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# DA chief orders audit of NFA rice disposition

By ROMINA CABRERA

**Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr.** has ordered the Department of Agriculture (DA)'s Internal Audit Service to look into the rice disposition by the National Food Authority (NFA) for the past five years amid the current rice sale controversy.

The audit will include the disposition data from 2019 when the Rice Tariffication Law was passed that allowed the agency to sell rice to the public, according to the DA.

The DA secretary said that provisions in the law could have been taken advantage of by NFA officials and private traders, using the aging rice buffer stocks as leeway for the sale.

"We want to see if there is a pattern of rice disposition that is disadvantageous to government," Laurel said.

Officer-in-charge Joan Jagonos-Oliva will head the DA-IAS in conducting the examination of the NFA rice stocks.

The Office of the Ombudsman recently ordered the suspension of 139 officials from the NFA, including administrator Roderico Bioco and

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## DA chief From Page 1

assistant administrator for operations John Robert Hermano.

Also suspended were 99 warehouse supervisors, 26 branch managers and 12 regional managers, who are set to be replaced by the next-in-line officials.

Ombudsman Samuel Martires personally served the subpoena to the officials that will compel them to submit documents over the alleged anomalous sale.

The DA said private traders will not be free from liability if they are found to be liable during the probe.

The agency added that it is ready to face all investigations, including the planned House and Senate probes, into the NFA mess.

The NFA has appointed officer-in-charge Pilolito Santos as the concurrent NFA administrator for finance and administration.

As of Feb. 1, the NFA had 361,396 bags of 50-kilo milled rice, including 193,386 bags in stock for more than three months.

On Feb. 13, NFA assistant administrator for operations Lemuel Pagayunan alleged that Bioco issued memoranda allowing the sale of 75,000 bags of NFA rice totaling P93.75 million to certain traders.

The NFA previously defended the sale of the rice, saying that the agency is allowed to dispose of aging stocks "up to 10 percent lower than the mandated price" to traders.

Speaking at a hearing of the House committee on agriculture and food last week, Pagayunan said 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.

Pagayunan also cited a memorandum issued by Hermano on Nov. 13, 2023 instructing that the stocks be rebagged in containers without NFA markings prior to selling as commercial rice.

Pagayunan's allegations prompted Laurel to form a panel to investigate the alleged corruption at the NFA.





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## DA orders audit of NFA rice buffer stock disposition

By JEL SANTOS

In the wake of the suspension of 139 National Food Authority (NFA) officials and employees over the controversial sale of rice buffer stocks to private traders, Department of Agriculture (DA) Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. has ordered an audit of the agency's rice disposition since 2019.

In a statement released Saturday, March 9, Laurel said he authorized the DA-Internal Audit Service (DA-IAS), which is now led by officer-in-charge (OIC) Joan Jagonos-Oliva, to conduct a review of NFA rice stocks.

Laurel also directed DA-NFA officials and personnel to "extend their full assistance and cooperation to DA-IAS to ensure the successful conduct of this audit."

The audit will examine disposition data since 2019 when the Rice Tariffication Law (RTL) was passed, Laurel said.

"We want to see if there is a pattern of rice disposition that is disadvantageous to the government," he said. ▶2

## DA orders audit of NFA rice buffer stock disposition 1◀

In an earlier press briefing, Agriculture spokesperson Assistant Secretary Arnel de Mesa explained that the functions to import and directly sell rice to traders were removed from the NFA when the RTL was passed.

He stated that the NFA's only remaining function is "buffer stocking" as part of the government's response in times of calamity and disaster. The buffer stock, however, should be obtained from either the NFA or local farmers.

The DA spokesperson stressed that NFA's primary mandate is to have 15 to 30 days of rice buffer stock, or at least 350,000 metric tons, on reserve in the event of a calamity or disaster.

Per NFA's data as of Feb. 1 this year, the number of 50-kilo bags milled was recorded at 361,396 bags, with 193,386 bags in stocks for more than three months.

It was recalled that an NFA official accused several agency executives of

inappropriately disposing of rice buffer supplies without bidding and at rates that purportedly is disadvantageous to the government.

NFA executives denied any wrongdoing, arguing that the sale followed processes.

On March 4, the DA implemented the Ombudsman's preventive suspension of the 139 NFA officials and employees, including Administrator Roderico Bioco and Assistant Administrator for Operations John Robert Hermano, as the anti-graft body investigates allegations of corruption in the alleged disadvantageous sale of approximately 75,000 50-kilo sacks of rice to private traders.

The DA chief recently told newly appointed NFA OIC Administrator Piolito Santos to provide the Office of the Ombudsman all the necessary documents it needs in its investigation into the alleged improper sale of NFA rice.

