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**DA seeks farmlands to test Irri varieties**

The Department of Agriculture (DA) is seeking to expand its partnership with nonprofit agricultural research institute International Rice Research Institute (Irri) to utilize technology to boost rice output. In a statement on Friday, the DA said it is looking for cluster of farm lands to showcase IRRI's seed varieties and technologies to produce more of this staple food, especially in the face of climate change. Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. said the expanded partnership can be realized by the second half of this year while Cao Duc Phat, chair of IRRI's board of trustees, said the DA proposal was "the best music to our ears." The DA, through the Masagana program, is striving to achieve the target of 97 percent self-sufficiency in rice by 2028. As of 2022, the country's rice self-sufficiency level reached 77 percent, but official data showed that palay production hit a record 20.06 million metric tons (MT) in 2023, an increase of 1.5 percent from 19.76 million MT in 2022. —JORDEFNE B. LAGARE





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## NFA ordered to submit documents on P93-M rice sale

By ELIZABETH MARCELO

Ombudsman Samuel Martires on Thursday went to the National Food Authority main office in Quezon City to personally serve a subpoena that would compel the agency to submit several documents in connection with the alleged anomalous sale of P93.75 million worth of NFA rice to two traders.

"I personally went to the NFA to obtain the data that we need in our investigation, such as the list of warehouses of milled rice or bigas. Because we cannot guess where these sacks of rice were stored, where they were delivered or where this rice delivered to traders were sourced from," Martires said over dzBB.

Martires said the requested documents will be crucial to his office's ongoing investigation of NFA Administrator Roderico Bioco and 138 other NFA officials and employees facing administrative charges of grave misconduct, gross neglect of duty and conduct prejudicial to the best interest of the service.

The charges stemmed from the alleged illegal sale of 75,000 bags of rice, part of the country's buffer stock, to two traders for a total of P93.75 million.

The ombudsman had earlier ordered the six-month preventive suspension without pay of Bioco and the 138 other NFA officials and employees as it found "strong evidence showing their guilt" of the administrative charges.

At a press conference on Monday, Agriculture Secretary **Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr.** said Bioco and the other officials and employees were already placed under preventive suspension in compliance with the ombudsman's order.

Laurel said those suspended include NFA assistant administrator for operations John Robert Hermano, 12 regional managers, 26 branch managers and 99 warehouse supervisors all over the country.

During the Bagong Pilipinas Ngayon briefing, Agriculture Assistant Secretary and spokesman Arnel de Mesa said that Laurel already directed NFA officer-in-charge Piolito Santos to prepare all the documents needed by the ombudsman.

"Our Internal Audit Service and the independent investigating panel (will assist) so that all the necessary papers will be made available, as well as all the people involved," De Mesa said.

On Wednesday, the NFA Council appointed Santos, the concurrent NFA assistant administrator for finance and administration, as OIC of the agency.

At the same time, De Mesa said that Laurel also tasked Santos to ensure the resumption in the operation of NFA warehouses after the storage

facilities were padlocked.

In a separate text message to **The STAR**, Santos said the NFA main office already complied with the subpoena of the ombudsman and directed field offices to submit the required documents.

"We provided the documents and additional papers will come from the (NFA) branches. We advised field offices to submit today," Santos told **The STAR**.

According to De Mesa, the Department of Agriculture will also tap officials of the Commission on Audit as witnesses in the ongoing investigation.

"We need to make sure that the current stocks are intact and there will be proper accounting of new deliveries," De Mesa added.

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

Martires, meanwhile, said that while some of the NFA rice buffer stocks may still be in the warehouses, this does not automatically mean that they were not illegally sold.

"There may be warehouses that have yet to release the rice, or maybe the traders or buyers have yet to haul the sold items, though, these were already paid," he said. "We will find out about all of this in our investigation."

### House probe

Speaking at a hearing of the House committee on agriculture and food last Thursday, NFA assistant administrator for operations Lemuel Pagayunan reaffirmed his allegation that the rice stocks sold were not deteriorating but were treated and fit for human consumption.

