivalent to 300,000 metric tons of rice.



NFA officer-in-charge named

THE National Food Authority (NFA) Council led by Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. yesterday appointed Piolito Santos, NFA assistant administrator for finance, as officer-in-charge (OIC) of the agency.

Santos said among his functions as OIC are "routine matters" but added he is requesting for additional functions that can fur-

ther smoothen operations of the agency, especially with the suspension of 139 employees, including warehouse personnel nationwide.

"We really need to fix this so that we can open their warehouses and we can continue our service to the people," he said.

Santos also reiterated that for this year, the NFA is targeting to buy 300,000 metric tons (MT) to 475,000

MT of palay from local farmers to fill up the country's buffer stocks, especially that the agency has over P17 billion in available budget.

Of the amount, P9 billion has been allocated for this year and P8.2 billion came from last year's excess allocation.

"For now, we have instructions to our department managers and the entire leadership of the NFA

that we will change our ways of selling rice to our outlets to avoid similar issues that we've recently encountered," Santos added.

An internal team from the DA and a separate one from the Office of the Ombudsman are conducting investigations on 139 NFA suspended employees for alleged anomalous sale of rice buffer stocks to favored traders. — *Jed Macapagal*

El Niño agri damage tops P1B – NDRRMC

BY FRANCISCO TUYAY AND JANINE ALEXIS MIGUEL

DAMAGE to agriculture brought about by El Niño surged to P1.05 billion, the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council (NDRRMC) said on Wednesday.

It said that El Niño had so far affected 17,718 hectares (ha) of farmlands, equivalent to 32,844 metric tons (MT) of production volume.

Total crop loss was broken down as follows: Western Visayas recorded the biggest crop area affected by the dry spell at 13,363 ha, equivalent to P678.7 million, followed by Mimaropa with 3,116 ha, valued at P319.7 million.

The dry spell hit 1,026 ha of farmlands in the Ilocos Region, 189.56 ha in Calabarzon, and 22.2 ha in the Zamboanga Peninsula.

To date, only the local govern-

ment of Bulalacao in Oriental Mindoro has declared a state of calamity due to the long dry spell.

In Negros Occidental, six barangay — Cabadiangan, Nabalian, Carabalan, Su-ay, To-oy, and Buenavista in Himamaylan town have been experiencing a shortage in drinking and irrigation water since December 2023.

Also, Zamboanga City implemented a water rationing scheme in its west coast and central areas amid limited water supply.

Rivers and fields in the town have dried up, affecting water

supply and crops, according to the municipal government.

Vulnerable rice lands

The Department of Agriculture said that 275,000 hectares of rice fields are expected to be vulnerable to the impact of El Niño. This is equivalent to an estimated yield of 1.1 million MT of palay (unmilled rice) or rice stocks good for 20 days.

The Philippines has 4.8 million ha of land dedicated to cultivating palay, and last year, palay production reached 20.06 million MT, the highest harvest of the staple.

To mitigate the adverse impact of the El Niño phenomenon, specifically on Mindoro Island, Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu

Laurel Jr. urged the local government units across the region to declare a state of calamity officially.

According to the DA, such a declaration "would extend com-

prehensive assistance to affected communities, including financial aid, agricultural inputs like crop seeds, and livestock."

Assistance

In terms of assistance, the department said that up to P25,000 in interest-free loans for three years to eligible farmers and fisher folk are available through the Survival and Recovery (SURE) aid program.

Additionally, the government is ready to provide farm inputs through the Quick Response Fund, while the Philippine Crop Insurance Corp. is ready to issue insurance claims of up to P25,000 for registered agricultural workers.

The El Niño phenomenon is characterized by the abnormal warming of sea surface temperature in the central and eastern equatorial Pacific Ocean, leading to below-normal rainfall.



TO CUSHION IMPACT OF DROUGHT

DA allots P725M to Bicol Region

BY RHAYDZ B. BARCIA

PILL, Camarines Sur: The Department of Agriculture (DA) in Bicol has allotted P725 million to mitigate the impact of El Niño on farmers in the region.

The DA report said that the dry spell will likely persist until May 2024.

The region, especially in Camarines Norte, Camarines Sur and Catanduanes, has been experiencing below normal rainfall conditions for the past two months, resulting in big losses to agricultural production.

Lovela Guarin, spokesman for DA Region 5 (Bicol Region), said that the Agriculture department in Bicol has been constantly monitoring the effect of the drought using drones to check the extent of damages.

Based on historical data, the DA in Bicol reported that the worst El Niño occurrence in the region took place in 1990 to 2020, which damaged crops worth P1.82 billion.

At least 76 percent of the damaged crops were rice and 21

percent were corn.

The provinces of Albay, Camarines Sur, Masbate and Sorsogon also experienced way below normal rainfall. Forecast rainfall from March to April favors harvesting and postharvest processing (rice and corn). However, it can reduce yield on vegetables crops as increase in temperature (>35 degrees Celsius) might reduce crop yield (rainfed and irrigated-tail end of canals).

Common pests and diseases due to high temperature (>25 C), precipitation and humidity (>80 percent) include rice blast, sheath blight, sheath rot, bacterial leaf blight, bacterial leaf streak, black bug, green leafhopper, brown planthopper, common armyworm, fall armyworm, bacterial stalk rot, thrips, lepidopterans, hopper, thrips, pod



DRYING UP A rice farmer in Cabasan village, Cagraray Island, Bacacay town, inspects the rice field affected by drought. PHOTO BY RHAYDZ BARCIA

borer, bean black aphids, southern blight and bacterial wilt.

Rep. Fernando Cabredo of the third district said that for one month now, water has been scarce in upland areas preventing farmers from planting. "Our farmers, specifically in upland areas and those with rainfed farmland, are facing problems if

the drought continues because it will affect their harvest and delay their planting," Cabredo said.

"The aquifers are drying up. It affected our farming and drinking water in the upland areas. The main source of living and livelihood of the people in the upland areas is agriculture. They cannot replant because they rely

on rainfall," Cabredo said.

"We are asking for assistance from the Department of Agriculture to help our farmers recover from their losses," he added.

The third district of Albay is the province's rice granary.

Polangui Mayor Adrian Salceda, Albay LMP president, said that four towns are affected by El Niño.

"As President of the LMP Albay, I already brought to the attention of DA Secretary Frankie Tiu Laurel Jr. the drought affecting at least 425.4 hectares of farms in the 3rd district of Albay. Secretary [Tiu] Laurel and I met on January 25, when weather predictions already suggested an upcoming El Niño," Salceda said.

"We are working with the DA to immediately address the needs of affected farmers, through the following: fast-tracked distribution of the rice farmer financial assistance under the Rice Tariffication Law; endorsement of the local government unit and National Irrigation Administration (NIA) requests for augmentation of water supply in affected farms; and

fast-tracked processing of claims with the Philippine Crop Insurance Corporation for damaged crops if any," the mayor said.