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### **Imbak na bigas ng NFA mula 2019, pinapa-audit ng DA**

Ipinag-utos ni Agriculture Secretary Francisco P. Tiu Laurel, Jr. ang malalimang pag-audit ng imbak na bigas ng National Food Authority (NFA) mula 2019 hanggang sa kasalukuyan nang maipasa ang Rice Tariffication Law (RTL).

Ito'y makaraang mabunyag na ibinenta umano ng bagsak-presyo ng mga opisyal ng NFA ang mga stock na bigas sa NFA warehouse sa pribadong negosyante.

Partikular na inatasan ni Laurel na magsagawa ng pagbusisi sa NFA rice stocks ang DA-Internal Audit Service (IAS) na pinamumunuan ni officer-in-charge Director Joan Jagonos-Oliva.

Sa ilalim ng RTL, hindi pinapayagan ang NFA na magbenta ng bigas sa publiko.

"We want to see if there is a pattern of rice disposition that is disadvantageous to government," sabi ni Tiu. Nitong Lunes ay pi-

natawan ng preventive suspension ng Office of the Ombudsman ang 139 NFA officials and employees, kabilang sina administrator Roderico Bioco at assistant administrator for operations John Robert Hermano, dahil sa umano'y korapsyon sa pagbenta nang palugi sa 75,000 sako ng bigas na tig-50 kilo.

Bumuo ng panel si Laurel para imbestigahan ang mga opisyal na nag-awtorisa sa pagbebenta ng milled rice na nasa NFA warehouse sa P25 kada kilo ng walang bidding, at palay (unmilled rice) sa P23 per kilo. (Angie dela Cruz)





## 'BATA' NI DIGONG DAMAY SA NFA PROBE

IPINAG-UTOS ni Agriculture Secretary **Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr.** ang pag-audit sa mga imbak na bigas ng National Food Authority (NFA) sapul noong 2019 o sa administrasyon ni dating Pangulong Rodrigo "Digong" Duterte.

Inatasan ni Laurel ang Internal Audit Service (IAS) na magsagawa ng pagsiyasat sa mga stock ng bigas simula sa panahon na ipairal ang Rice Tariffication Law noong 2019. Ang pinuno ng IAS ay si officer-in-charge Director Joan Jagonos-Oliva.

Noong pinatupad ang Rice Tariffication Law, inalis sa NFA ang papel na umangkat ng bigas sa abroad. Ang mandato na lamang ng NFA ay tiyakin ang supisyenteng supply ng buffer stock ng bigas na katumbas ng 30 araw ng total consumption ng bansa kapag lean season at 15 araw kung hindi.

Pinagbabawalan din ang NFA na magbenta ng bigas sa publiko.

Ang probisyon na ito ay posibleng pinagsamantalahan ng mga opisyal ng NFA at trader nang ibenta ang lumang stock ng bigas.

"DA-NFA officials and personnel are directed to extend their full assistance and cooperation to DA-IAS to ensure the successful conduct of this audit," ayon kay Laurel.

"We want to see if there is a pattern of rice disposition that is disadvantageous to the government," dugtong pa niya.

Noong nakaraang Lunes, ipinag-utos ng Ombudsman ang preventive suspension ng 139 opisyal at empleyado ng NFA, kabilang si administrator Roderico Bioco at assistant administrator for operations John Robert Hermano, dahil sa diumano'y maanomalyang bentahan ng 75,000 sako ng bigas sa dalawang trader nang walang public bidding. **(Riz Dominguez)**



## Permanent KADIWA store in Bataan to benefit 28 farmer coops – DA

**By Joel dela Torre**

THE Department of Agriculture (DA) has turned over P5 million financial grant for the establishment of a permanent KADIWA store in Limay, Bataan that is seen to benefit 28 farmer cooperatives and associations in the province.

Secretary Francisco Laurel Jr. said that the

project is part of the government's push for food security and higher income for the 3,826 farmer-members.

The P5 million KADIWA project, he added, includes the P1 million trading capital to support the center.

"A permanent KADIWA store in Limay promises affordable, fresh, and safe food for local consumers while providing farmers with

increased income opportunities. However, this is just the beginning: More initiatives are needed to sustain this momentum," Laurel stressed.

In the same date, the agri chief also witnessed the signing of an agreement among the DA, local government unit of Limay, Bataan Peninsula State University, and Limay Polytechnic College for the launch of

another Zero Kilometer Food Project.

Zero KM, an initiative launched last year in the towns of Hermosa and Dinalupihan, promotes healthy eating while minimizing cost and impact on the environment by consuming locally-grown fruits, vegetable and other agricultural products.

