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Poultry from Sweden, Czech Republic banned

THE Department of Agriculture (DA) has ordered temporary bans on the importation of poultry products from Sweden and the Czech Republic following outbreaks of avian influenza or bird flu in both countries.

Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel said the import bans were necessary to prevent the spread of the highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI), particularly the H5N1 subtype, and protect the local poultry population.

The ban on poultry products from the Czech Republic was issued on March 8 after the Ministry of Agriculture told the World Organization for Animal Health (WOAH) on January of an outbreak in the Usti nad Orlici district.

The following week, on March 11, the DA ordered the ban on poultry products from Sweden following a bird flu outbreak, also in January, in the town of Ystad.

The bans cover imports of domestic and wild birds and

their products, including meat, day-old chicks, eggs and semen.

The immediate suspension of the processing of applications and issuances of sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) import clearances was also ordered.

Shipments from Sweden and the Czech Republic that were already in transit and were slaughtered or produced before Dec. 22, 2023, will still be allowed to enter the country.

From January to November 2023, the country imported about 394.108 million kilograms of poultry products, with the majority being chicken meat, data from the Bureau of Animal Industry showed.

Chicken was the second-highest imported meat product during the period, next to pork, accounting for 35.25 percent of the country's total meat imports.

In 2022, the Philippines' total importation of poultry meat was 411.07 million kilos, valued at \$468.45 million.

JANINE ALEXIS MIGUEL



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Marcos urged to take over NFA operations

By Maricel V. Cruz

A PARTY-LIST lawmaker on Wednesday urged President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. to take over management of the **National Food Authority (NFA)** amid charges of anomalous sale of the government's rice buffer stocks by the agency.

Meanwhile, the Department of Agriculture (DA) said 79 warehouses managed by the NFA remained padlocked in light of the ongoing Ombudsman investigation on the alleged irregular sale of rice to selected traders.

Rep. Wilbert T. Lee of AGRI party-list cited the need for the President to take over the NFA to speed up the purge of erring officials of the agency.

"There is no need for prolonged investigation. Very obvious, these involved senior NFA officials should be fired once-and-for all, these sloppy, corrupt and unthinking people who have led to this huge anomaly and suffering of our farmers," Lee said in Filipino.

He added that the unscrupulous businessmen in cahoots with the corrupt NFA officials should also be prosecuted.

Lee earlier stressed the importance of a speedy resolution on the matter to protect farmers' livelihood and the welfare of NFA employees who were suspended but are clearly innocent of any wrongdoing.

Lee filed House Resolution 1625 which aims to identify any gaps or loopholes in the existing policies of the NFA and determine what legislation is necessary to ensure the agency's optimal utilization of goods and proper disposal methods.

The DA said 20 of the warehouses were scheduled to open following the Ombudsman's move to lift the suspension of more than 20 NFA personnel.

NUMBER ON THE RISE OVER THE PAST 5 YEARS

DOLPHIN STRANDINGS ALARM EXPERTS IN ILOCOS

By Yolanda Sotelo
@yzsoteloINQ

ALAMINOS CITY—In a span of just five days, 14 dolphins were spotted along the coastline of the Ilocos region, many of them getting stranded in the shallow waters, officials of the **Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR)** said on Wednesday.

One of the dolphins, a spinner (*Stenella longirostris*), was found dead in the waters off Vigan City on March 16, while another was taken to a BFAR rehabilitation facility for monitoring, BFAR veterinarian Hasmin Chogsayan said in an interview.

Stranding cases in the Ilocos area have been on the rise in the past five years, Chogsayan said, with 21 recorded in 2023.

“But just this March alone, there were already 14, after the

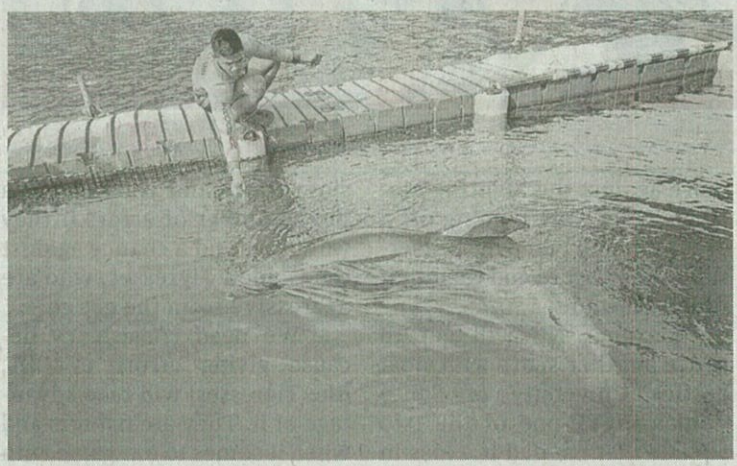
five in February,” she said. The latest dolphin to be found dead was immediately buried, while those that were stranded either returned to the sea on their own or were helped back to deeper water by authorities, she said.

Rehabilitated

Most of the sighted dolphins were of the melon-headed species (*Peponocephala electra*), while two were pygmy killer whales (*Feresa attenuata*), which are rarely seen in these parts.

Efforts to guide the dolphins back to the sea involved local fishermen, sea patrol (“bantay dagat”) volunteers and government personnel, Chogsayan said.

The two pygmy killer whales were sighted in Magsingal town, Ilocos Sur, and in San Juan town, La Union, while the melon-headed dolphins were seen



ON REHAB A stranded melon-headed dolphin rescued from Anda town, Pangasinan, is temporarily kept for rehabilitation at a facility of the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources on Cariatz Island within the Hundred-Islands National Park in Alaminos City. —PHOTO COURTESY OF BFAR

in various locations across the region.