Salceda said that he is working with the mayors in Libon, Oas and Pioduran affected by the ongoing drought to protect the people of Albay from hunger and high food prices.

Guarin said that the potential impact in the agriculture sector of drought will affect 113,354 hectares (ha), covering rice with 68,749 ha; corn, 22,525 ha; and high-value crops or HVC with 17,080 ha.

According to the department, over 64,000 rice and corn farmers are possibly affected. To mitigate the impact of El Niño in Bicol, the DA allotted a P725-million budget for 2024, Guarin said.

About P654 million of the budget will go to the NIA while the DA gets P71.74 million.

The 2023 inventory of irrigation facilities includes a solar-powered irrigation system with 29 units serving 466 hectares and small-scale irrigation projects servicing 1,753 ha.



REGIONS

NIA: Irrigated farms spared by El Niño

The El Niño weather phenomenon had minimal impact on farmlands irrigated by the National Irrigation Administration (NIA), with only 1 percent of areas expected to suffer its brunt actually being affected, said NIA Administrator Eduardo Guillen. The agency will be launching a contracting scheme covering 40,000 hectares to show that farmers could continue planting rice as long as there is ample irrigation. —STORY BY JULIE M. AURELIO

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ASSISTANCE AVAILABLE FOR FARMERS

IRRIGATED FARMS SPARED BY EL NIÑO IMPACT—NIA

By Julie M. Aurelio
@JMAurelioINQ

The El Niño weather phenomenon had minimal impact on farmlands irrigated by the National Irrigation Administration (NIA), with only 1 percent of areas expected to be hit by drought or dry spell reported to be actually affected.

According to NIA Administrator Eduardo Guillen, the agency will launch a contract farming scheme covering 40,000 hectares (ha) this month to show that it is possible to continue planting rice as long as there is enough irrigation supply despite El Niño.

In an interview over "Bagong Pilipinas Ngayon" on Wednesday, Guillen noted that 20 percent of irrigated farmlands were expected to be vulnerable to the impact of El Niño.

"But because of our alternate wetting and drying technique, we are able to save up to 20 to 30 percent in irrigation and only a minimal portion of the irrigated areas were actually affected," Guillen said.

Alternate wetting and drying is a water-saving technology in which irrigation is applied to rice fields after the disappearance of ponded water. This allows farmers to reduce their irrigation water consumption in rice fields without decreasing yield.

Under the NIA's contract farming scheme, a farmer agrees to supply predetermined quantities of an agricultural product while the buyer commits to purchase it and supply farm inputs and technical advice, among others.

"We received a budget from Congress for contract farming and we will launch it this March for 40,000 ha. We're saying there's still El Niño. We want to show that even with El Niño, as long as there is irrigation we can plant palay," Guillen said.

He made the remarks as the impact of the El Niño phenomenon continued to be felt across the country, with provinces experiencing drought, dry spell or dry condition due to the prolonged absence of rainfall. The state weather bureau earlier

warned that El Niño may last up to May this year.

But irrigation for farmlands, the NIA said, is sufficient.

"We also have long-term projects like reservoir-type dams. Solar-powered water pumps are completed within three months, so every month we are able to turn over irrigation projects," Guillen said.

He added that the NIA was closely working with local governments to assist them in their irrigation infrastructure projects.

"We help them fund their proposed projects ... We coordinate with [local governments] for bottom-up budgeting for their proposed projects," Guillen said.

Situation in Bicol

In Bicol, the NIA is closely monitoring the condition of 479 ha of rice fields in the region as these are at risk of drying up.

Data provided by the NIA on Tuesday showed that farmlands in Albay, Camarines Sur and Masbate were experiencing water scarcity.

"Most of the water sources located in those areas are already at critical levels, so farmers requested water pumps, which we immediately provided," engineer Gaudencio de Vera, NIA regional manager, told the Inquirer in a phone interview.

De Vera said providing farmers with pumps and pipes might eventually save their crops from possible damage.

"Good thing [that] ahead of time, we conducted an intensive information dissemination campaign and advised farmers to plant early as [the weather bureau forecast] that Bicol might experience El Niño during the first quarter of 2024," he said.

De Vera said the NIA had provided irrigation supply to 64,000 ha of rice fields in Bicol.

The agency also sent 10 of its backhoes to different Bicol provinces to help divert water from rivers to rice fields.

NIA said it would construct more irrigation canals and install solar-powered water pump projects in Bicol to help farmers save on production costs. —WITH A REPORT FROM MICHAEL JAUCIAN INQ



NFA mulls hike in selling price

By JASPER EMMANUEL ARCALAS

The National Food Authority (NFA) is considering raising its selling price of rice to as much as P36 per kilogram to recover its costs and keep profit margins after it increased its palay buying price last year.

Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. confirmed to **The STAR** that such a proposal is on the table and he is studying it "carefully."

"I have to study this carefully but for now for sure there is a need to increase [the selling price] because the [buying] price of palay increased," Laurel said in a recent interview.

Laurel, who is also chairman of the NFA Council, said raising the NFA's mandated selling price is "tricky" since it must take into consideration the price movements of both palay and rice in the market.

The NFA Council is the agency's highest policy-making body.

Highly-placed sources told **The STAR** that the council is considering the increase of the state-run agency's mandated rice selling price to between P32 per kilogram and P36 per kilogram.

At present, the NFA sells its rice stocks to agencies involved in calamity and relief operations at P23 per kilogram and P25 per kilogram depending on the quality.

Sources said the proposal came from the NFA management last year after the agency's effective buying price of palay was increased to P23 per kilogram from P19 per kilogram.

The NFA's total costs for the sale of rice is around P41.5 per kilogram while its gross revenue is around P55.2 per kilogram, resulting

in a gross income of P13.7 per kilogram, according to sources.

The NFA gets an annual subsidy, currently at P9 billion, from the national government to cover some of its costs, particularly the procurement of palay.

Keeping the NFA's mandated selling price at P25 per kilogram might "erode" the agency's net profit per sale, resulting in a possibility of ending this year with a break-even bottom line, sources said.

A higher NFA selling price would mean that government agencies like the Department of Social Welfare and Development that get rice stocks from the NFA would have to pay more, Raul Montemayor of Federation of Free Farmers said.

"They have to at least recover their costs, because if they buy at P23 per kilogram, the palay cost of their rice will be P38.33 per kilogram without including storage, freight, overhead and other costs," Montemayor said.

Senen Reyes of the University of Asia and the Pacific (UA&P) cautioned, however, that increasing the NFA's rice selling price could send a signal that may influence private traders to increase their selling price as well.

Reyes noted that at times private traders track the price movements of the NFA and factor it in in their selling prices.