"Implementing this concept at the grass-

roots level within municipalities is where its true impact lies. It addresses the critical issue of food supply and demand at the local level, echoing concerns that resonate at the provincial and national levels. This grassroots approach fosters a deeper understanding, better planning, and effective management of our food systems," the Secretary pointed out.



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## EDITORIAL

### NFA housecleaning

With rice retailed at P20 per kilo still stuck in the realm of aspiration, a scandal has erupted in the **National Food Authority**, which is tasked to maintain a rice buffer stock for the country by buying from local farmers. The scandal has led to the six-month suspension by the Office of the Ombudsman of 139 NFA officials and employees led by administrator Roderico Bioco, for administrative charges of grave misconduct, gross neglect of duty and conduct prejudicial to the best interest of the service. The ombudsman has subpoenaed documents related to the case.

Apart from the ombudsman, the House of Representatives is conducting a probe amid a report of NFA assistant administrator for operations Lemuel Pagayunan about an allegedly anomalous sale of 130,000 bags of NFA rice worth P93.75 million to two traders at prices lower than the prevailing costs. The two then sold the rice at high prices.

NFA officials have defended the sale, explaining that the agency is allowed to sell rice buffer stock if the rice is deteriorating and could become unsafe for human consumption. Pagayunan, however, said the rice sold was not approaching decay, and no public bidding was held. The NFA Council, the

governing body of the agency, was not informed of the sale. Rebagging and reselling of the rice, he told the House, "was not appropriate."

With the suspension of the NFA officials, the government must ensure that there will be no serious disruption in the agency's principal task, which is to buy locally produced rice and maintain a healthy buffer of the nation's staple. The NFA has long been hounded by suspicions of corruption. Under the Rice Tariffication Law, the NFA has been stripped of its authority to stabilize rice supply and prices through importations. With its mandate already drastically limited, it's doubly disappointing to hear allegations of continuing anomalies in the NFA.

Now even carrying out its limited task could be compromised. The six-month suspension covers 12 regional managers, 26 branch managers and 99 warehouse supervisors of the NFA. It will take time before the ongoing probes by the ombudsman and the House are finished. In the meantime, rice retail prices continue to go up, again fueling food inflation. The government must see to it that the turbulence in the NFA will lead to a genuine, thorough housecleaning, and will not destabilize rice supply and prices.





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# Imee Marcos slams importation of rice

BY RJAY ZURIAGA CASTOR

**I**LOILO CITY: The **National Food Authority (NFA)**, whose function is to procure palay (unmilled rice) locally and maintain the optimal level of buffer stock, has become an importation entity, Sen. Maria Imelda Josefa "Imee" Marcos said on Friday, March 8.

"The problem is the NFA has entered into importation, similar to the Department of Agriculture. I told them, 'You've become a department of importation. You're no longer helping the farmers, just importing

whenever there's a shortage,'" she said in Guimaras on Friday.

Marcos was in Guimaras to distribute financial assistance to 2,000 beneficiaries under the Assistance to Individuals in

Crisis Situation program of the Department of Social Welfare and Development.

The senator noted that the NFA "seems to have lost its way" in fulfilling its mandate to maintain sufficient rice buffer stocks to be sourced from local farmers.

"They are not supposed to import. They are meant to support the locals," she added.

Marcos also expressed concern about the NFA's "highly suspicious" sale of 75,000 bags of rice stock worth P93.75 million to two traders.

"Now they're saying it's local, but it was sold for a huge amount

to only two importers," she said.

The senator filed a Senate resolution on March 4 to investigate NFA's actions, which she described as having "no transparency" with regard to the purchasing rates for locally produced rice.

The buffer stock was allegedly sold to private traders at P25 a kilo, which is significantly lower than the market price of P70 per kilogram.

Marcos also disclosed that the Ombudsman issued a subpoena, demanding the NFA to provide documents regarding the alleged anomalous sale of rice to traders at lower prices.





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# PEOPLES' JOURNALS

Everybody's Newspaper

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AIMING FOR 97%: PHILIPPINES RENEWS PUSH FOR RICE SELF-SUFFICIENCY



## EDITORIAL

# Rice self-sufficiency

**AS an agricultural country, the Philippines is supposed to be self-sufficient in rice, which is the staple food of the Filipino people.**

But due to a number of factors, this Asian nation continues to import rice to meet the food needs of the mushrooming population.

After the end of late President Ferdinand E. Marcos' administration, the Philippines even became the world's biggest rice-importing nation.

And to think that we even exported rice during FM government.

Today, however, the government hopes to achieve the target of 97 percent self-sufficient in rice by 2028, when the Marcos government ends.

This, the government will do by expanding its partnership with the Los Banos, Laguna-based International Rice Research Institute (IRRI).