Chogsayan said the melon-headed dolphins were either sighted or stranded in the

towns of Magsingal and Tagudin in Ilocos Sur, the towns of Bacnotan and Bauang in La Union and the towns of Anda and Sual in Pangasinan.

A report from BFAR showed that a dolphin that was stranded off Sual received medical attention at the BFAR facility on Cariatz Island in Hundred Islands National Park.

The BFAR has established a rehabilitation pen on the island where BFAR, Philippine Coast Guard personnel and local government unit staff volunteer to take care of the dolphins around the clock.

Three dolphins were seen lingering near the shore on Wednesday, including one off Poro Point in San Fernando City, La Union, and two off Telbang, Alaminos City.

Residents and experts kept their distance from the animals, which eventually retreated to the deeper parts of the sea.

Two others were spotted by fishermen at dawn on Wednesday and were driven back to the waters off the Hundred Islands National Park after three hours

of swimming near Telbang beach.

Chogsayan said the dolphins could be part of a pod because they were sighted or were stranded almost at the same time.

Rescues not enough

She said while blast fishing was not ruled out as a cause of the stranding, there could be other factors, such as the presence of commercial fishing vessels in the West Philippine Sea, disturbing the marine mammals and forcing them to the shallows.

“For years, there has been a continuous occurrence of marine mammal strandings, and it’s crucial to analyze what’s happening so we can develop management strategies for these animals. Simply rescuing and rehabilitating them may not be sufficient,” Chogsayan said. INQ



Salt imports decline as local output improves

By **BELLA CARIASO**

The country's salt imports decreased to 84 percent of total requirements last year from 90 percent in 2022 as local production improved, a ranking official of the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources said.

BFAR spokesperson Nazario Briguera said Republic Act 11985 or the Philippine Salt Industry Development Act signed by President Marcos on March 11 would help revitalize the salt industry.

"After the government allocated funds (for the salt industry), our salt imports started to go down. It is now down to 84 percent and our local production increased to 16 percent. This shows that if we focus, the local salt production in the country will really go up," Briguera said.

Briguera said salt-producing areas in the country include Pangasinan, Mindoro, Cebu, Quezon and Marinduque.

"The potential of our salt industry is big as we have a long shoreline and salt comes from seawater," he said.

According to Briguera, the local salt industry has been neglected for many years, resulting in the country's dependence on importation.

"For a long time, our salt industry was

neglected as first, there is no law on the agency tasked to handle the industry," Briguera added.

He said the implementation of the iodization of salt also became a hindrance for small-scale enterprises in developing the industry.

"The newly signed Salt Industry Development Act defines the agency tasked to revitalize the salt industry to lessen our dependence on importation," Briguera said.

Under the law, BFAR is the lead agency in reviving the salt industry.

"It is important to note that while there is nothing wrong with the campaign of the Department of Health to use iodized salt, it is not comprehensive as it affects small scale," he said.

Briguera said consultations are being made for the drafting of the implementing rules and regulations (IRR) of the new law.

"We are hoping that at the very soonest time possible, the IRR will be crafted," he said.

The 23-page RA 11985 seeks to revitalize what legislators call a "dying" industry and achieve self-sufficiency by equipping salt farmers with appropriate technology and financial, production and marketing support.



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Local coffee producers struggling to keep pace with surging demand

By GABRIELL CHRISTEL GALANG

The country is facing a challenge in meeting the increasing demand for coffee amid limited local production, the Philippine Coffee Board, Inc. said.

Coffee Board president Pacita Juan shared that the country's demand for coffee is around 150,000 to 200,000 metric tons (MT), however, local production is only at an estimated 30,000 to 33,000 MT.

"If we're looking at attaining self-sufficiency [in coffee production and export], it might take 10 years, but those are very conservative figures," Juan he told reporters.

The PCBI chief also estimated that the government might need to spend around ₱600 million a year in the

next 10 years to attain stable coffee production, while the coco levy fund could be another solution to mend the large disparity between the industry's demand and supply.

As the number of specialty coffee shops begins to rise at every corner of Metro Manila and beyond despite the low local production, imports make up a large percent of the overall production of coffee – approximately 120,000 MT.

Besides the large quantity of foreign supply, some coffee shops opt to buy imports like the Vietnam Robusta to minimize the business production cost, according to Juan.

But in order to balance the numbers between domestic and imported supply, PCBI Director Andy Mojica called the need for nursery expansion

in the country.

"The problem with coffee production is that there is a need for ample seedlings... And the solution to this is to have nurseries at every region, as well as promoting the coffee farmers," he said.

Subsequently, land area is also an issue when it comes to coffee farming. Since the field is limited and the trees require certain meters above sea level (MASL) to produce more supply while obtaining good quality, Mojica stated that the coffee board has been in talks with the **Philippine Coconut Authority (PCA)**.

"If we partner with the PCA, we would be able to see almost 300,000 hectares of land area... So, the angle that we see here is that we could [intercrop] coconut and coffee," he explained.

"PCA said that there are 1 million hectares of land readily available, so we could make programs for intercropping, which could be beneficial to both industries," he added.

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Job generation seen with new salt industry law

THE revival of the salt industry, through Republic Act (RA) 11985, or "Philippine Salt Industry Development Act," will generate thousands of new jobs, particularly in the countryside and coastal communities.

Signed by President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. last March 11, RA 11985 shall establish a comprehensive road map to implement programs, projects and interventions for the

development and management, research, processing, utilization, business modernization and commercialization of the Philippine salt.

"Apart from the thousands of new jobs that this law will create, the income of our farmers will also increase," Agri Party-list Rep. Wilbert Lee said of the law that he principally authored.

