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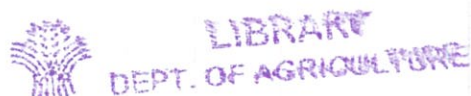
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Early case resolution sought for 141 NFA officials

By **BELLA CARIASO**

The resolution of cases against 141 officials and employees of the National Food Authority must be hastened amid the six-month preventive suspension issued by the ombudsman for the alleged anomalous sale of NFA rice to some traders, according to Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr.

"During our last meeting at the NFA, the secretary wants the resolution of the case very soon so that those who are really accountable will be covered by the investigation and those who have nothing to do (with the alleged anomaly) can

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return to their respective work," Agriculture Assistant Secretary Arnel de Mesa said at a press conference yesterday.

"They are under preventive suspension without pay, this is really difficult for ordinary employees, it's hard for their families if they are not directly involved," he added.

Among those suspended were administrator Roderico Bioco, assistant administrator for operations John Robert Hermano, former officer-in-charge Piolito Santos and 138 officials and employees of the agency, including 12 regional managers, 26 branch managers and 99 warehouse supervisors.

The completion of the audit of NFA's rice disposition will be up to the team created by Laurel.

Laurel ordered the Department of Agriculture's Internal Audit Service to audit the NFA's rice disposition for the past five years after NFA assistant administrator for operations Lemuel Pagayunan accused Bioco and other officials of allowing the sale of 75,000 bags of NFA rice totaling P93.75 million to certain traders.

"I cannot give you an update as it is ongoing unless they issue an update but up to now, we have yet to receive it as the review will start in 2019," De Mesa said.

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Phl bans poultry from Sweden, Czech Republic

By **BELLA CARIASO**

The Philippines is banning the importation of domestic and wild birds from Sweden and the Czech Republic amid the outbreak of avian influenza in the two countries.

Domestic and wild birds and their products, including poultry meat, day-old chicks, eggs and semen from both countries are prohibited from entering the country, according to Memorandum Orders 11 and 12 issued by Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr.

Sweden and the Czech Republic reported an outbreak of the highly pathogenic avian influenza H5N1 on Jan. 5 and Jan. 30, respectively.

"All shipments coming that are in transit before the official communication of this order shall be allowed provided that the products were slaughtered on or before Dec. 22, 2023," Laurel said in his order.

Bird flu spreads among wild aquatic birds worldwide and can infect domestic poultry and other bird and animal species, according to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

El Niño task force bares emergency plan

PRESIDENT Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr.'s task force on El Niño response has put emergency measures in place should the country face a possible water shortage as a result of the El Niño phenomenon.

In a related development, the Department of Agriculture (DA) on Thursday that the buffer stock of rice for the country is enough amid the ongoing El Niño phenomenon.

The DA is part of the government's task force on El Niño.

In a news release on Thursday, the Nat-

ural Water Resources Board (NWRB), an attached agency of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), said deep wells across the country have been put on standby as a "last-recourse mitigation measure".

The NWRB, a member of President Marcos' Task Force El Niño, said deep

wells being operated by the Metropolitan Waterworks and Sewerage (MWSS) can be temporarily activated for possible use in case of water shortage.

During the recent third meeting of the task force, NWRB officer-in-charge Ricky Arzadon also reported that they have been continuously encouraging and reminding all sectors, notably the general public, to conserve water as El Niño peaks.

On Feb. 12, Defense Secretary Gilberto Teodoro Jr. ordered all military camp commanders to conserve water

as the government ramps up its actions to mitigate and manage the impacts of El Niño.

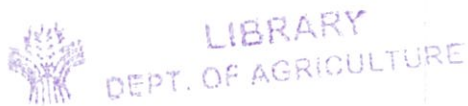
The President also designated the following officials as task force members: Secretary of Environment and Natural Resources Maria Antonia Yulo Loyza-ga, Secretary of Agriculture Francis Tiu Laurel Jr., Secretary of Health Teodoro Herbosa, and Secretary of National Economic and Development Authority Arsenio Balisacan.

DA spokesperson Assistant Secretary Arnel de Mesa in an interview mean-

while said: "Our buffer stock is okay and right now, the harvest season has started this March, April, until May."

De Mesa made the assurance to the public despite the alleged irregularities in the sale of the National Food Authority's (NFA) buffer stocks to private traders which resulted in the suspension of more than a hundred NFA officials and employees.

De Mesa said the three separate investigations regarding the NFA controversy are ongoing, with the DA expecting the results to be out as soon as possible.



DA chief seeks review of law to boost milk production, attract more investors

By Othel V. Campos

THE Department of Agriculture (DA) said Thursday it is taking steps to boost local milk production by encouraging more investments in the dairy industry.

Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. underscored the need to review Republic Act 7884, or The National Dairy Development Act of 1995, in a recent meeting with the Philippine Chamber of Agriculture and Food Inc. (PCAFI).