He said the disposition of the rice stocks did not undergo public bidding and was not approved by the NFA Council, the agency's governing board.

"There was no bidding, the quality of rice was good, the rebagging and the reselling price (of the rice) was not appropriate," he told the panel.

The motu proprio inquiry was called based on House Resolution 1611, filed by panel chair and Quezon Rep. Wilfrido Mark Enverga, citing a report of Pagayunan about Bioco's "improper" sale of some 75,000 bags to "selected rice traders who bought the said stocks at a price much lower than the prevailing price... and sold the same at very much higher prices."

Enverga moved for the amendment of his resolution, as it turned out that the bags sold were actually 130,000.

The bill stated that NFA is authorized to dispose of rice stocks before the quality of the stocks deteriorates and becomes unacceptable and unsafe. — **With Bella Cariaso, Sheila Crisostomo, Jasper Emmanuel Arcalas**



# REMATE

## ANG DIARYO NG MASA

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### DTI hinikayat na palakasin, pagtibayin ang presyo, supply sa El Niño

HINIKAYAT ni Defense Secretary and Task Force El Niño chair Gilberto C. Teodoro Jr. ang Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) na palakasin at pagtibayin ang presyo ng mga pangunahing bilihan at supply monitoring para protektahan ang mga mamimili mula sa mga mapagsamantalang negosyante sa gitna ng El Niño phenomenon.

Alinsunod ito sa direktiba ni Pangulong Marcos na kailangan nang makialam ang gobyerno sa para mabantayan ang paggalaw

ng presyo at suplay ng basic goods.

"Let us ensure that (an) adequate supply of basic necessities and goods are available to the general public, especially those in areas hardest affected by El Niño," ayon kay Teodoro.

Bahagi pa rin ito ng pagsisi-kap ng task force laban sa manipulasyon ng mga pangunahing kalakal at bilihan.

Sa ilalim ng Executive Order (EO) No. 53 ni Pangulong Marcos, nakasaad na "directs the government to streamline,

reactivate, and reconstitute the old El Niño task forces under EO No. 16 (s. 2001)" at Memorandum Order No. 38 (s. 2019), kung saan itinalaga si Teodoro bilang chairperson ng task force, kasama si Science and Technology Secretary Renato U. Solidum bilang co-chairperson.

Sa kabilang dako, sa nilagda-an noong Enero 19, 2024 na EO 53, ipinag-utos sa task force na i-develop ang komprehensibong disaster preparedness at rehabilitation plan para sa El Niño at La Niña upang makapagbigay ng

"systematic, holistic, and results-driven interventions" para tulungan ang publiko na makayanan at mabawasan ang matinding epekto nito.

Itinalaga naman ng Pangulo sina Environment and Natural Resources Secretary Maria Antonia Yulo Loyzaga, Agriculture Secretary Francis Tiu Laurel Jr., Health Secretary Teodoro J. Herbosa, at National Economic and Development Authority Secretary Arsenio M. Balisacan bilang mga miyembro ng Task Force.

KRIS JOSE

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## **'Anay' sa NFA nararapat malipol!**

DAPAT gumamit na si President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. ng kamay na bakal laban sa mga "anay" sa National Food Authority (NFA). Nabulgar ang korupsiyon sa NFA nang mabuking ang pagbebenta ng bigas sa napaka-murang halaga sa pinaborang traders.

Kung magiging malamya si BBM sa pagkastigo sa mga "anay" sa NFA, mababankarote ang pamahalaan. Sa tingin ko, sinamantala ng mga "anay" ang pagkakataon dahil naging makupad ang Presidente sa pag-a-appoint ng kalihim sa Department of Agriculture. Nagkaroon ng pagkakataon ang mga korap sa NFA na maibenta ang buffer stock na bigas na laan sana sa pang-emergency na pangangailangan ng bansa.

Todo na ang ginagawang pag-iimbestiga ni **Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel** sa bentahan ng NFA rice. Sinuspende na ng Ombudsman ang dalawang mataas na opisyal ng NFA at 138 na empleyado na sangkot sa bentahan ng bigas. Lumalabas na binenta lamang ng mga korap ang 150,000 sako ng bigas sa mga pinaborang traders sa halagang P25.00 bawat kilo.