"Our work does not end with

the signing of this measure into law. We need to ensure its proper and effective implementation," he added.

Aside from encouraging investments and increasing local salt production through the expansion of existing and idle salt farms, Lee said the law will boost capacity building for salt farmers and strengthen market linkages.

The Department of Agriculture

(DA) shall ensure that salt is a priority commodity to be produced locally.

The measure classifies salt as an aquatic resource product and shall be exempt from all taxes.

The DA-National Fisheries Research and Development Institute, in close coordination with the Philippine Center for Postharvest Development and Mechanization, shall spearhead the development

of the latest technology in salt production particularly technology that allows year-round production of salt even under erratic weather patterns.

It shall also encourage the mechanization of salt production and develop technologies that promote alternative methods and cost-effective techniques in salt production.

Lee said President Marcos

and his fellow lawmakers in both houses of Congress for the enactment of RA 11985.

"With proper monitoring and implementation, we can achieve our ultimate goal to be salt self-sufficient and become a net exporter of salt. We can now avoid having to import 500,000 metric tons of salt every year, or more than 90 percent of the country's salt requirement,"

he said. **PNA**



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Iligan pushes corn output boost

ILIGAN CITY: To improve the local production of yellow and white corn in this city, the Department of Agriculture (DA) office in Region 10 (Northern Mindanao) has turned over P535,500 worth of corn inputs and a corn sheller to farmers of the commodity.

DA Region 10 Technical Director for Operations Carlota Madriaga, together with Provincial Operations Center chief for Lanao del Norte, Abdulharis Paporo, handed over the assistance to Iligan Mayor Frederick Siao for distribution to corn farmers in the city.

The assistance includes 35 bags of hybrid white corn seeds and 100 bags of urea fertilizer intended for 20 farmers in Barangay Ditucalan.

A mechanical corn sheller unit was also provided to the 35-mem-

ber Gawgawon Farmers' Association of Barangay Mainit, which has an estimated corn cultivation area of 50 hectares.

DA Region 10 Executive Director Carlene Collado is optimistic the assistance will help enhance the region's corn production by increasing the grain yield per hectare of yellow and white corn, and closing the gap between the supply and requirements of different corn processors, given the increasing demand for corn for food and other industrial uses.

Likewise, he underscored the need for farmers to be part of an active corn cluster organization and have its members be enrolled in the Registry System for Basic Sectors in Agriculture of the DA to be eligible to receive support. **PIA**



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BPI Foundation supports Negros coop

THE Bank of the Philippine Islands Foundation Inc. (BPIF) is supporting a Negros-based cooperative in expanding its agribusiness ventures.

Anileen Pajarillo, implementer of the Rice Business Innovations System (RiceBIS) Community Program of the Philippine Rice Research Institute (PhilRice) office in Negros, said the Quezon Codcod RiceBIS Farmers' Cooperative (QueCoRiFACo) has received a truck and rice mill as part of BPIF's P5.2-million support for the cooperative.

"QueCoRiFACo currently comprises five associations with plans to expand their reach across 415 hectares, benefiting over 300 farmers. To prepare for this expansion, cooperative members have undergone training in capacity enhancement, packaging and labeling, and good agricultural practices (PhilGAP). Soon, their farms will undergo assessment and certification by PhilGAP," she said.

For his part, QueCoRiFACo Chairman Hernan Samson expressed gratitude for the grant,

emphasizing its role in reinforcing their commitment to fellow farmers.

"As farmers, we support each other, especially given our resource constraints. With this grant, we can fulfill our duty as stewards of our members and communities," he said.

Leo Sta. Ines, PhilRice officer in charge director, said QueCoRiFACo is the only farmers group in the Visayas chosen by BPIF as its beneficiary along with two other farmers cooperatives from Luzon and Mindanao.

Sta. Ines said the cooperative based in Barangay Quezon, San Carlos City, qualified because they have "a strong organization and goal to improve not just as farmers but also improve the lives of their members."

The turnover and blessing ceremony was held in Quezon Multipurpose Gym in San Carlos City with BPIF Executive Director Ma. Carmina Marquez, BPIF officers and PhilRice Deputy Executive Director for Development Karen Eloisa Barroga. **CONRAD M. CARIÑO**



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Region 2 young farmers get aid

YOUNG farmers in Region 2 (Cagayan Valley) continue to benefit from the credit linkage assistance under Kapital Access for Young Agripreneurs (KAYA) Program, according to the Department of Agriculture (DA) Region 2 office.

Among them was John Winston Soliven, a 27-year-old Juris Doctor graduate who resides in Iguig, Cagayan. He was a provincial awardee of the Young Farmers Challenge (YFC) Program 2021 and produces rabbit meat.

Rose Mary Aquino, DA Region 2 officer in charge regional executive director, said the program is part of the continuous support of the DA in the region through the Agribusiness and Marketing Assistance Division (AMAD) to its young farmer awardees.

Rosario Pacarangan, DA-Region 2 AMAD chief, said the program is a collaboration with the Agricultural Credit Policy Council (DA-ACPC) that continuously orients young farmers on the KAYA Program.

Soliven said the YFC program

“holds true to its purpose as more young farmers evidently excel in their respective ventures.”

“The program provided us access to resources and opportunities that enabled our generation to venture into profitable agri-fishery-based enterprises,” he said.

Also a KAYA Program beneficiary was Rochelle Lafrades from Piat, Cagayan, a YFC 2023 awardee.

Lafadres is now one of the DA-ACPC beneficiaries under the KAYA Program who also availed a zero-interest working capital loan for quail production and processing.

Paccarangan said the program aims to finance working capital or fixed asset acquisition requirements of startups, or existing agri-based projects of young entrepreneurs and agri-fishery graduates 18 to 30 years old.