"We will draft a measure to activate this provision of the dairy law," he said, noting that the industry is among the "low hanging fruits" in the sector.

The DA said it would focus on the provision requiring agreement between commercial milk processors and domestic dairy cooperatives on

the volume of locally-produced milk absorbed by the commercial sector.

The Dairy Act would have determined an increase in volume in 1998, three years after its passage. However, despite the legislation, domestic production remains low, hovering around 1 percent of annual demand, according to the department.

PCAFI said there is lack of agreement on minimum volume and suggested that the DA, through the National Dairy Authority (DA), implement a rule.

The rule would require "commercial milk processors and traders to secure their milk supply from local sources with definite volume, or at least 5 percent of their total requirement, within a full or staggered basis over a certain fixed period."



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SUSPENDED NFA WORKERS: OUR TASK JUST 'MINISTERIAL'

STORY BY KATHLEEN DE VILLA

A total of 108 **National Food Authority** employees, mostly warehouse staff and some managers, ask the Ombudsman to reconsider their 6-month suspension, saying they have no discretionary powers to be involved in the rice sale anomaly. **A6**

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BALANCED NEWS + FEARLESS VIEWS

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FROM A1

By Kathleen de Villa
@kdevillaINQ

More than a hundred employees of the National Food Authority (NFA) implicated in the alleged anomalous sale of the government's rice buffer stocks on Thursday sought to reverse the six-month preventive suspension meted out to them, saying they are now left with no stable source of income.

In a 21-page motion for reconsideration filed at the Office of the Ombudsman, 108 NFA employees, mostly warehouse staff and some branch and regional managers, asked the government watchdog to rethink the suspension, arguing that they were merely assigned with "ministerial duty" and did not wield discretionary powers in the agency.

The petitioners excluded the other suspended high-ranking NFA officials led by Administrator Roderico Bioco and Assistant Administrator for Operations John Robert Hermano.

They comprise the majority of the 139 officials and employees ordered suspended last week to make way for a probe into the allegedly anomalous P93.75 million worth of transactions made by the NFA with G4 Rice Mill San Miguel Corp. and NBK San Pedro Rice Mill.

Errors in suspension order

According to lawyer Dino de Leon, who represents the affected NFA staff, the Ombudsman "should have acted more judiciously" before it decided to hand down the suspension order.

"The Ombudsman must remember that there are loyal government workers being unwarrantedly deprived of their

only source of livelihood and of being forced to face the stigma inherently connected with suspension from office," De Leon said in a statement read out by his co-counsel, Raphael Rayco.

Rayco, who filed the motion in person at the Ombudsman's office, also noted that the financial security of the employees hangs in the balance due to the suspension.

"We're not suggesting anything, we're just asking this honorable office to kindly reconsider the list of respondents, because a lot of employees were hit [by the suspension]. Right now, they have no source of livelihood," Rayco told reporters.

"They merely do ministerial [tasks] and do not exercise discretion in releasing stocks. Upon orders from the higher management, they only release these stocks," he added.

The lawyers also pointed out

glaring "errors" in the suspension order, such as the inclusion of a deceased employee and two others who retired two years ago.

"There are many other errors in the list of respondents," Rayco said.

For De Leon, this legal move by the NFA personnel was not only for their benefit, but also for "all government employees who may fall victim to the failure of due process and the capricious exercise of the Office of the Ombudsman of its powers."

Whistleblower

"There was no explanation as to why each one of them was suspended, save for a general claim that there is already 'strong evidence of guilt' against them," he stressed, adding that this was "unfair" to the affected employees.

The indefinite suspension stemmed from the letter-com-

plaint dated Feb. 12 filed by NFA Assistant Administrator for Operations Lemuel Pagayunan at the Office of the President.

Pagayunan alleged that Bioco and his assistant administrators acted with "manifest partiality, evident bad faith and/or gross inexcusable negligence" when they greenlighted the sale of supposedly aging 75,000 bags of milled rice to "preselected" traders at low prices in the absence of the NFA Council's approval.

Pagayunan had claimed that Bioco issued several memorandums allowing the sale of 75,000 bags of "deteriorating or aging" NFA rice totaling P93.75 million to the traders.

He also cited a Nov. 13, 2023, memorandum supposedly issued by Hermano instructing that the stocks be rebagged in containers without the NFA markings before selling them as commercial rice.

Pagayunan alleged that "while the payment for the sale was made directly in the NFA Central Office, no other bidders or buyers were allowed to submit their bid price for the NFA stocks being sold. There is also no showing that the amount paid by G4 and NBK was the best price offered. In short, the buyers were preselected."

In its order, the Ombudsman said it found "sufficient grounds" to suspend the NFA officials and employees as "there is strong evidence showing their guilt" for grave misconduct, gross neglect of duty and conduct prejudicial to the best interest of the service.