"The signal that gets to the market is that we will increase our retail prices. If it is around P32 to P36 per kilogram, the retail prices of private traders might reach P60 per kilogram," Reyes, the executive director of the UA&P's Center for Food and Agri Business, told **The STAR**.



DoLE assists abaca farmer groups in Region 13

THE Department of Labor and Employment (DoLE) office in Region 13 (Caraga Region) recently provided livelihood assistance amounting to P5.4 million to 12 abaca farmer associations in San Miguel, Surigao del Sur.

The livelihood assistance or grant includes farm machinery and business capital, among others, under the DoLE Integrated Livelihood Program, which benefited mostly Indigenous farmers of the abaca associations.

"The grant aims to assist the farmers in enhancing their livelihood by improving and hastening the abaca fiber production in the town that will increase their yield and create better market opportunities for the local product," said DoLE-Surigao del Sur Director Genabelle Bal.

The local government unit (LGU) of San Miguel is DoLE's accredited partner in the initiative, and Philippine Army and other stakeholders played a vital role in its implementation.

Bonito Bocales, the Tribal Abaca Farmers Association chairman

and also a tribal chieftain, expressed immense gratitude to the government for the program implementation.

"We appreciate the stripping machines provided by DoLE, with assistance from the LGU and the 75th and 36th Infantry Battalions. They were reliable partners, especially in document preparation. These machines greatly aid us abaca farmers, offering solutions to our challenges," he said in the vernacular.

Prior to the machine distribution, each beneficiary underwent comprehensive training on financial literacy, health education, workers' basic rights and an overview of the DoLE Integrated Livelihood Program.

The beneficiaries also underwent specialized training on the efficient operation of the machines.

The 12 abaca farmer associations that benefited from the initiative are: Acnitan Abaca Farmers Association, Balungkanadan Manobo Association, Carromata Abaca Farmers Association, Ca-

tabadan Busog Badbadan Abaca Farmers Association, Inadan Tribal Organic Farmers Association, Nalindog Farmers Association, Organisasayong Mag-uuma sa Tubod, Purok 7 Unified Abaca Farmers Association, Sangay Upland Farmers Association, Tambonon Lowland and Upland Farmers Association, Tribal Abaca Farmers Association and Balungkanadan Abaca Farmers Association.

According to the Philippine Fiber Industry Development Authority, the Philippines is the largest producer of abaca fibers, supplying about 87 percent of the world's requirement for the production of cordage, specialty papers (for currency note, stencil paper, teabag, coffee filter/cup, capacitors, insulation paper, among others), textiles, furniture and fixtures, among others.

In 2022, Caraga ranked third among the top abaca-producing regions in the country, with an estimated 10,000 metric tons of fiber production. Surigao del Sur has 24 abaca farmers and traders who contributed to the output. **PIA**



■ The Department of Labor and Employment (DoLE) provided machines for abaca processing to 12 farmer associations in Caraga Region. DOLE PHOTO



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Cloud seeding kicks off in Cagayan Valley

THE Department of Agriculture (DA) Region 2 (Cagayan Valley) office has started cloud seeding operations to mitigate the effects of El Niño in the area.

Ferdinand Cortez of the DA-Region 2 unit's Agriculture and Fisheries Information Section said rain fell in torrents as the Piper Navajo Flyers aircraft touched down at the Civil Aviation Authority of the Philippines Base at Cauayan Airport after scattering sodium chloride on cloud formations some 4,500 feet above the ground on targeted areas.

During the operation, Cortez said the DA-Region 2 unit's sky and cloud spotters were stationed in Iguig, Enrile and Tuguegarao in Cagayan; Santo Tomas, Santa Maria, Ilagan and Benito Soliven in Isabela; and Barangay Villaros in Bagabag, Nueva Vizcaya.

He said spotters messaged affirmative to waiting Bureau of Soils and Water Management (BSWM) personnel manning their consoles online, and Philippine Air Force (PAF) pilots and crew monitoring their apps.

Rose Mary Aquino, DA-Region 2 officer in charge executive director, said the cloud seeding operations

can cushion the initial impact of El Niño. "Crops really need the precipitation and the cooling effect of the rain," she said.

Before the operation, Roberto Busania, DA-Region 2 technical director for operations and extension, said they coordinated and planned through online conferences with the PAF, BSWM, Disaster Risk Reduction Management (DRRM) Offices and National Irrigation Administration (NIA) office in Region 2.

"We have been busy since February 19, 2024, actually, as we monitored cloud formation using available models online," Busania said.

Daisy Saldo of the DA-Region 2 Agriculture Engineering Division said the cloud seeding operation had to consider many parameters before execution.

"We have to confirm the identified clouds spotted by the apps from BSWM by our sky spotters. Furthermore, we have to get the timing that these clouds are above the targeted cornland and other areas subject to the direction of the wind," Saldo said.

LEANDER C. DOMINGO



Kamara walang sasantuhin sa bigas scam

Sisimulan ng House Committee on Agriculture and Food bukas, Marso 7 ang imbestigasyon nito kaugnay ng pagbebenta ng National Food Authority (NFA) ng bigas sa ilang trader.

Ayon sa chairperson ng komite na si Quezon Rep. Mark Enverga ang direktiba ni Speaker Ferdinand Martin Romualdez sa komite ay "walang sasantuhin" kaya otomatiko na ang pagsasagawa ng imbestigasyon sa mga ganitong isyu.

"The Speaker has always tasked the committee to probe anything. Wala pong sasantuhin, walang sisinuhin kaya nga po automatic na po sa amin, at nabanggit nga po niya, make this

a priority," sabi ni Enverga.

Nanawagan naman si AGRI party-list Rep. Wilbert Lee kay Pangulong Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr. na walisin ang mga korap na opisyal at empleyado ng NFA upang bumalik ang tiwala ng publiko sa ahensya.

"Malaking kasalanan ang paglulustay sa supply ng bigas, lalo pa napakamahal ng presyo ng pagkain at mga pangunahing bilihin ngayon," sabi ni Lee.

Dapat umano ay hindi na makabalik ang mga sinuspendeng opisyal ang empleyado ng NFA na sangkot sa katiwalian. (Billy Begas/Eralyn Prado)



LMP Albay president secures DA support for El Niño-hit farmers

POLANGUI, Albay Mayor Raymond Adrian Salceda has assured Albay farmers that the Department of Agriculture has committed financial support and assistance under the government's Rice Farmer Financial Assistance (RFFA) program of the Rice Tariffication Law, among others, for them to recover from the devastation of the El Niño dry spell.

Salceda, head of the League of Municipalities of the Philippines (LMP) Albay Chapter, said he had coordinated with Agriculture Secretary Franklin Tiu-Laurel and was assured of RFFA assistance.

The El Niño phenomenon has already damaged more than 425 hect-

ares of rice lands in Albay, particularly in the towns of Polangui, Libon, Oas, and Pioduran, all in the third district of the province, the mayor reported.