She challenged other young farmers to avail of the program by visiting the Young Farmers Challenge Region 2 Facebook page and website at <https://acpc.gov.ph/> to learn more about the DA-ACPC programs. **LEANDER C. DOMINGO**



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Marinduque farmers complete ube deliveries

THE Marinduque Ube Cluster completed the deliveries to two partner buyers through the Farm and Fisheries Clustering and Consolidation Program (F2C2) of the Department of Agriculture (DA).

Organized by the DA, the Marinduque Ube Cluster — a group of local farmers and fishermen in the

province — recently supplied 691 kilograms (kg) of pure purple variety and 3,124 kg of rainbow variety to two F2C2 partner institutional buyers, namely KTL Fruits Inc. and Sunlight Food Corp.

Each yam is carefully examined including its size, color and quality to make sure that it will meet the standards of the clients. After

making sure that the yams are enough for distribution, they also discussed price regulation, capital and its prospected profit once the product is exported.

Over 300 members of the Marinduque Ube Cluster teamed up in harvesting and sorting the yams. It includes eight farmers cooperative and association members from

the towns of Torrijos, Buenavista and Boac.

Through the F2C2 program, the DA aims to create successful farming and fishing clusters across the country. These empowered clusters are intended to establish local value chains, which will result in the development of the economy in rural areas. **PIA**



Members of the Marinduque Ube Cluster show their harvests that will be sold to food producers. PIA PHOTO



'Pricey meat could affect learning outcomes'

By BUTCH FERNANDEZ
X@butchfBM

THE local livestock and poultry subsectors must get more assistance from the government to make meat products more affordable, which will help improve learning outcomes in the Philippines, according to Senator Cynthia A. Villar.

Villar noted that high meat prices could lead to protein deficiency, contribute to malnutrition and even affect learning outcomes. Citing the findings of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), she said students from countries with higher pork and chicken prices tend to have lower test scores.

Despite their importance, Villar said several challenges prevent the Philippine

livestock and poultry subsectors from realizing their full potential.

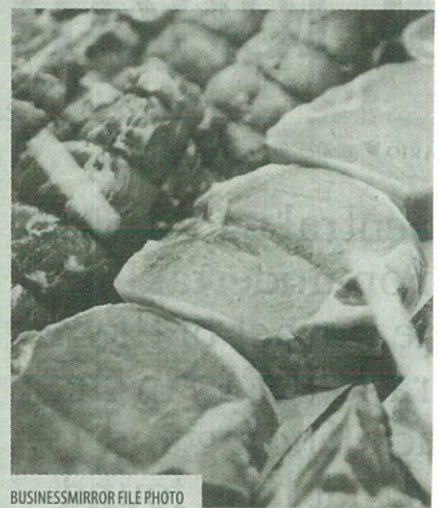
"We know too well of the effect of disease outbreaks, such as the African swine fever, which has been afflicting our hog industry and decimating our pork supply since 2019. This has resulted in a significant increase in the prices of pork products."

She said pork, and chicken are integral components of the Filipino diet, helping ensure a balanced intake of nutrients.

"It is estimated that 52 percent of our protein consumption comes from pork and chicken, and this is projected to grow even higher to 58 percent in 2030."

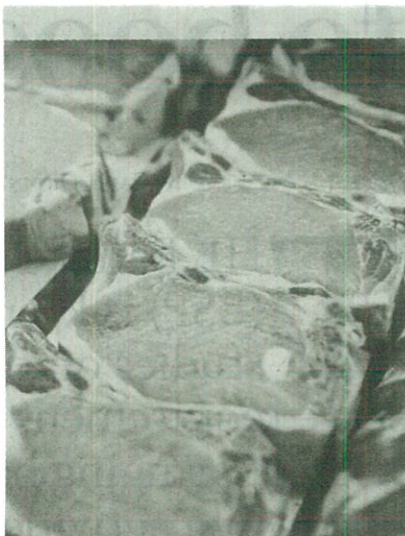
Compared with other agricultural commodities, however, the lawmaker said the subsectors receive relatively lower development assistance from the government.

"The Philippine Institute for Development Studies data shows that from 2009 to 2020,



BUSINESSMIRROR FILE PHOTO

fiscal support for the LPD [livestock, poultry and dairy] sector averaged only P1.18 billion per year, accounting for merely 1.6 percent of the total budget of the Department of Agriculture [DA] for the period."



She said the "highly fragmented government support structure" is also responsible for the struggles of the dairy sector, which continues to rely heavily on imported milk.

The lawmaker is pushing for the passage of an enabling legislation that is expected to unlock the immense potential of the country's livestock, poultry, and dairy subsectors.

She filed Senate Bill (SB) 2558 or "An Act Strengthening Livestock, Poultry, and Dairy Industry Development and Competitiveness, Rationalizing the Organization and Functions of Relevant Government Agencies, and Creating a Competitive Enhancement Fund Therefor."

One of the salient features of the bill is the creation of a fund that will be earmarked for LPD.

"Building on the model of the Rice Competitive Enhancement Fund or RCEF established under Republic Act 11203 or the Rice Tariffication Law, tariff collection from LPD imports will be earmarked to the LPD Fund. It shall consist of an annual appropriation of P7.8 billion for six [6] years," said Villar, who is also chairman

of the Senate Committee on Agriculture and Food.

The beneficiaries of the fund are small-hold raisers, cooperatives, associations, or organizations accredited by the DA. An LPD Registry System, the master list of eligible beneficiaries will be established by the DA in consultation with farmer cooperatives and LGUs.