A separate investigation is being conducted by the Department of Agriculture through a fact-finding committee led by Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources Director Demosthenes Escoto. INQ



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Pilipino Star **NGAYON** Diyaryong disente ng masang intelihente

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Cyanide fishing salot sa tao, isda, corals

NAPABALITANG gumagamit ng lasong cyanide ang Chinese fisheries militia sa Panatag (Scarborough) Shoal. Nagnanakaw na nga sila, sinisira pa ang ating bahura. Parang akyat-bahay na winasak ang kandado.

Gas o liquid ang cyanide. Nauso ito sa Europe nu'ng siglo-1700s para pasimpleng patayin ng mga misis ang mapang-aping mister. Hinihinalang binudburan ng cyanide ang pagkain ni Napoleon hanggang mamatay habang naka-exile sa St. Helena.

"Binubugahan ng konting cyanide ang isdang-dagat para maparalisa," hinaing ni Prof. Michael Atrigenio, PhD sa Marine Science. Tapos, nilalagay ito sa malinis na tubig para magising, at ibinebenta pang saltwater aquarium.

Sina-cyanide ng mga tiwaling mangingisda ang matatabang lapu-lapu na nakalungga sa corals. Tapos, ibinebenta nang buhay bagamat naghihigalo. Nalipon ang cyanide sa atay at muscles ng isda.

Malas ang tao na nakakain ng nilasong isda. Kapag konti lang ang cyanide, siya'y mahihilo, masusuka,

Sapol

NI JARIUS BONDOC



manghihina, mananakit ang katawan, at hihimatayin. Kung marami siyang nakain, magkakasakit siya sa atay, at mamamatay, ani Prof. Atrigenio.

Umuugat ang corals sa sahig ng dagat. Nalalason ito sa cyanide. Nawawala ang kulay at tinutubuan na lang ng algae. Kapag walang corals, wala ring itluga, palakihan, kainan, at pahingahan ang mga isda.

Tulad ng dinamita at kuryente, bawal ang cyanide sa pangingisda sa buong mundo. Pinoposasan agad at hinahabla ang mga Pilipinong nahuhuling nagsa-cyanide.

Ganundin dapat ang trato sa Chinese fisheries militia. Dakpin sila ng Philippine Coast Guard at Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources. Para ebidensiya, i-video sila gamit ang aerial drones.

Makinig sa *Sapol*, Sabado, 8-10 ng umaga, DWIZ (882-AM).

EDITORIAL

Preventing another onion crisis

Memories of the 2022 Christmas holiday season, when onions became the top meme, still linger. The onion crisis saw retail prices of the bulbs skyrocketing to as high as P720 a kilo, with no white onions to be had. Flight attendants were held for bringing in bags of red onions from abroad. Onion prices contributed to food-fueled high inflation at the time, and raised questions about management of the agriculture sector under President Marcos.

So the administration must know enough to move decisively in preventing a repeat of the onion crisis. Sufficient warnings are being aired. The Philippine Chamber of Agriculture and Food Inc. has reported that an infestation of armyworms or *harabas* is devastating onion plantations across Luzon. El Niño-induced drought, which is expected to last until May, is aggravating the infestation, according to the PCAFI. The armyworms are reportedly proving resistant to ordinary pesticides.

The dry months until April are the peak harvest season for onions. With the farmgate price at P40 to P42 per kilo, retail prices range between P60 and P120

for red onions, and P50 to P120 for white, which is the variety preferred for Filipino beef steak or *bistek*, burgers and onion rings. This is based on monitoring by the Department of Agriculture.

Because of the armyworm infestation, which has affected an estimated 45 percent of onion plantations, harvests have declined. PCAFI estimates that up to 60,000 metric tons of onions may have to be imported to stabilize supply and prices after the harvest season. Failure to make timely importations of both red and white onions was partly blamed for the 2022 onion crisis. As in other agricultural commodities, the importation must be balanced against the circumstances of domestic onion producers.

The current problem is also a reminder of the need to speed up the provision of cold storage facilities for small-scale farmers, which the administration has promised almost from Day One. The 2022 onion crisis was unprecedented and should have imparted indelible lessons in supply and price management. There is no excuse for the government to allow another onion crisis.



Phl may import onions amid armyworm infestation

By **BELLA CARIASO**

The Philippines might have to import up to 60,000 metric tons of onions as 45 percent of plantations are affected by *harabas* or armyworm infestations that worsened due to El Niño, according to the Philippine Chamber of Agriculture and Food Inc. (PCAFI).

"My expectation was only five percent (of onion farms) will be affected by *harabas* but it has worsened because of El Niño. The armyworms are really attacking the onion plantations," PCAFI president Danilo Fausto said yesterday.

Fausto, who owns an onion farm in Nueva Ecija, noted that his production dropped by 40 percent due to armyworms.

"Luckily, I decided to harvest two weeks ahead. If not, my farm will be wiped out. El Niño caused the worms to multiply. We cannot control the spread. We sprayed insecticides morning and afternoon but we failed to control," he added.