Aside from the RFFA financial support, Salceda said he was also promised that the National Irrigation Administration would install surface pumps near water sources to augment the supply in drought stricken rice farms, referred to as Pump Irrigation from Open Sources or PISOS.

He said coordination are currently being undertaken by his office with the Philippine Crop Insurance Corporation to fast track assistance for the affected farmers.

Alarmed by the threat, the LMP-

Albay president has urged other municipal and city mayors in the province to support one another while waiting for government assistance.

Mayor Salceda said they will likewise see to it that Albay farmers will have their share of the certified and hybrid palay seeds and fertilizers which will be distributed by the DA in Bicol to help mitigate the effects of the calamity.

DA officials in Bicol have announced they will also distribute open pollinated corn flint, glutinous and hybrid corn and GM seeds and fertilizers to corn farmers, lowland vegetable seeds including legumes such as mungbean and flower inducers.

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RICE PRICES SET TO FALL AS HARVEST SEASON BEGINS



EDITORIAL

Rice price

THE Department of Agriculture (DA) has reported that the rice-eating Filipino people may expect a downward trend in the price of the cereal.

Without doubt, this is "good news," particularly to the poor, who comprise the bulk of the country's more than 110 million population.

In fact, the price of rice slightly dropped before the end of last month, according to Agriculture Undersecretary Arnel de Mesa. "Noong huling bahagi ng Pebrero hanggang ngayon ay nasa P49 to P50 level na 'yong prevailing prices," said the DA executive.

In January, the average price of the grain, the staple of Filipinos, was around P52 to P53 a kilo for well-milled and regular milled rice.

The hard-working official added: "We are expecting that the price will drop even more" this March because the harvest season has started.

Besides, safety nets are in place to blunt rice price hikes in the country, where the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) is located.

The Los Banos, Laguna-based IRRI is the world's premier research organization dedicated to reducing poverty, hunger and malnutrition.

Here, scientists from various parts of the world develop new high-yielding rice varieties.

In the view of many quarters, the government is in a position to ensure that our people have access to low-priced but high-quality



DA vows more help for farmers to bring down prices

By Joel dela Torre

THE Department of Agriculture (DA) has vowed to continue providing interventions and marketing strategies to farmers in order to give consumers quality and affordable agri-fishery produce.

According to Undersecretary and spokesperson Arnel de Mesa, these approaches have also contributed in bringing down the prices of agricultural products.

The agency, he added, is persistently monitoring prices movement in the markets through the Agribusiness and Marketing Assistance Service (AMAS).

Based on a report from

the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA), prices of onion, tilapia and other agricultural commodities have started to decline as of February.

Prices of red onion have

reflected a P25.26 decrease in its average value per kilo from January to February at P188.37 and P163.11, respectively.

KNP, adheres to the Bagong Pilipinas cam-

paign of President Marcos Jr., which focuses on an all-inclusive plan for economic and social transformation. focuses on an all-inclusive plan for economic and social transformation.



DA sees dip in rice prices during peak harvest

CONSUMER may expect a downward trend in the price of rice amid the peak-harvest season, according to the Department of Agriculture (DA).

The DA issued the statement on Tuesday following the reported rice inflation which hit 23.7 percent in February, contributing to the food inflation hike which reached 4.8 percent.

During a Bagong Pilipinas Ngayon briefing, Agriculture Assistant Secretary Arnel de Mesa said the prices of rice slightly dropped in the latter part of February.

"Noong huling bahagi ng February hanggang ngayon ay nasa P49 to P50 level na iyong prevailing prices," he said.

In January, the average prevailing price of rice was around

P52 to P53 for well-milled and regular-milled rice.

"Inaasahan natin na lalo pa itong bababa dahil ngayong March, nagsimulanaiyong harvest natin ng palay at magpipikito March-April," De Mesa added.

Likewise, he said that the lowering of the farmgate price will contribute to the decline of retail price.

De Mesa, meanwhile, said that El Nino's worst effect did not hit the productive stage of palay due to its timing.

"This is very small in terms of total rice area. In terms of total rice production, medyo minimal din about 0.11 percent ng total harvest na inaasahan natin. So hindi ganun kalaki iyong epekto," he said.

The El Niño phenomenon has so far caused P284.27 million worth of loss in rice production, affecting at least 5,011 hectares of rice farms, according to the DA-Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Office (DRRMO).

Undersecretary Asis Perez, meanwhile, said the DA is eyeing to modify the entire value chain.

He said this will cover soil and water management, improving logistics, and building post-harvest facilities.

He said that out of 14 million hectares of available natural assets, there are 3.1 million hectares of estimated land area that can be irrigated.

As for pork prices, the DA said although the country is recovering from the effects



of the African swine fever (ASF), having vaccines would help address price challenges.

In Metro Manila, the retail price range of pork kasim

(shoulder) is set at P290/kg to P370/kg, and P340/kg to P420/kg for pork liempo (belly).

Earlier, consumers are raising complaints amid the surge in pork prices in Visa-

yas and Mindanao, reaching as high as PHP400 per kilogram.

De Mesa expects a supply of vaccines against ASF by year-end or early part of 2025. PNA



Refined sugar supply 'stable' despite refinery closure

THE Sugar Regulatory Administration (SRA) on Monday said the country's supply of refined sugar is stable despite the permanent closure of the Central Azucarera Don Pedro Incorporated (CADPI) refinery in Batangas on Feb. 28.

In a radio interview, SRA Administrator Pablo Luis Azcona said the agency's target to keep a buffer stock

has been implemented.

"Sa ngayon, iyong availability po ng (For now, the availability of) refined sugar in the country is very ample, our supply has been stable the whole year," he said.

He added that the supply stability sustains the predictable market prices of refined sugar.

According to the latest

Department of Agriculture (DA) Bantay Presyo (price watch), the retail price range of refined sugar is around PHP72 to PHP100 per kilogram in Metro Manila.

The CADPI, a subsidiary of Roxas Holdings Incorporated (RHI), was forced to terminate employees following its shutdown due to "serious business losses." PNA



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Villar pushes extension, higher budget for RCEF

By **JASPER EMMANUEL
ARCALAS**

Sen. Cynthia Villar wants to double the annual guaranteed allocation for the rice competitiveness enhancement fund (RCEF) to P20 billion as she seeks to extend the fund by another six years or until 2030.

The extension of the RCEF is necessary in sustaining the initial gains from the program in improving rice farmers' productivity as noted by Villar in her previous pronouncements.

Villar is the principal author of Republic Act 11203 or the rice trade liberalization that created

the RCEF in 2019.

RCEF, which aims to make rice farmers competitive against neighboring countries, is set to end this year after six years of implementation.

Under the law, the RCEF gets a guaranteed annual appropriation of P10 billion, while all tariffs collected from rice imports in excess of P10 billion would be plowed back to the rice industry to bankroll additional programs.