Under her proposal, 29 percent of the fund will be allotted for repopulation and herd build-up, improvement and accreditation of established breeding centers/stock farms nationwide while 15 percent will go to the Bureau of Animal Industry for animal health and welfare, and native animal development programs, disease control, prevention and response, including protective surveillance, pest and disease emergency response, and conduct of research and technology advancement programs.



SC finds no civil liability against PhilRice officials over car plan scheme

By JOEL R. SAN JUAN

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THE Supreme Court (SC) unanimously affirmed the Commission on Audit (COA) ruling, which declared as illegal the 2008 car plan scheme implemented by the Philippine Rice Research Institute (PhilRice) to entice its officials and employees to stay in the agency.

However, the Court en banc found the officials of PhilRice not liable to refund the government in the amount of P10.15 million representing the expenses incurred during the implementation of the car plan program.

The said amount was the subject of 26 notices of disallowance (ND) issued by the COA in 2013.

The SC held that the officials acted in good faith in allowing the release of government funds for the procurement and use of the vehicles under the scheme.

"Here, while petitioners approved and authorized the payment of government funds in violation of Section 12 of RA No. 6758 [Compensation and Position Classification Act of 1989], nevertheless, the exceptional circumstances surrounding the case...tenaciously show they acted in good faith and were solely propelled by a valid and genuine cause—the prevention

of 'brain drain' within the institute through a more cost-effective approach," the SC said in a decision penned by Associate Justice Japar Dimaampao.

The petitioners in the case are Sophia T. Borja, Ma. Ethel P. Gibe, Mary Grace DG. Corpuz, Joy T. Agudia, Aurea C. Cosio, Wilfredo B. Collado, Myrna D. Malabayabas, Evelyn F. Javier, Eduardo Jimmy P. Quilang, Rizal G. Corales, Renato B. Bajit, Manuel Jose C. Regalado, Glenda DC. Ravelo, Leo C. Javier, Caesar Joventino M. Tado, Rhemilyn Z. Relado and Babyllinda O. Reyes.

The petitioners were signatories to the vouchers approving the release of the disallowed amounts, with petitioner Borja as one of the car owners.

"Thusly, petitioners, in their capacity as approving/certifying officers, are likewise excused from liability under Rule 2 of the Madera rules," it added.

In determining petitioners' liability to return the disallowed amounts, the SC said it is guided by its landmark ruling in the case of Madera v. Commission on Audit.

In the said ruling, the SC held that if a notice of disallowance is upheld, the "approving and certifying officers who acted in good faith in regular performance of official functions and with the diligence of a good father of the family are not civilly liable to return consistent with Section 38

of the Administrative Code of 1987."

The SC said the purpose of the car plan scheme was to keep the brilliant and exceptional officials and employees of PhilRice from seeking greener pastures outside the agency.

Likewise, the SC noted that the operations of PhilRice as a research and development institution, entailed countless of land travels, which necessitated the costs, such purchase price of vehicle, fuel, oil, maintenance expenses and comprehensive insurance premiums.

In point of fact, based on a cost benefit analysis, PhilRice could save around P6.00 to P 7.00 per kilometer in rented vehicles rather than owning and maintaining vehicles.

Records also further showed, according to the SC, the petitioners observed the strict guidelines mandated by PhilRice in the car rental plan.

The car plan scheme operated as a rental plan under which qualified officials and employees procured vehicles of their choice through the financing scheme of the Philippine National Bank (PNB) for a period of three years, payable on a monthly installment basis.

These private green-plated vehicles were then mortgaged to the PNB until full settlement of the obligation.

Thereafter, the vehicles were rented out to PhilRice for use in the operations in its central station located in the Science City of Muñoz and other branches/stations around the country.

The rental payments were used to pay for the private vehicles.

The petitioners maintained that the car rental plan was guided by Opinion No. 121, Series of 1988 issued by the Office of the Government Corporate Counsel (OGCC).

Following an audit conducted in 2013, the COA issued NDs issued for "expenses incurred during the trips made using rented private vehicles under the car plan."

The COA said the car plan scheme was not approved by the President as required under Section 215 of Presidential Decree (P.D.) No. 98 and that it contravened the required austerity measures of the government.

It further ruled that the scheme was not included in the exemption of standardized salary under Republic Act (RA) 6758.

It added that the rental of the vehicles did not conform with Section 7 of RA 6713, which prohibits public officers and employees from having any interest in any transaction requiring the approval of their office and Section 8, Article IX-B of the Constitution which prohibits additional or double compensation.



Isda, gulay taas-presyo nakaamba sa Kuwaresma

Asahan ang pagtaas sa presyo ng mga isda at gulay habang papalapit ang Semana Santa.

Ayon kay **Department of Agriculture (DA) Assistant Secretary Arnel de Mesa**, mararamdaman ang taas-presyo ng mga naturang bilihin sa mga palengke.

"People are weaning away from consuming pork and other protein kagaya ng baka... kasi tayo, 85 percent Catholics ang mga Pilipino so that drives alone, na mga Katoliko na nagninilay, kasama na iyon especially for Black Friday," paliwanag ni De Mesa.

Karaniwan na aniyang nagkakaroon ng 10 hanggang 20 porsiyentong pagtaas sa presyo ng isda at gulay sa ganitong panahon.

Base sa Bantay Presyo ng DA noong Biyernes, Marso 15, naramdaman na ang taas-presyo ng mga isda tulad ng bangus, galunggong, at alumabahan sa mga palengke sa Metro Manila.

"Sa gulay, ganon din halos parehas sa isda pero hindi kagaya ng isda na mas mahal, mas malaki iyong tinataas," ayon kay De Mesa.

Sa kabila nito, hindi umano magpapatupad ng price cap ang DA.