Napakamura ng binentang NFA rice! Tiba-tiba ang traders. Magkano ang bigas sa pamilihan ngayon? Nasa P40.00 hanggang P60.00 ang kilo. Ang NFA rice na binili ng traders ay ibebenta sa mamamayan ng ganyang halaga o mas mataas pa. Kawawa ang namamayan sa ginawa ng mga "anay" sa NFA. Dapat kasuhan din ang traders na bumili ng NFA rice.

Tiyak na umaapaw ang bulsa ng mga "anay" sa NFA. Kahit na sinuspende na sila ng Ombudsman, marami silang nakulimbat na perang pinaghati-hatian. Kamakalawa, nag-simula ang imbestigasyon ng DA at House of Representatives sa bentahan ng NFA rice.

Sana ay magkaroon ng saysay ang pag-iimbestiga sa mga korap sa NFA dahil kung walang mangyayari, ang agrabyado ay mga Pinoy na nagugutom. Patuloy ang pagsirit ng presyo ng bigas. At tiyak ko, lalo pang tataas ang presyo dahil sa epekto ng El Niño na ngayon ay maraming probinsiya na ang napinsala.

Nagdeklara na ng state of calamity ang ilang bayan sa Oriental at Occidental Mindoro dahil natuyo na ang kanilang taniman ng palay. Nagkabitak-bitak na ang mga lupa. Wala nang tubig ang mga ilog kaya wala nang umaagos sa mga irigasyon. Kawawa talaga ang mga magsasaka.

Sa nabulgar na korupsiyon sa NFA sana may managot. Magsagawa rin ng lifestyle check sa mga opisyal at empleyado ng NFA dahil palagay ko matagal nang nangyayari ang bentahan ng bigas. Kaya nauubos ang bigas sa NFA ay dahil sa mga "anay".



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NEWS

## SRA sets incentive for sugar traders

In a bid to stabilize depressed mill-gate prices, the Sugar Regulatory Administration (SRA) has conceived of a plan to encourage conscientious sugar traders and users to support local planters by buying local produce at premium prices in exchange for assured allocations in future government importations. The offer, however, is open only to registered traders, beverage makers and other sugar users in good standing. —STORY BY JORDEENE LAGARE

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# SRA rewards traders backing local farmers

By **Jordeene B. Lagare**  
@jordeenelagare

The Sugar Regulatory Administration (SRA) has conceived of a plan to encourage conscientious sugar traders to support local planters by buying local produce at premium prices in exchange for assured allocations in future government importations.

Under Sugar Order No. 2, the SRA allows traders to purchase 300,000 metric tons (MT) of local raw sugar in exchange for the future allocations, the first voluntary limited volume purchase of local raw sugar, which is expected to stabilize farm-gate prices while "ensuring fair and reasonable retail prices."

When asked if the SRA will implement this moving forward, SRA administrator Pablo Luis Azcona said, "most probably as we need to support those who support the local farmers with a good farm-gate/millgate price."

The agency said it was deemed necessary to adopt "additional, responsive and preemptive measures" by way of voluntary limited volume purchase of domestic raw sugar and will be reclassified as "C" or reserved sugar for a specific period.



HOE, SOW, GROW Farmers of Hacienda Luisita in Tarlac hoe a field before sowing sugarcane. —MARIANNE BERMUDEZ

This is "to maintain a balanced supply and demand of sugar for domestic consumption while ensuring reasonable and stable prices," it said.

## In good standing

The voluntary purchase is open to, among others, farmers, farmer's groups, farmer's co-operative, farmer's association, sugar millers, manufacturers and beverage makers who are licensed local or international sugar trader in good standing.

Those interested should not have any pending case with the SRA and should have updated and paid registration/license fees, submitted repor-

torial requirements and is legally allowed to engage in sugar trading activities.

The order covers 300,000 MT of raw sugar, applicable to planters' share covered by quedans for crop year 2023-2024.