"We will have some changes based on the performance (of the components)," Villar, who chairs the Senate

Committee on Agriculture and Food, told reporters yesterday on the sidelines of a poultry forum.

"The (rice tariff) collection is so huge. When we passed the law they said collections would reach P12 billion but now it is around P30 billion. So, it is okay even if we increase the (RCEF) budget to P20 billion," Villar added.

PHL sets world record for number of pork dishes

Record-breaking attempt was part of effort to revitalize the pork industry

A NEW Guinness World Record has been set in Quezon City. On March 1, the National Federation of Hog Farmers, Inc. set the world record for the Most Variety of Pork Dishes on Display during the National Hog Festival.

The Guinness World Records, founded in 1955, is a reference for the world's extremes: the most, the biggest, the longest. Some of their records that have involved the Philippines include a record for the most people brushing their teeth simultaneously (2007); and quite recently, the record for the largest human mattress dominoes (2335 in 2023). And most infamously, before the entry was placed under review (still accessible through <https://tinyurl.com/3fmxktpm>), the record for the greatest robbery of a government, set by dictator Ferdinand Marcos.

"The minimum is 300," said Guinness World Records Official Adjudicator Sonia Ushiroguchi during the attempt to set the world record in Gateway Mall 2 in Araneta City. "Today, we have 341 dishes," she said, which was greeted with cheers. However, she asked for a bit of quiet to make something clear — "We have 341 dishes that were submitted," and this time, she was greeted with groans. "I know. I'm very happy that everyone is so passionate here. However, we have some disqualifications."

"Some of the dishes did not meet the guidelines. We have 28 dishes that did not meet the guidelines. So, with a total of 313, we have a new Guinness World Record! Congratulations!"

The crowd cheered, and Jan Buenaflor, Project Director for the National Hog Festival, the record attempt, and a member of the Ways and means Committee of the National Federation of Hog Farmers, burst into tears. In an interview with *BusinessWorld*, she said, "I am very, very happy. I'm actually [at a loss] for words."

"It's very touching that we gathered all these people together



A SCENE from the National Hog Festival in Quezon City.

to showcase their pork dishes. I'm very, very happy," she said.

Participants included schools like National University - Dasmarinas, the University of Perpetual Help System, Perpetual Help College of Manila - College of International Hospitality Management, the Lyceum of the Philippines University - Manila, and the Manuel S. Enverga University Foundation, which collectively contributed 100 dishes.

Institutional partners like Robina Farms, Universal Robina, Del Monte, and restaurants such as Tung Lok Seafood, Mango Tree Café, Bacolod Chicken Inasal, Mesa, Tim Ho Wan, Pound Flat-terrie, Hawker Chan, Cabalen, Tindeli, and Vikings, also submitted entries.

Don't ask us what we ate: we had more than 300 of them to go through.

Ms. Buenaflor said that the guidelines included using a mini-

mum of three kilograms of pork per dish, multiplied by 313 (which comes out to 939 kilograms, a bit more than a ton of pork).

"The reason why we did this attempt is because we wanted really to showcase (not only) the culinary expertise of these people, but it's because Filipinos love pork," she said.

More than that, the world record attempt was made as an effort to revitalize the hog industry, in recovery since the African Swine Flu (ASF) outbreak in 2019, and the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020. "During ASF, *talagang marami kaming nawalan ng hanapbuhay* (a lot of us lost our livelihoods)," she said. "During the time when ASF happened, we really wanted to increase the per capita consumption of pork. *Gusto naming manumbalik muli ang sigla ng pagbababoy* (we want to return the vigor of hog raising)," she said.

In a story from *BusinessWorld*, "Pork inventory seen sufficient until first quarter of 2024," it said that "Philippine pork production is expected to hit 925,000 metric tons representing a 5% downgrade of a previous forecast due to the continued presence of ASF in top producing regions," according to the US Department of Agriculture. "We need more support, *kailangan marami ulit ang mag-alaga* (we need more people to raise pigs)... we have to do repopulation," said Ms. Buenaflor.

Still, she said, "*Walang imposible sa taong nangangarap ng bongga-bongga* (nothing is impossible for a person with big dreams)."

Meanwhile, Ms. Ushiroguchi told *BusinessWorld*, "Any record that brings so many people together to work to make the world a more fun, positive, and interesting place deserves a place in the Guinness World Records."

— Joseph L. Garcia



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Villar seeks six more years of RCEF, funding boost to P20B

THE SENATOR who chairs the chamber's agriculture and food committee expressed her support for a six-year extension of the Rice Competitiveness Enhancement Fund (RCEF), with funding raised to P20 billion a year.

"(Another) six years. (We plan to change) some aspects of the law," Senator Cynthia A. Villar told reporters at the sidelines of a poultry industry conference on Wednesday.

The RCEF is intended to modernize the rice industry and is funded by import tariffs gener-

ated as a result of Republic Act 11203, or the Rice Tariffication Law.

The fund supports the supply of machinery, seed, and fertilizer, among others to farmers. The rice tariffs support RCEF to the tune of P10 billion annually. The tariff allocations are set to expire in June.

The law, which took effect in 2019, allowed private traders to bring in rice shipments without restriction. At the time, they had to pay a 35% tariff on Southeast Asian grain.

Ms. Villar added that changes being planned for the extension period include a dedicated budget for water impounding and to support organic fertilizer production.

"*Magdagdag kami sa water impounding facilities at dagdagan ang composting machines to make organic fertilizer para may regular na budget para doon* (we will add provisions to fund water impounding and composting)," she said.

Ms. Villar added that she is proposing an increase in annual

RCEF funding to P20 billion, also funded by tariffs collected by the Bureau of Customs (BoC).

The Philippines collected P30 billion in rice tariffs in 2023, according to the BoC.

Executive Order No. 50, signed by President Ferdinand R. Marcos, Jr., extended the lowered tariff regime for rice imports, which was at 35% for shipments both within or over the minimum access volume quota.

Ms. Villar added that she will seek approval of the RCEF extension by June. — **Adrian H. Halili**



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Agricultural trade deficit narrows in Q4 to \$3.02B

THE DEFICIT in the trade of agricultural goods declined 6.6% year on year to \$3.02 billion in the fourth quarter, according to preliminary data issued by the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA).

In a report, the PSA said that the overall trade in agriculture — or the sum of exports and imports — slipped 0.9% to \$6.27 billion during the quarter, a reversal of the 5.1% growth posted a year earlier.

Agricultural imports, which accounted for 14.7% of overall imports for the period, dropped 2.9% to \$4.78 billion during the quarter.

Cereals remained the top agricultural import during the quarter, accounting for 22% of the total, or \$1.02 billion.

Agricultural imports from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) amounted to \$1.67 billion, or 17.8% of all farm shipments.