Aside from Nueva Ecija, also affected by armyworm infestations were other onion-producing provinces like Ilocos, Pangasinan and Mindoro, Fausto said.

"Based on our projection, (armyworms) will result in 20 to 30 percent reduction in the harvest (of onions)," he noted.

"We previously requested the Department of Agriculture (DA) to suspend the importation (of onions). We are asking for a suspension until July. (The importation of onions) may start in May. We have 40 more areas planted with onions this year but because of *harabas*, we don't expect an increase in harvest," he added.

In 2023, the country's total onion harvest reached 242,000 MT, he said.

"We need at least 262,000 MT (of onions annually)," he added.

The farmgate price of onions was pegged at P40 per kilo, he noted.

"It increased. Last week, it was P32 (per kilo). It increased as traders competed as they needed to store the bulbs in cold storage. It is now between P41 and P42 per kilo," he said.

The peak harvest season will be until April, he noted.

Based on the DA's monitoring, the retail price of red onions ranged between P60 and P120 per kilo and white onions, between P50 and P120 per kilo.



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Ilocos farmers get P28.4-M aid amid El Niño

SAN FERNANDO CITY, La Union – Farmers in La Union, Ilocos Sur, Ilocos Norte and Pangasinan have received agricultural supplies worth P28.4 million from the Department of Agriculture (DA) to mitigate the effects of El Niño.

The DA said it provided hybrid seeds and insecticides worth P21.1 million; assorted vegetable seeds, P6.2 million, and 2,000 bottles of pesticides.

Analiza Ramos, DA-Ilocos operations officer, said damage to crops in the region due to El Niño was estimated at P103.2 million; rice, P50 million; corn, P44.9 million, and high-value crops, P8.3 million.

"We are updating the El Niño action plan... so we can start the interventions for farmers who were validated," Ramos said.

Annie Bares, DA regional executive director, said the department continues to validate the extent of damage, particularly in Pangasinan and Ilocos Norte.

– Jun Elias

Agri collaboration eyed in PH trade visit to Malaysia in April

By RAYMUND ANTONIO

A group composed of private businesses in the Philippines will conduct a trade visit to Malaysia next month to collaborate on agricultural ventures, which could result in better trade and investment ties among Southeast Asian countries.

In a statement, non-profit organization Go Negosyo said the trade visit will happen from April 23 to 24.

Part of the agenda "are the exploration to share best practices and the creation of commercial values in agricultural commodities for both countries."

The commodities to be explored ►14

Agri collaboration eyed in PH trade visit to Malaysia in April 1◀

are palm oil, rubber, rice, dairy, poultry, pineapple, durian, banana, coconut, and corn.

"Other possible areas to be explored during the visit are agarwood inoculation technologies and the possibility of streamlining international and domestic testing compliances," the statement said.

The details of the planned trade visit were discussed in a meeting organized by proponents of the Kapatid Angat Lahat sa Agri Program (KALAP) led by Association of Southeast Asian Nations' Business Advisory Council (ASEAN-BAC) Philippines chairman and Go Negosyo founder Joey Concepcion.

The meeting brought together some

of the country's largest agriculture companies—Universal Leaf Philippines, Yovel East Agriventures, Lionheart Farms, and Iba Botanicals.

Other stakeholders were also represented by the Philippine Rice Industry Stakeholders Movement, the Philippine Rubber Industry Council, and the UNAHCOPhilippine Association of Feed Millers.

The discussions were led by Go Negosyo senior advisers former Agriculture secretary Dr. William Dar and Josephine Romero, while the ASEAN-BAC was represented by executive director Gil Gonzales.

The trade mission came about after the signing of a memorandum of understanding

(MOU) last year between ASEAN BAC Philippines and ASEAN BAC Malaysia.

In the MOU, both countries agreed to engage in promoting trade, investment, and other development partnerships in agriculture.

The meetings next month will be conducted through the ABAC Malaysia B2B Connect Initiative (BCI) led by Malaysia's former trade minister Dato' Sri Mustapa Mohamed.

It will also be participated in by industry leaders from both the public and private sectors to explore projects to be undertaken under the MOU.

The meeting with Malaysia's private sector is expected to kick-off similar activities between ABAC Philippines and the other signatories of the MOU, such as Indonesia, Singapore, Cambodia, Myanmar, Brunei, Laos, and Thailand.