Last Friday, the **Department of Agriculture (DA)** said that it is looking for cluster of farm lands to showcase IRRI's seed varieties and technologies to produce more rice.

Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel said the expanded PH-IRRI partnership can be realized by the second quarter of the year.

No less than Cao Duc Phat, chairman of the board of trustees of IRRI, described Laurel's proposal as "music to our ears."

Like other Filipinos, we believe that concerned government agencies, led by DA, are in a position to achieve rice self-sufficiency.





## Gender responsiveness of a small farmers' association

OVER a week ago, I got a message from the president of our small community farmers' association through our group chat, seeking guidance on integrating gender responsiveness indicators into our group's program during a capacity-building activity. This raised an important question: Was gender inclusivity adequately covered in his training? It seemed unlikely that he would require external support if it were. Sadly, my doubt was not entirely unfounded.

Reflecting on my own experience in a government-led farm business training last year, it became clear that gender was an afterthought if considered at all. Despite a session labeled "gender and development," it really boiled down to a little more than a pep talk, akin to a "self-fulfilling prophecy" session, lacking substantive discussion on gender dynamics. My feedback to the organizers hopefully initiated a review of their curriculum, but doubts remained. This year's International Women's Month is a suitable time to



### VIEW FROM THE SOUTH

**DR. LALAY  
RAMOS-JIMENEZ**

reflect on gender matters, especially for our small farmers' association.

There is the pervasive assumption that gender mainstreaming permeates all facets of development in our country because these are supposedly installed in national laws, policies and programs. Yet the practical understanding of this concept on the ground remains questionable, particularly among farmers and community-based groups. While gender-related literature abounds, briefly revisiting its core concepts appears necessary before going into the specific indicators for gender-responsive farmers' associations.

Gender refers to the social, cultural and psychological features, roles, behaviors and qualities that a society considers appropriate for men,

women and nonbinary individuals, that are distinct from biological sex. Gender equality is the belief that people should have the same rights, responsibilities and opportunities, regardless of their gender. Gender equity acknowledges that women and gender-diverse people are not in the same starting position as men because of historical and social disadvantages.

Gender sensitivity requires intense awareness of these societal roles and expectations. However, being truly gender-responsive involves actively incorporating a gender perspective into all components of policymaking, programming and intervention, with a keen recognition of the varied needs, priorities and rights of different genders.

Yet, beyond mere recognition lies the domain of gender-transformative approaches. These go further than addressing discrepancies to challenge the power dynamics, standards and structures perpetuating gender inequality. While gender sensitivity fosters awareness, gender-responsive

strategies actively confront disparities, and gender-transformative initiatives strive to reform societal norms for lasting equality. The journey toward authentic gender inclusivity demands more than lip service; it requires a major change in our shared mindset, policies and practices.

A truly effective farmers' association is one that not only recognizes but actively supports the varied needs, concerns and capabilities of all its members, regardless of gender. As I reflect on the progress of our relatively young group, it is important to consider how we can further enhance our inclusivity and responsiveness to gender dynamics within our association.

Although gender-related discussions have not been at the forefront of our meetings since I joined the association last year, I believe that our group shows a subtle but substantial commitment to gender responsiveness. Despite the absence of formal documentation or explicit discussion on the matter, it is evident that six out of the 10 recognized

gender-responsive indicators for farm associations are already rooted in our group's practices and beliefs.

Leadership within our association shows a sign of gender balance, with women holding key roles as secretary and treasurer, although men occupy the top two leadership positions. Furthermore, both male and female members actively participate in discussions, decision-making processes and capacity-building initiatives, supporting an environment of inclusivity and mutual respect. Access to resources and opportunities is distributed equally among our members, illustrated by the shared access to government-provided inputs and extension services. Furthermore, our communication channels prioritize gender sensitivity, ensuring that all members receive relevant and accessible information.

More importantly, our association upholds a culture of safety and inclusivity, where discrimination, harassment and violence have no place and where every member feels valued

and respected. As we recognize our advances in gender responsiveness, it is necessary to recognize areas where we can improve. Our association currently lacks formal policies and guidelines addressing gender equality, and we have yet to implement initiatives that specifically recognize and empower women farmers within our community.

Looking ahead, we must prioritize education and awareness of gender dynamics in farming, integrating these insights into our practices and policies. By encouraging a more gender-responsive environment and actively supporting initiatives that empower all members, particularly women, we can truly embody the principles of inclusivity and equality that define a progressive farmers' association.

As our association continues to evolve, the members should commit to learning from each other and striving toward a future where everyone in our association, regardless of gender, can prosper and contribute meaningfully to our group's success.