"We are not considering any price ceiling on any commodity kahit sa pork... sa ngayon kasi kapag mayroon kang pagpigil, magko-cause iyan ng mga problema rin na ayaw nating mangyari sa atin," dagdag pa ng opisyal.



8 to 11 typhoons to enter PAR

Eight to 11 typhoons are expected to enter the country this year, according to the Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration.

PAGASA weather specialist Rusy Abastillas told a press conference that one typhoon is expected in April, one to two in May and June and two to three from July to September.

"A slight delay of the rainy season is possible amid the developing La Niña," Abastillas said.

She said most parts of Luzon would experience below normal rainfall, but near to above normal rainfall can be expected in eastern and southern Luzon, the Visayas and Mindanao.

PAGASA said El Niño has started to weaken and may return to ENSO-neutral conditions from April to May. ENSO condition means no El Niño or La Niña is prevailing.

While El Niño has weakened, Task Force El Niño said the areas to be hit by dry spell or drought are likely to increase in the next three months.

Task force spokesman Joey Villarama said 67 provinces in Ilocos, Cagayan Valley, Central Luzon, Calabarzon, Mimaropa, Zamboanga peninsula, Western Visayas and Soccsksargen are experiencing dry spell, dry condition and drought.

Of the 67 provinces, 30 are experiencing drought.

"Based on PAGASA's projection, these (El Niño-hit) provinces may still go up to... around 76 to be affected in varying degrees in the next three months," Villarama said at the Bagong Pilipinas public briefing on PTV.

He said the next three months are "critical" as the country enters the dry or summer season.

Heat index reaches 'dangerous' level

Meanwhile, La Union sizzled as a heat index of 47 degrees Celsius was recorded on Tuesday.

A heat index of 42 degrees Celsius is forecast in the province today.

Heat indexes of between 42 to 51 degrees Celsius are considered "dangerous."

Virac in Catanduanes experienced a heat index of 47 degrees Celsius on Saturday and 44 degrees Celsius on Sunday.

PAGASA climatology and agrometeorology division officer-in-charge Anna Lisa Solis said a higher heat index can be expected in April with the end of the southeast monsoon or *amihan* to be aggravated by the peak of El Niño.

The heat index in Metro Manila is forecast to reach 40 degrees Celsius next month.

In Mexico, Pampanga, corn crops withered due to lack of irrigation amid the dry spell, according to Jerry Due, chairperson of the Pinagpalang Anao Irrigators and Farmers Association.

Agri damage hits P1.75 B

Amid the dry spell, damage to agriculture has reached P1.75 billion.

Citing reports from the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council, Task Force El Niño said six areas have declared a state of calamity.

These are San Jose, Magsaysay and Looc in Occidental Mindoro, Bulalacao and Mansalay in Oriental Mindoro and Zamboanga City.

Pioduran in Albay is also expected to declare a state of calamity due to El Niño. – **Bella Cariaso, Helen Flores, Ramon Efren Lazaro**



High meat prices blamed for protein deficiency among Pinoys

By **CECILLE SUERTE FELIPE**

Higher prices of meat have caused protein deficiency and contributed to malnutrition among Filipinos, which affected their learning capacities, according to Sen. Cynthia Villar.

Villar sponsored Senate Bill 2558, or an act strengthening the livestock, poultry and dairy industry development and competitiveness, which seeks to rationalize the organization and functions of relevant government agencies.

Villar, chair of the Senate committee on agriculture and food, said the livestock, poultry and dairy (LPD) industry accounted for more than a quarter of the agricultural sector's output in 2023.

"It stimulates economic growth, especially in rural areas, and provides livelihood opportunities to more than 2.8

million livestock and poultry farmers," Villar said.

"It is my hope that through these efforts, we would be able to provide adequate support to our raisers and farmers, boost our domestic production capabilities and improve the competitiveness of our LPD industry," she added.

The senator said that pork and chicken are integral components of the Filipino diet and help ensure a balanced intake of nutrients.

It is estimated that 52 percent of Filipinos' protein consumption comes from pork and chicken, and this is projected to grow to 58 percent by 2030.

"Due to this, high meat prices may result in protein deficiency and contribute to malnutrition. It could even affect learning outcomes," she said.

Villar cited a study conducted by

the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's Program for International Student Assessment, which showed students in countries with higher pork and chicken prices tend to obtain lower scores in examinations.

Despite its importance, Villar lamented that the LPD industry faces several challenges that hinder it from realizing its full potential.

"We know too well of the effects of disease outbreaks such as African swine fever, which has been afflicting our hog industry and decimating our pork supply since 2019. This has resulted in a significant increase in the prices of pork products," Villar said.

Compared to other agricultural commodities, the LPD sector historically receives relatively lower development assistance from the government, she said.



Ex-PR lady bets on 'tanglad' to help Tarlac farmers

By JUNEPA OCAMPO

When former public relations executive Myra Salvosa inherited land from her parents in Tarlac, she contemplated simply establishing a bed-and-breakfast place for weekend retreats. She called it "Bale Mi" – My House in the Capampangan language.

However, when the Covid-19 pandemic compelled her to stay for months in the laidback barangay of Balanti, she realized a significant need to assist the local farmers who were barely surviving.

It was then that she discovered tanglad or lemongrass.

This humble crop is used for cooking, imparting a unique flavor to Filipino dishes like inasal or lechon manok. Hence, Myra considered cultivating it on her 10-hectare farm and offering the produce to restaurants in Metro Manila.

Utilizing her connections, she reached out to a major lechon manok chain, which promptly informed her of

the need for 5,000 kilos of lemongrass per week.

"Apparently, there is a huge demand for lemongrass," she realized. "However, the vast volume is too much for us to supply. Masasagad yung farm ko (My farm will be exhausted)," she revealed. Additionally, Myra felt that the purchase price of ₱14 per kilo was too low to be sustainable, let alone profitable.