MALACAÑAN PALACE
MANILA

BY: PRESIDENT OF THE PHILIPPINES

ADMINISTRATIVE ORDER NO. 16

DIRECTING THE IDENTIFICATION OF FISHERIES MANAGEMENT AREAS AS STRATEGIC AGRICULTURE AND FISHERIES DEVELOPMENT ZONES

WHEREAS, Section 1 of Article XII of the Constitution declares it a policy of the State to promote industrialization and full employment through industries that make full and efficient use of human and natural resources, and which are competitive in both domestic and foreign markets;

WHEREAS, Section 2 of Republic Act (RA) No. 8550 or the "Philippine Fisheries Code of 1998," as amended by RA No. 10654, declares the policies of the State to: (a) protect the preferential right of fisherfolk on the use of municipal waters; and (b) adopt a precautionary principle in the management of fishery and aquatic resources;

WHEREAS, Section 8 of RA No. 8550, as amended, prescribes the establishment of Fisheries Management Areas (FMAs) in the country for fishery resource conservation and management;

WHEREAS, Section 6 of RA No. 8435 or "Agriculture and Fisheries Modernization Act of 1997," as amended by RA No. 9281, requires the identification of Strategic Agriculture and Fisheries Development Zones (SAFDZs) within the network of protected areas for agricultural and agro-industrialization purposes and as centers for development of agriculture and fisheries sectors;

WHEREAS, Sections 149 and 151, Chapter 2, Title I, Book II of RA No. 7160 or the "Local Government Code of 1991," grant municipalities and cities the exclusive authority to grant fishery privileges in municipal waters;

WHEREAS, the establishment of a SAFDZ aims to address the urgency and local fishery products; and (iv) improve the quality of life of fishers and stakeholders; and

WHEREAS, Section 17, Article VII of the Constitution vests in the President the power of control over all Executive departments, bureaus and offices, and the mandate to ensure the faithful execution of laws;

NOW, THEREFORE, I, FERDINAND R. MARCOS, JR., President of the Philippines, by virtue of the powers vested in me by the Constitution and existing laws, do hereby order:

Section 1. Identification of FMAs as Areas for the Establishment of SAFDZs. The Department of Agriculture (DA), in coordination with the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR), Department of the Interior and Local Government (DILG), and Department of Science and Technology (DOST), is hereby directed to identify FMAs where SAFDZs may be established pursuant to RA No. 8435, as amended, subject to relevant provisions of RA No. 7160, existing laws, rules and regulations.

Section 2. Protective Measures. Pursuant to Section 2 of RA No. 8550, as amended, the DA shall implement measures to protect the preferential use of subsistence fisherfolk over municipal waters, and ensure the conservation, protection and sustained management of fishery and aquatic resources within the SAFDZs to be established in identified FMAs.

Section 3. Convergence. The DA shall coordinate, collaborate and consult with the National Economic and Development Authority, Department of Finance, Fiscal Incentives Review Board, Department of Trade and Industry, Board of Investments, Philippine Economic Zone Authority, and the Office of the Special Assistant to the President for Investment and Economic Affairs, towards ensuring that SAFDZs to be established shall be optimized for agro-industrialization and development of agriculture and fisheries sectors through, among others, seamless integration of forward and backward linkages and grant of fiscal incentives to qualified strategic industries and activities in these sectors.

Section 4. Funding. The funds necessary for the implementation of this Order shall be charged against current and available appropriations of the DA and other concerned agencies, subject to pertinent budgeting, accounting, and auditing laws, rules and regulations. Thereafter, the funding requirements for succeeding years shall be included in the annual General Appropriations Act, subject to the usual budget preparation process.

Section 5. Implementing Guidelines. Within thirty (30) working days from the effectivity of this Order, the DA, in coordination with DENR, DILG, and DOST, shall formulate and issue guidelines, as may be necessary, for the effective implementation of this Order.

Section 6. Separability. If any provision of this Order is declared invalid or unconstitutional, the other provisions not affected thereby shall remain valid and subsisting.

Section 7. Repeal. All orders, rules and regulations, and other issuances or parts thereof, which are inconsistent with this Order, are hereby revoked, amended, or modified accordingly.

Section 8. Effectivity. This Order shall take effect immediately following its publication in the Official Gazette or in a newspaper of general circulation.

DONE, in the City of Manila, this 11th day of March, in the year of our Lord, Two Thousand and Twenty-Four.

By the President:

Lucas P. Bersamin
LUCAS P. BERSAMIN
Executive Secretary



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Editorial

Breathing new life into PH bamboo industry

THE versatility of bamboo has been renowned for centuries. Over 5,000 years ago, bamboo was first used in China to build treehouses. It has since evolved into a material for making furniture and utensils, musical instruments and weapons, and even clothing fabrics.

Today, the increase in new applications for bamboo, more innovative sustainable building and construction concepts, and higher consumer awareness on the benefits of bamboo are driving a huge global market. In 2022, the market was worth \$64.45 billion and is expected to reach \$94.38 billion from 2023 to 2029.

China is the world's biggest bamboo exporter, with an annual production of about 40 million tons. The Philippines is the fifth-biggest exporter and wants a bigger piece of the action. What's holding it back, as far as the Philippine Council for Agriculture, Aquatic and Natural Resources Research and Development is concerned, is "the low supply of raw materials, low survival rate for macro propagation, limited technology for shoot production and marketing strategies, high cost of processed products and weak transfer of technology."