“Vietnam was the leading supplier of agricultural products to the Philippines among ASEAN member countries. It contributed \$479.29 million, or 28.6%, to the country’s total value of agricultural imports from ASEAN,” the PSA said.

Meat and edible meat offal were the top imports from the European Union (EU) during the fourth quarter.

“Agricultural imports from EU member countries amounted to \$391.29 million or 19.7% of the total value of imports in the fourth quarter,” it added.

During the quarter, Spain was the Philippines’ top supplier of agricultural commodities, with its shipments valued at \$101.5 million.

The PSA reported that exports of farm goods increased 5% to \$1.63 billion during the period.

“In the fourth quarter, the value of agricultural exports accounted for 8.8% of total exports,” it added.

The leading exports were edible fruit and nuts, as well as peel of citrus fruit and melons, valued at \$501.12 million or 30.8% of the total.

Exports to ASEAN during the fourth quarter totaled \$204.31 million, equivalent to 7.2% of farm exports for the period.

Tobacco and manufactured tobacco substitutes were the top exports during the quarter. — **Adrian H. Halili**

BusinessMirror

A broader look at today's business

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HEAT IS ON: FARMERS BATTLE RISING INFLATION AND EL NIÑO As Philippine inflation rises amid the challenges posed by El Niño, farmers in Mabitac, Laguna, carry on with their crucial tasks despite the adversities. In the face of widespread water shortages induced by El Niño, the agricultural sector faces significant hurdles, with crop production damage being highest at this period. This impact extends beyond upland and rainfed areas to lowland irrigated areas like Mabitac. After meticulously tending to newly planted palay seedlings and applying fertilizers and pesticides, farmers now turn their attention to the essential task of irrigating the farm plots using the traditional "painumin" method. BERNARD TESTA



'TOO SOON' TO DECLARE VICTORY VS. INFLATION

By CAI U. ORDINARIO

X @caiordinario

IT'S too early for the country to "declare victory" against inflation, giving the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas (BSP) more reason to keep monetary policy tight longer than expected.

In a briefing on Wednesday, BSP Governor Eli M. Remolona Jr. told reporters that the monetary authorities do not expect any rate cuts soon.

However, Remolona said it is also unlikely that the Monetary Board, the highest policy-making body of the BSP, will increase rates further.

"You saw the inflation number yesterday [Tuesday]. It's well within what we thought [it] would be. So, our models are more or less right. The models and the data seem to suggest that it's still too soon to declare victory," Remolona said.

"We seem to be on our way [to meeting our targets]. But there's not enough data to assure us that we will settle comfortably within our target range of 2 to 4 percent.

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Inflation...

CONTINUED FROM A1

In terms of just the data, things look okay. But it's not assured," he also said.

Remolona said the proposal to increase minimum wages lodged at the Senate of the Philippines and the House of Representatives would be considered a supply shock to the economy.

The Senate has approved the P100 increase in wages, while the House of Representatives approved a P350 increase in wages. These proposals, Remolona said, will be considered as second round effects.

"[We are at] 3.4 percent. Our model was saying it's going to be around 3.9 for the year. So it's on the edge. So I can't say that we're going to ease [monetary policy] soon. I think it's unlikely that we will tighten it some more. But we'll see what the data says," he added.

Upside risks to inflation that Remolona said would affect the BSP's decision on monetary policy include rice inflation in the domestic market and oil prices in the international market.

In February, PSA said rice inflation increased by 23.7 percent and 26.3 percent for All Income and Bottom 30 percent households, respectively. (See: <https://businessmirror.com.ph/2024/03/06/high-rice-prices-cited-in-3-4-february-inflation/>)

National Statistician Claire Dennis S. Mapa said rice prices accounted for 49 percent or 1.6 percentage points of the inflation of all income households and 79 percent or 3.3 percentage points of the

4.2 percent inflation experienced by the poorest Filipinos.

"Rice prices are a source of upside risk. They are also what we call a salient price. Which means people tend to notice rice prices more than they notice other prices," Remolona said. "[This] means it has an outsized effect on expectations. So we're struggling with [this]. For now, we seem to be able to manage expectations. But rice is very popular. Locally it's rice and then globally it's oil," he added.

Last month, the Monetary Board left the Target Reverse Repurchase (RRP) Rate unchanged for the second time. With the decision, the country's key policy rate was 6.5 percent. The interest rates on the overnight deposit and lending facilities were kept at 6 percent and 7 percent, respectively.

BSP Monetary and Economic Sector In-Charge Iluminada Sibat said the monetary authorities would instead take a "more prudent monetary policy stance" given upside risks to inflation.

However, the economy's growth is not safe from the impact of tight monetary policy. The BSP warned that the full impact of the rate hikes will be felt by the economy this year. (See: <https://businessmirror.com.ph/2024/02/16/prudent-amid-inflation-risk-bsp-keeps-rates-again/>)



Villar to seek extension of RCEF

SENATE committee on agriculture chair Cynthia Villar is proposing for a six-year extension of the implementation of the Rice Competitive Enhancement Fund (RCEF) beyond June this year.

Villar told reporters she will propose for the increase in the annual allocation of P10 billion as tariff collection has been exceeding that amount since 2019.

She said her proposal will in-

crease the funding for water impounding facilities as well as for composting machines for organic fertilizer so that these will have a regular budget.

The lawmaker noted the importance of retaining funding for mechanization as well as the budget intended for the distribution of quality rice seeds.

RCEF was created by the Rice Tariffication Law which provides that tariffs collected from rice

imports should be allocated to programs that benefit local rice farmers and the industry.

However, under the current version of the law, the fund is only expected to be collected until June 2024 after it started in 2019.

RCEF's annual P10 billion allocation is divided into several focus areas including the mechanization program for P5 billion; distribution of high-yielding seeds at P3 billion; training and capacitating

farmers for P1 billion; and credit support for the remaining P1 billion.

"We will change some things based on performance," Villar said on the sidelines of an event hosted by the United Broiler Raiser's Association in Quezon City yesterday.

Villar said she is finalizing the bill on the extension and targets to have it passed and signed into law before June. **-Jed Macapagal**



Agri trade contraction narrows in Q4 2023

THE country's agricultural trade decreased by 0.9 percent to \$6.27 billion in the fourth quarter (Q4) of this year compared to the same period last year, the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) said.

In its latest report released on Tuesday, the PSA said that the recent figure was slower than the 12-percent annual decrease in the previous quarter.

The country's total agricultural exports from October-November last year rose to \$1.62 billion, a 5.0-percent increase from \$1.54 billion a year earlier. Agricultural

exports accounted for 25.9 percent of the country's total trade during the period.

Imports of farm goods, meanwhile, dropped by 2.9 percent to \$4.64 billion from \$4.7 billion last year; this accounted for 74.1 percent of the country's total trade.