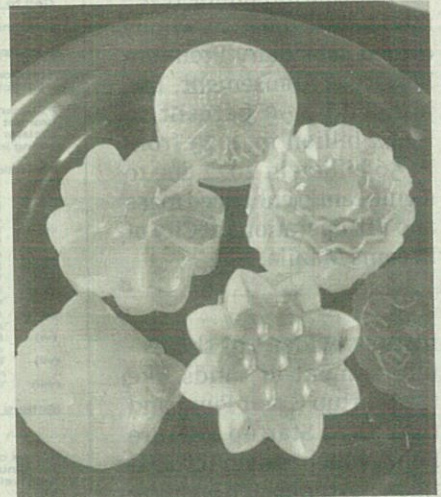
Adding value to lemongrass

It was then that Myra conceived the idea of using lemongrass for high-value products. She considered soaps and shampoo, staples of fast-moving consumer goods. However, to produce soaps and shampoo from lemongrass, Myra needed to extract oil from it.

She approached the Department of Science and Technology for assistance, and after preparing a feasibility study and proposal, she secured a grant for an extractor for her community, now named Riverside Organic Farmers Association of Balanti.



THIS BAG contains pulverized lemongrass that can freshen your car or room.



THE MALAGU lemongrass soaps and shampoo bars.

It took Myra several months to produce soaps and shampoo, which she branded as "Malagu," the Capampangan word for beautiful.

She then expanded to producing organic air fresheners, linen sprays, and oil for humidifiers, all of which were very popular among her friends and former colleagues in Metro Manila.

"We can sell these products at very good prices, half of which goes to the farmers we employ in growing and processing the lemongrass," she said.


Tanglad for food

As a pure-blooded Capampangan, Myra knows tanglad as an ingredient for food like chicken tinola. However, she said the market for this is very small. "Hinihingi nga lang sa amin ang tanglad ng mga gustong magluto ng tinola. (Those who want to cook chicken soup just ask lemongrass from us)," she said.

To make it a profitable venture for food, Myra and her son Joseph, a chef, have created various concoctions with lemongrass. They have developed a refreshing tanglad iced tea drink, which, Myra said, has medicinal properties such as lowering cholesterol and fighting



MYRA SALVOSA (left) and other leaders of farmers' groups in Central Luzon show the grant-in-aid contracts they signed with the Department of Science and Technology.

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TANGLAD QUEEN – Myra Salvosa now uses her relationship-building skills to help farmers through lemongrass growing and processing.

infections.

"My son was also able to pulverize tanglad and make a dry rub that he applies to any kind of meat for flavoring. It makes it easier for the meat to absorb the flavor," she said.

Unlimited income potential

Since tanglad is grass, it requires minimal effort to grow it. It grows all year round and does not require fertilizer or pesticide. "It's completely organic," said Myra.

Hence, Myra said the farmers in their barangay have a virtually unlimited income potential now that they already know how to add value to something that they used to take for granted.

"We are now developing other possible products such as lotion, deodorant, and even organic air freshener for cars which we can sell not only locally but even abroad. The potential is endless," she said.



FARMERS WORK in the night to prepare the lemongrass for processing.



LEMONGRASS GROWS easily, even in the hilly parts of Myra's 10-hectare farm in Balanti, Tarlac.



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Sweet memories of our vanishing salt beds

Why the country's salt industry needs a major comeback



SALTY ESSENTIALS To meet the demands of salt consumption nationwide, over 850,000 metric tons of salt is imported each year



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For many generations, my family never had to buy salt. Like almost everyone in our barrio, Pulanglupa, we were given free salt for our household needs by neighbors who owned the hundreds of salt beds, which were landmarks as famous as our town's bamboo organ. Well, not exactly free. We had to work for it.

Salt harvesting coincided with summer vacation. Helping around the salt beds gave children something to do besides kite flying, fishing, fruit picking, and hunting quail in freshly harvested rice fields. We helped our playmates' fathers and uncles perform four major tasks. First, we filled up the saltbeds with sea water that had been exposed to the summer sun in shallow ponds to increase salinity. Called pagtatasik, it was hard on the back and waist. By noontime, a sheet of solid salt would have formed on the surface and had to be broken into grains by slapping with bamboo poles. This had to be repeated at mid-afternoon when the sun was hotter than usual.

At sunset, it was time to scrape the grains of salt from the mat of broken pottery laid down like mosaic artwork. The process is called pagkayod, Tagalog for scrape. Each child had a wood-and-bamboo scraper to

gather the salt grains into pyramid-like piles, which would allow the wet salt to drain overnight and be ready to transfer to the main kamalig (store room) to await buyers.

At the end of each day, we kids were each rewarded with merienda and a kilo of salt. Our parents al-

lowed us to save the salt in sacks. We each had several sacks of salt by the end of summer. The rainy season brought salt buyers to our barrio. Our salt stocks were sold just in time for the Christmas holiday season when we had to spend our own savings on carnival rides, chocolates, and gifts for our friends.

During the rainy season, we had other reasons to hang around the salt beds, which by then would be under several feet of brackish water and teeming with bangus, tilapia, prawns, and crab, the only fish we were not allowed to catch. No problem, there was plenty of banak (mullet), bidbid (ladyfish), talimusak (goby), and the seasonal talangka (small crabs).



TIMPLA'T TIKIM

SOL VANZI

Image from FREEPIK

Sadly, all of these sweet memories are now just that. The salt beds are gone, replaced by high-rise condominium buildings and ugly steel-and-concrete commercial units.

A very special treat for me was oysters, which grew along the walls of the concrete kantarilya (dike) that controlled the water allowed into the ponds from the Zapote River.