Last week, the Department of Agriculture said it is taking a new tack to reenergize the country's bamboo industry.

It involves engineered bamboo, the term for composite boards or panels made up of pressed raw bamboo. The boards can be used to make walls, doors, ceilings, floors and a myriad of other house parts.

Engineered bamboo panels are said to be stronger and less prone to warping than solid wood.

Agriculture Undersecretary Deogracias Victor Savellano is confident that engineered bamboo could save the government P400 billion annually through import substitution.

According to the base head of technology, Luis Felipe Lopez, "over 1,200 species of bamboo are abundant across the Philippines, and technology and engineering continue to optimize its use as a reliable and durable construction material."

One building materials company, the Florida-based Rizome, is confident enough to invest \$100 million in an engineered-bamboo manufacturing plant in Cagayan de Oro City.

Rizome Philippines Chairman Luis Lorenzo Jr. said the country imports almost 94 percent of its wood-based construction material. "The focus is bamboo as a reengineered lumber for the construction industry and as biomass and ethanol production."

The company's Philippine component buys the bamboo mainly from farmers in Bukidnon, North Cotabato and the Agusan and Surigao provinces.

Lorenzo said the company provided the lamellar wood used in the new passenger terminal of the Mactan Cebu International Airport.

"The beams and all that — we make all of those; we make these bullet-proof. We can make beams as long as you like. No more steel, no more concrete," he touted.

Researchers at the Department of Science and Technology's Forest Products Research and Development Institute (DoST-FPRDI) are also excited about the potential of cross-laminated bamboo, or CLB. They said tests made on CLB found that its density, hardness and bending strength are "promising" for load-bearing walls, floors and ceilings.

Dr. Rico Cabangon, DoST-FPRDI deputy director, said that with the uptick in local housing demand, "there is space for CLB in the Philippine building industry, especially in prefabricated housing."

It also holds export potential, Cabangon said. "In the US alone, the demand for prefab houses is expected to reach 145,000 units next year."

Made from a fast-growing, renewable resource, CLB can help provide jobs to local bamboo farmers and other players in the bamboo industry.

If the Philippines hopes to make it big in the global bamboo market, the government must launch capacity-building activities to support the local bamboo industry.

"If you want to be the main player in the global trade of \$60 billion annually, the government should take the lead and focus on it, like other agricultural commodities like coffee and cacao," suggests Edgardo Manda, president of the Philippine Bamboo Foundation Inc.

Manda said the renewed enthusiasm for bamboo is mainly fueled by the private sector. "What is happening is 'token involvement.' What we really need is a national program," he said.

The government could start by considering policies that incorporate bamboo into the National Building Code or National Structural Code.

Fast-tracking the passage of House Bill 9144, or "An Act Integrating Bamboo as a Sustainable Material for the Built Environment," is also worth studying.

Malaya Business Insight



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Date: 15 MAR 2024 Page: A1 & A2

Slash budget for rice programs, DA told

BY JED MACAPAGAL

THE Philippine Chamber of Agriculture and Food Inc. (PCAFI) said the Department of Agriculture (DA) should consider changes in the budget allocation of different segments for 2025.

Danilo Fausto, PCAFI presi-

dent, told reporters in a briefing in Quezon City yesterday budget for rice programs must be slashed to give way for additional funding to high value crops and other segments.

Fausto said the DA must "correct the disparity of the existing budget for 2024 to bring at least

to a near level the distribution of resources to other agriculture sector."

Citing his aid memoire dated March 7 to the DA, Fausto said of the P197.84 billion budget this year, 60 percent or P118.66 billion

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SLASH

has been allocated for rice; P24.02 billion for fisheries; P6.15 billion for livestock and poultry; P5.03 billion for high value crops and other crops; and the remaining P43.98 billion for other expenses of the DA.

Fausto said last year, rice contributed 23.03 percent in the country's agricultural output

while high value crops provided a higher share of 33.78 percent.

Livestock and poultry with 30 percent and fisheries with 13.4 percent.

Fausto said of the total budget of P200 billion for 2025, P86 billion must be allocated for rice; P30 billion for livestock and poultry;

P25 billion for fisheries; P15 billion for high value crops and the remaining P44 billion for other expenses of DA.

PCAFI said the government should also consider establishing a coffee and cacao institute in Laguna or Cavite with an estimated budget of P1 billion while also planting at least 5 million trees

with a budget of P500 million.

Fausto asked DA to make available at least P1 billion credit facility for coffee and another P500 million each for the establishment of an instant coffee facility operated by farmers' cooperative and a coffee trading post or hub.

This would boost coffee production locally.

PCAFI said 85 percent of coffee in the country is imported.

The group said to close the 4 million metric tons shortage of local corn used in the manufacture of animal feeds, the DA must beef up post-harvest facilities in areas with twice a year harvest and allocate P500 million budget for every 1,000 hectares

of land planted to corn.