During the quarter, agriculture trade balance was at a deficit of \$3.015 billion, or a 6.6-percent dip from the \$3.22 billion of the same period in 2022.

Edible fruits, and nuts and peels of citrus fruit melons accounted for the largest share of agriculture exports during the

October-November period at \$502.12 million, up by 15.27 percent from the previous year's \$435.59 million.

Animal or vegetable fats and oils, and their cleavage products; prepared edible fats; and animal or vegetable waxes fell by 10.6 percent to \$323.73 million from the previous year's \$362.13 million.

Preparations of vegetables, fruit, nuts or other parts of plants was valued at \$169.62 million, 8.7 percent higher from the \$155.95 million recorded a year earlier.

To round up the country's top five

agricultural exports for the fourth quarter of 2023, shipments of tobacco and manufactured tobacco substitutes reached \$135.48 million and preparations of meat, fish and crustaceans, molluscs and other aquatic invertebrates at \$117.91 million.

The top 10 commodity groups in terms of value of agricultural exports contributed \$1.56 billion or 96.2 percent of the country's total agricultural export revenue during the quarter.

JANINE ALEXIS MIGUEL



Local Oggun tractor unveiled

BY LEANDER C. DOMINGO

A LOCALLY developed Oggun tractor has been unveiled by RU Foundry based in Bacolod and the Southeast Asian Regional Center for Graduate Study and Research in Agriculture (Searca) headquartered at the campus of the University of the Philippine Los Baños (UPLB).

Searca Director Glenn Gregorio said the collaboration has resulted in the completion of the enhanced Oggun tractor, an open-systems design tractor locally manufactured in the Philippines.

"The Center strides toward building community resilience and sustainable livelihood through agri-mechanization with open-systems tractors," he said.

Gregorio said the center's General Service Unit, together with the Emerging Innovation for Growth Department, inspected the newly designed Oggun tractor, which is tailored to meet the unique needs of farming communities in the Visayas.

He said that the upgraded Oggun tractor now boasts a power-take-off device for direct coupling of implements, an improved wheel design for enhanced traction, and a sturdier bracket and frame engineered to thrive in the country's diverse terrain and soil conditions.

Headed by Ramon Uy, RU Foundry introduced a locally manufactured hydraulic cylinder for the tractor and upgraded the engine to a fuel-injected type,

ensuring cost-efficient fuel consumption.

RU Foundry's long-term partner, the Kabankalan City-based Central Philippine State University (CPSU) represented by its president Aladino Moraca, as well as the UPLB Center for Agri-fisheries and Biosystems Mechanization (BioMech), witnessed the impressive test run of the Oggun tractor in Bacolod, followed by a hands-on field test in Kabankalan, Negros Occidental, held on February 27-28.

Headed by Ronel Pangan, the UPLB Biomech is also Searca's partner in the farm mechanization initiative.

Gregorio also noted that as part of the community consultation process, the Searca team engaged with the farmers in Sitio Flora in Kabankalan to gather their perspectives on utilizing the localized Oggun tractor in their farms.

Francisco de Guzman, Sitio Flora Agrarian Reform Cooperative (SFARC) president, expressed unwavering enthusiasm on the tractor's potential impact on their community.

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■ The Oggun tractor developed by RU Foundry and the Southeast Asian Regional Center for Graduate Study and Research in Agriculture (Searca) can meet the needs of Filipino farmers. SEARCA PHOTO

De Guzman said SFARC, which manages approximately 120 hectares of agrarian land dedicated to corn, sugarcane and various vegetables, is assisted by the Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR) in enhancing their entrepreneurial skills.

He added that the farm cooperation has been the primary source of vegetable produce being supplied to the Bureau of Jail Management and Penology in Negros Occidental.

However, de Guzman also em-

phasized that there are challenges farmers face in land preparation.

"We depend so much on carabaos for which we pay P300 for four hours of work per day. Additionally, the extreme heat limits their working hours and preparing a hectare of land for production takes up to two weeks," he said.

De Guzman added there are few experienced carabao handlers in their area that could skillfully maneuver the animal for land preparation, making it more challenging for farmers to prepare

their farmland for planting.

With that, Searca said the community envisioned the possibilities and benefits of utilizing an Oggun tractor that can meet their needs.

"Weeks of land preparation from their traditional practice using carabaos can now be shortened to just a few hours with the local tractor in place even with inexperienced tractor drivers and women who could now seamlessly navigate and operate the tractor," Gregorio said.

Searca said the community expressed eagerness to actively participate in the improvement and study of the Oggun tractor's localization process.

"With strong backing from academia through CPSU, government through the DAR and industry through RU Foundry, this initiative is poised to yield promising outcomes fostering community empowerment and ensuring the sustainability of livelihoods in the agricultural areas of Negros Occidental," Searca said.



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Food firms get potential sales in Gulfood

THREE food companies based in Region 2 (Cagayan Valley) made a mark at the Gulfood Show 2024 by generating market leads worth \$3.7 million or around P207 million.

Gulfood 2024 is the largest annual food and beverage trade show in the Arab region held at the Dubai World Trade Center from February 19-23.

According to the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) office in Region 2, this is the third time the region participated in an overseas fair in one year, the first one at the China Asean Expo in Nanning, China, featuring Tuguegarao City and at the Ambiente Fair in Frankfurt, Germany, featuring Quirino province.

Manilyn Ponce, DTI Region 2 information officer, said the three food companies who participated in the Gulfood Show are now in negotiations for potential sales worth \$3.7 million with buyers from India, France, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Pakistan and Africa.

"The figures are expected to increase with serious inquiries



■ Photo shows the booths of Filipino food firms that participated in Gulfood 2024 from Feb. 19-23, 2024.

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

from 13 more potential buyers with interests in the calamansi herbal juice drink and okra chips from JBM Food Products of Cabatuan, Isabela; fresh frozen shrimps from Dataj Aquafarm Inc. of

Santa Teresita, Cagayan; and rice-cassava crackers from Lighthouse Cooperative of Tuguegarao City, Cagayan," Ponce said.

She said the DTI Region 2 is taking businesses to new heights, and

its participation in global events hopes to catapult the region's micro, small and medium enterprises to become significant players in the export arena.

LEANDER C. DOMINGO



P1B sa agrikultura winasak ng El Niño

PUMALO na sa mahigit P1 bilyon ang halaga ng pinsala sa agrikultura ng pananalasa ng El Niño

phenomenon ayon sa ulat ng National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council (NDRRMC) kahapon.

Base sa ulat ng NDRRMC, may kabuuang P1,056,379,891 ang halaga ng nasira matapos na matuyot ang mga pananim sa ibat-ibang lugar sa bansa dulot ng El Niño.

Ang Western Visayas ang may pinakamalaking pinsala sa agrikultura na umaabot sa P678,705,381, sumunod ang Mimaropa, P319,755,957; Ilocos, P54,450,077; Calabarzon, 2,750,947; at Zamboanga, P717,527.