The volume is proportioned as follows: up to 60,000 MT for sugar covered by quedans whose date of issuance is on or before the week ending Jan. 28 and a maximum of 240,000 MT for sugar whose issuance date is on or after the week ending Feb. 3.

## First come, first served

The SRA head holds the discretion to temporarily or per-

manently stop the further implementation of the voluntary purchase at any time upon the issuance of a notice effective the next Monday after the date of issuance of the same notice.

Participation is on a "first-come first-served basis," as long as complete requirements have been submitted and the quedans to be reclassified have been surrendered.

Eligible participants who have complied with the conditions set forth by the SRA will be given priority in the future program for importation authorized by the government, depending on the volume of local raw sugar imported at a ratio of 1.5:1 (locally produced raw sugar purchased: imported sugar).

Data from the SRA showed that millsite prices of sugar averaged P2,566.40 per 50-kilo bag as of Feb. 14, a reduction of 14.76 percent from P3,010.62 per 50-kilo bag in the same period a year ago.

In Metro Manila markets, retail prices have decreased as well. Based on the Department of Agriculture's price monitoring, refined sugar is sold from P72 to P100 per kilogram as of Friday, lower than P87 to P110 per kg a year before. **INQ**





# Negros sugarcane plantations hit by drought

By **GILBERT BAYORAN**

**BACOLOD CITY** – Nearly 100,000 hectares or one third of sugarcane plantations in Negros have been affected by drought.

Sugar plantations in Negros Occidental have been most affected by El Niño, according to Ma. Lourdes Almodiente, chief agriculturist at the Sugar Regulatory Administration (SRA).

Almodiente said losses incurred by sugarcane farmers are being consolidated and would be released next week.

She said there has been "almost no rain" in southern Negros since January while parts of northern Negros, Panay and Cebu have been experiencing rainfall.

She said drought in southern Negros "is more

intense."

Almodiente said the SRA and Department of Agriculture are planning cloud seeding operations to minimize the impact of drought.

Manolet Lamata, president of the United Sugar Producers Federation, said around 300,000 hectares of land in Negros are planted with sugarcane.

"We need to pray for the rain to come," Lamata said, noting that damage to affected plantations may reach billions of pesos.

## **Cotabato continues to sizzle**

Meanwhile, Cotabato City has continued to sizzle as the temperature reached 37 degrees Celsius, one of the highest recorded in the country so far this year.

The Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration (PAGASA) said the high temperature was recorded at 2 p.m. on Thursday.

The heat index in Cotabato City reached 43 degrees on the same day.

A heat index of 42 to 51 degrees may cause heat cramps and heat exhaustion, with heat stroke probable with continued exposure.

In Bacolod, Mayor Alfredo Benitez suspended classes in all levels in public and private schools yesterday due to the high heat index.

Extreme heat was also experienced in La Carlota City in Negros Occidental, Mambusao and Roxas City in Capiz, Iloilo City and Dumangas town in Iloilo province.





## Where's P152B from sales of rice buffer stocks, NFA asked

**By Jester Manalastas**

A House leader asked the National Food Authority (NFA) and the Commission on Audit (COA) to account for the P152 billion in total cash that it was supposed to have received as inflows from 2018 to 2022 through a management audit of the controversial

government corporation

In the House Committee on Food and Agriculture hearing on the supposed sale of 75,000 sacks of buffer stock rice without auction, Albay Rep. Joey Salceda urged Congress "not to limit its investigation merely to the P93 million sale in question this year," but to include all sales of buffer stock since the Rice Tariffication

Law took effect in 2019.

According to Salceda, the NFA is supposed to have received a total of P85.7 billion in national government subsidies and another P66.3 billion in sales of rice stocks from 2018 to 2022. That totals to P152 billion from those five years alone.

"That is additive. Even with a loss incurred of P20 billion –

or the difference between the direct cost of rice and the sale of rice – that's still P132 billion to account for," Salceda added.

Salceda thus moved that the Committee sustain investigating not just the sale of the 75,000 sacks of rice supposedly without auction, but the management performance of the NFA from 2019 to 2023.