Fausto also supports the consolidation and clustering of corn producers to improve logistics and lessen the involvement of middlemen.

PCAFI pushes for the promotion of the planting of cassava in upland areas as it can also be used to manufacture feeds.

Kamehame harvest: Two examples of farming in pop culture

Last week, the anime world mourned the passing of Akira Toriyama, the creator of Dragon Ball Z (DBZ). I've only seen parts of it in passing, just enough to be familiar with some characters and to know what the Kamehameha (Kamehame wave in the Filipino dub) energy wave attack is and to have wanted Gino Padilla to sing the DBZ theme song when he sang at a Christmas party I attended last year.

I mention this because a friend joked that I should put it in my column because the main character Son Goku was at one point a radish farmer. There's a recurring character who farms ostriches, and the Saiyans, one of the alien races in the anime, are mostly named after vegetables (exceptions include Son Gohan, Goku's son, who was named after cooked rice, which is a grain, not a vegetable). Growing up, I thought names like Kakarrot, Broly,

and Vegeta were part of the Filipino dub, sort of like a Ghost Fighter situation, where the characters were given Western names. And since I haven't thought about DBZ in decades, it was only after Toriyama's death that I realized that some characters were named after vegetables!

Now that I've embarrassed myself after admitting how long it takes me to realize the most obvious things sometimes, let me tell you why I began this column with an anime. There's more to my mentioning DBZ than vegetable names. In the cartoon, Goku becomes a radish farmer because his wife Chi-Chi wants him to make more money. Imagine that! That storyline wouldn't work in the Philippines. That's



AVANT
GARDENER
YVETTE TAN

because in Japan, the agriculture industry is well funded and well respected, with farmers earning a decent living — enough to make it an occupation to aspire to in popular culture.

Not so in the Philippines.

Also last week, I bought a copy of Libing Isa, a horror comic by Malayo Pa Ang Araw. It's 11 eerie flash fiction stories accompanied by cute and creepy illustrations often starring children reminiscent of Edward Gorey.

The fourth story in the book is called "Ang Kasaysayan ng Bigas," a blind child asks his father where the rice they are cooking comes from and his father tells him a straightforward story of how rice is produced. It's a pretty good explanation of how rice gets from seed to the table. However, the pictures tell another story. When the father tells his son that rice starts from buto (seed), it's an illustration of what's obviously crushed human bones (buto) falling into a hand. When the father talks about how farmers are dependent on rain instead of irrigation, it's a rain of bullets that we see flying into the rice fields. When the father talks about drying palay in the sun, we see farmers' bodies covered with the same woven mats that's used to shield the drying palay from the ground. This is what farming is like in Philippine pop culture. For most farmers, it is a dangerous, thankless

job that ends in poverty or, if one happens to go up against the wrong people, death.

That situation doesn't apply to all farmers, of course. There are farmers who started with very little and who have managed to earn a good income, but these folks seem to be the exception more than the rule.

How can we encourage people to enter into agriculture when it is (rightly) associated with poverty and violence in the public consciousness?

How can we encourage the youth to go into agriculture when they experience the effects of their parents being unable to climb out of poverty? A lot of the current sentiment is aimed at showing young people that agriculture can be lucrative, but as I've said before, I think this is the wrong way to go about it. If we want to encourage young people to go into agriculture, their parents have to experience that it's lucrative. Farmers are famously "to see is to believe" type persons and well, to see lots of money is to believe in agriculture as a viable career choice.

A good indicator of what the public thinks of something is to observe how it is depicted in pop culture. In Japan, farming is what a member of a powerful alien race turns to when he needs to make enough money to feed his growing family. In the Philippines, it's quite literally a horror story.



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PALAY

FARMGATE

PRICE

JUMPS 38.6%

IN FEB-PSA



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By CAI U. ORDINARIO
X@caiordinario

FARMGATE prices of palay jumped by 38.6 percent year-on- year in February 2024, according to the latest data released by the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA).

Based on the data, the average farmgate price of unmilled rice reached P25.21 per kilo in February 2024, compared with the P18.19 per kilo recorded in February 2023.

PSA data also showed that palay farmgate prices rose 1.2 percent from the average price of P24.92 per kilo recorded in January 2024.

"Farmgate prices refer to the prices received by farmers for the sale of their produce at the first point of sale net of the total marketing cost paid by the farmers," PSA said.

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Palay...

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"These prices are determined at the farmgate or first point of sale transactions and are also known as 'producer prices,'" it added.

The highest increase was recorded in the Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR), where average price posted a year-on-year growth of 52.2 percent.

The average palay farmgate price in CAR reached P26 per kilo in February 2024, higher than the previous year's P17.08 per kilo.

PSA data also showed that the slowest year-on-year increase in farmgate prices was recorded in Eastern Visayas at 22 percent.