Apektado rito ang 23,086 magsasaka habang 17,718 ektaryang sakahan at maisan ang nawasak sa pagtuyot.

May mga ulat din sa kakulangan ng mainom na tubig at pang-agrikultura

sa anim na barangay sa Himamaylan, Negros Occidental mula noong Disyembre 2023.

Samantala, nagpatupad ang Zamboanga City ng rationing scheme sa ba't ibang lugar dahil sa kakulangan sa tubig.

Nagdeklara na ng state of calamity ang bayan ng Bulalacao, Oriental Mindoro dahil sa pagkatuyo ng mga ilog at mga sakahan dahilan upang mamatay ang kanilang (Edwin Bal-asa)



Soybeans, corn flat

BEIJING- Chicago soybean and corn futures were flat on Wednesday, hovering near three-year lows ahead of a key USDA report as South American harvest pressure continues to drag the market.

Wheat slipped after ending lower in the previous session.

Traders are awaiting the US Department of Agriculture's (USDA) monthly supply-and-demand report on Friday to assess the latest estimates on corn and soy production in South America.

"Limited changes are expected for the US balance sheets with a focus on updates to South American production," Bergman Grains Research said in a note.

Analysts, on average, expect the USDA to lower its estimate for Brazil's soybean harvest to 152.28 million metric tons and Argentina's harvest to 50.23 million metric tons, a Reuters poll showed.

The most-active soybean contract on the Chicago Board of Trade (CBOT) held its ground at \$11.50-1/4 a bushel.

CBOT corn was flat at \$4.26-3/4 a bushel.

Wheat fell 0.45 percent to \$5.48-1/2 a bushel.

Chinese importers are believed to have purchased at least 65,000 metric tons of animal feed corn from Ukraine in deals on Monday, European traders said on Tuesday.

- Reuters



EU govts prepare for possibility of food crisis

THE combined forces of El Niño and La Niña have crippled Latin American soy output. Ukrainian and Russian grain farmers have gone to war. Indonesia has banned shipments of palm oil to Europe, while China is hungry for crops. The Mediterranean region is getting more like a desert.

The year is 2024. "Food shortage in Europe? The only question is when, but they don't listen," says an unidentified voice in a video broadcast. The audience sits quietly—listening.

The dramatic collision of events, of course, hasn't yet come to pass. But over two days in central Brussels last month, some 60 European Union and government officials, food security experts, industry representatives and a few journalists gathered to confront the possibility of something barely on the radar a few years ago: a full-blown food crisis.

The group sat down in a refurbished art deco Shell building to simulate what might happen, and help design policies aimed at prevention and response. A few streets away, farmers were stepping up their protests against the European Union, disrupting supplies to supermarkets as if to sharpen the focus of the participants.

The plush co-working space was hardly a bunker or secure basement

in a warzone. But the video images of drought, floods and civil unrest to the pounding beat of ominous music created a sense of urgency.

"Expect a level of chaos," warned Piotr Magnuszewski, a systems modeler and game designer who has worked with the United Nations. "You may be confused at times and not have enough information. There will be time travel."

To watch one of the best-fed regions in the world stress test its food system underscores a growing level of alarm among governments over securing supplies for their populations. In the space of four years, multiple shocks have shaken up the way food is grown, distributed and consumed.

The coronavirus pandemic, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and disruptions on key shipping routes have disturbed supply chains and sent prices soaring. Erratic and extreme weather now regularly disturbs farming. Against that backdrop, officials are no longer asking when a food crisis may arrive, but rather how many crises they can deal with at once.

And so, it's 2025 and there are more harvest failures. They impact animal feed prices, which curbs livestock and fish production. Some ships carrying crops turn away from Europe to cater to higher bidders elsewhere.

Asia's palm oil export limits are now reducing supplies of daily staples from margarine to bread. Allegations of corporate greed, disinformation and conspiracy theories are spreading.

"The timeliness in terms of the topic was incredibly on point," said Katja Svensson, a senior food systems adviser to the Nordic Council of Ministers who participated in the simulation. She now wants her region to hold its own. "When it comes to movies, it's engrossing. You really become part of it, and it has a far greater impact," she said.

Stress testing has been a common feature in the banking industry since the financial crisis, while government officials and policymakers in the United States have done so-called wargaming from time to time, even one involving a pandemic just months before coronavirus struck.

In Europe, government-led exercises are rare, let alone one focused on food, according to Magnuszewski, science director at the Centre for Systems Solutions in Wrocław, Poland.

Seemingly, Europe is in an enviable position. It's one of the world's biggest suppliers of foodstuffs from grains and dairy to pork and olive oil, with some of the lowest levels of food insecurity.

On average, just 14 percent of household spending went toward

food in 2021, compared with some 60 percent in Nigeria and 40 percent in Egypt. The Global Food Security Index regularly ranks European countries as the most secure in the world.

But there are vulnerabilities. Weather and climate events are hitting farmers regularly, costing Europe more than €50 billion (\$54.3 billion) in economic losses in 2022. The cost of fertilizers and energy needed to grow crops and keep glasshouses running soared in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Things unravel further later in 2025. Thieves are looting supermarkets. Police struggle to contain riots spreading in cities. People in Germany can't find fish and meat at grocery stores. Livestock farmers are going bankrupt.

Meanwhile, the public's focus shifts to profiteering by commodity traders. Small farms fall like dominoes, while attacks on immigrants begin to become more widespread. Is the EU a sinking ship, someone asks in the video? It's all the fault of "liberal elites," someone else says.

Now for the solutions. Participants split into groups with each person assigned a new role, from farmer lobbyists to food worker unions. (This reporter played a representative of a trade group for oil plant producers). In circles of four

or five with coffee and cookies, the groups workshopped policies from crisis management and building reserves to food provision for the most vulnerable.

Longer term, there are questions over how to curb Europe's concerning overreliance on imports of crops like soy needed to feed its vast meat and dairy industry. So a taskforce, attended by this reporter, pushed to cut subsidies for livestock farming. Wine and crudités ended the day.

Day two started with a mindfulness session before focusing on policy proposals and any conclusions. There was little objection to the idea that diets need to shift toward healthier options and away from meat. Questions loomed over how best to manage food reserves and monitor the level of stockpiles.

Participants singled out other topics for future exercises, from food safety and bioterrorism to countering disinformation and preparation for animal-borne diseases, the latter being "a huge issue and it risks becoming even bigger," Svensson said.

In truth, few governments in Europe are prepared for managing future food crises, according to Chris Hegadorn, a retired US diplomat who co-organized the workshop.

"We've been living in crisis for the last three years," said Hegadorn, adjunct professor of global food politics at Sciences Po in Paris. "There's a lot more to be done on every level. Crises are only going to come faster and harder." *Bloomberg News*