The average palay farmgate price went up to P23.2 per kilo in February 2024 from P19.01 per kilo in the same period last year.

On a monthly basis, the highest increase in February was recorded in Eastern Vi-

sayas at 20.1 percent.

PSA data also showed that the average farmgate price in the Bicol region contracted by 17.8 percent to P22.75 per kilo in February from P27.66 per kilo a month ago.

The highest average farmgate price was seen in the Ilocos region where it reached P28.41 per kilo in February 2024.

This was followed by Western Visayas where farmgate prices averaged P26.68 a kilo; Central Luzon, P26.56; Cagayan Valley, P26.46; and CAR, P26.

The lowest average palay farmgate price was recorded in the Bicol region where it reached

P22.75; Davao region, P23.10; Eastern Visayas, P23.2; SOCCSKSARGEN, P24.11; and Caraga, P24.5 per kilo.

The PSA said the monthly data on the farmgate prices of palay are obtained from the results of the Farm Price Survey for Palay conducted on the last five days of the reference month.



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Wheat futures slide

CANBERRA- Chicago wheat futures slid towards their lowest levels since 2020 on Thursday, as cheap Russian supply continued to exert pressure on prices and undermine the competitiveness of US crops.

Soybean and corn futures also edged down on ample supply from the Americas.

The most-active wheat contract on the Chicago Board of Trade (CBOT) was down 0.9 percent at \$5.39-1/2 a bushel and nearing Monday's low of \$5.23-1/2, its lowest since August 2020.

Black Sea grain is flooding the market and large crops are expected later this year in Russia, Ukraine and the United States, said Dennis Voznesenski, a Commonwealth Bank analyst in Sydney.

However, dry weather in Canada,

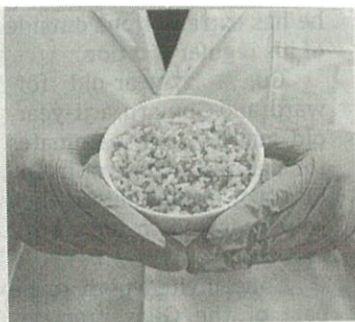
concern that a La Nina weather system could harm crops in Argentina and the risk of trade disruption should limit price falls, he added.

Benchmark Russian wheat export prices slipped below \$200 a metric ton (\$5.44 a bushel) this week for the first time since August 2020, Refinitiv data show.

Around 500,000 metric tons of US wheat export sales to China have been cancelled in the past week, according to the US government, likely due to the recent slide in prices.

Chinese wheat importers have also cancelled or postponed imports of about 1 million metric tons of Australian wheat originally scheduled for shipment in February, March and April sources said.

- Reuters



BOVINE CELLS IN A BOWL
A researcher handles a petri dish containing hybrid beef rice, elaborated using cow muscle and fat stem cells, at the laboratory of Yonsei University in Seoul, South Korea, on March 8. —REUTERS

SOUTH KOREA SCIENTISTS OFFER 'BEEF RICE' AS ECO-FRIENDLY PROTEIN

SEOUL—South Korean researchers have grown beef cells in rice grains in what they say is a major step toward achieving a sustainable, affordable and environmentally friendly source of protein that could replace farmed cattle for meat.

Professor Jinkee Hong of Yonsei University in Seoul, who led the research published in the journal *Matter* this month, said the "beef rice" is the first product of its kind. It uses grain particles as the base for cultivating

animal muscle and fat cells.

In the research, rice grains were treated with enzymes to create an optimal environment for cell growth, then infused with bovine cells that are cultivated to achieve the final hybrid product, which resembles a pinkish grain of rice.

Cultivated meat

The Yonsei team is not the first to work on lab-grown meat products. Companies around the world have launched cultivated meat; one of the latest in-

volves plant-based chicken and eel cultivated from a soy base, marketed in Singapore.

Hong's team said rice has an advantage in terms of safety relative to soy or nuts because fewer people are allergic to it.

"If successfully developed into food products, cultured beef rice could serve as a sustainable protein source, particularly in environments where traditional livestock farming is impractical," he said.

The beef rice contains ap-

proximately 8 percent more protein and 7 percent more fat than conventional rice. Hong noted the protein is 18-percent animal-based, making it a rich source of essential amino acids.

Priced at about \$2 per kilogram and with a far smaller carbon footprint than traditional beef products, cultured beef rice could compete on grocery shelves, he said.

Hong said challenges remain from a technical standpoint and in terms of winning over cus-

tomers with flavor and texture.

Keum Dong-kyu, who recently sampled the rice beef at a Korean barbecue restaurant in Seoul, said the idea is innovative.

"But honestly, I don't think it can replicate the juiciness or texture of real beef," Keum said.

Christian Krammel, who is visiting from Germany, was more positive. "Now, it does not compare to beef yet, but as I see the research is in early stages, I would say it's a great way forward," Krammel said. —REUTERS