Sadly, all of these sweet memories are now just that. The salt beds are gone, replaced by high-rise condominium buildings and ugly steel-and-concrete commercial units. The Zapote River is a silted muddy shadow of what it used to be. And the salt beds? Now and then, on my rare visits to my hometown, I pick up a few broken pieces of brown clay pots, the kind that used to line the salt beds. No amount of legislation can bring back the "irasan" of my youth.

But there is hope for the local salt industry. President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. has signed into law the "Philippine Salt Industry Development Act," which aims to strengthen and revitalize the salt industry in the

Philippines as part of the administration's efforts to promote rural development and increase rural income.

The law signed on March 11 stated that appropriate technology and research and adequate financial, production, marketing, and other support services will be provided to salt farmers to revitalize the salt industry, attain increased production, achieve salt-sufficiency, and become a next exporter of salt.

A Philippine Salt Industry Development Roadmap will be formulated and established to ensure the attainment of the objectives of the law. A "Salt Council" will also be created to ensure the unified and integrated implementation of the salt roadmap and accelerate the modernization and industrialization of the Philippine salt industry.

Salt, a basic commodity, is a dying local industry in the Philippines

and the country is forced to spend precious dollars to import 90 percent of our needs, at least 850,000 metric tons every year. The Philippines only produces a scant 100,000 metric tons of local salt.

A major culprit is the ASIN law that mandated consumable salt must be iodized and made it illegal to sell uniodized salt in any form. Columnist Boo Chanco points out that the country only needs to dedicate less than one percent of the country's shoreline to genuine salt-making to get rid of all of our imported salt.

Sixty percent of salt is used for cooking our food and finds its way as table salt and as a mix for seasonings but it has more industrial applications in the making of plastics, paper, coconut fertilizer, ice plant ingredients, etc. In fact, there are over 1,000 uses of salt.

Senate agriculture, food, and agrarian reform committee chairperson Cynthia Villar said the Philippines was producing around 240,000 metric tons of salt annually in the 1960s and the 1970s.

The ASIN Law passed in 1995, Villar said, became a deterrent to our salt industry's development.



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Quirino seeks coffee, cacao industry devt

BY LEANDER C. DOMINGO

TO enhance the local coffee and cacao industry in Quirino, the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) office in the province took proactive steps by convening stakeholders through the Coffee and Cacao Industry Meeting held on March 13, 2024.

Held at the Q-Life Conference Room in Capitol Hills in Cabaroguis, the activity was in partnership with the Quirino provincial government through its Provincial Agriculture Office and the Q-Life Upland Ecosystem Program.

Attended by various key stake-

holders of each cluster, DTI Region 2 (Cagayan Valley) information officer Manilyn Ponce said the focal point of the meeting was the comprehensive action planning session where participants engaged in addressing the needs and challenges faced by coffee and

cacao stakeholders.

Ponce said Quirino Gov. Dakila Carlo Cua took the lead in the reorganization of the Provincial Coffee and Cacao Council with the Quirino provincial government.

The DTI said the council plays a pivotal role in coordinating efforts to promote the growth and sustainability of local cacao and coffee industries.

"[It demonstrates] the stakeholders' commitment to collective progress as well as to improve the agri-supply chain of these commodities and help connect the key industry players with the various agri-industry clusters for market and infrastructure support," the DTI said.

Participants during the event

were provincial directors of DTI Quirino and the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority-Quirino, Quirino provincial agriculturist and representatives from the different national line agencies, as well as coffee and cacao farmers, traders, processors and coffee shop owners.

Ponce said the activity provided a platform for meaningful discussions, addressing common challenges and formulating collaborative solutions.

"It also fostered support from the government agencies in tackling identified obstacles and how their respective programs will be able to address them," she said.



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FOR THE LOVE OF PINAKBET The La Union provincial government hosts the inaugural Pinakbet Cookfest at the Mabanag Grounds in San Fernando on March 15, 2024. The cookfest was held in conjunction with the province's 174th founding anniversary and the 'Saluad La Union para Serbisio, Agri-turismo, Lako ken Oportunidad,' or SaLU-SALO, program aimed at showcasing the vegetable industry of La Union.
PIA PHOTO



Cavite group, Taiwan NGO renew agri supply deal

By JONATHAN L. MAYUGA

[X@jonlmayuga](#)

THE Tres Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries Farmers Association Inc. in Cavite renewed its contract to supply agricultural products to the Taiwan Fund for Children and Families (TFCF) for its childcare program.

The supply contract covers certain agricultural product requirements of the Taiwan nongovernment organization (NGO) to improve maternal, infant, and child nutrition in the Philippines.

The first memorandum of agreement (MOA) was signed last year between Danilo Arnes, President of the Tres Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries Farmers Association, Inc., and Kai Li Chang, TFCF Philippines Branch Director.

"This partnership has assured the agrarian reform beneficiaries [ARBs] of

the association of a steady market for their products and opened up opportunities to further expose their products to other target consumers," James Arthur T. Dubongco, Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR) Provincial Agrarian Reform Program Officer II in Cavite said in a statement.

He said the association will continuously supply their harvested agricultural products to the TFCF, including root crops, fruits, and vegetables.

TFCF is an international non-governmental organization established 73 years ago that dedicates itself to providing support to vulnerable children and their families.

TFCF has its main headquarters in Taichung, Taiwan, and its corresponding Philippine branch is in Mandaluyong. It boasts of remarkable achievements in helping underprivileged children and families in around 34 countries, including Mongolia,

Vietnam, Cambodia, and Jordan.

Albay FMRs

SEVERAL farm-to-market roads in four towns in Albay Province are expected to improve accessibility and transportation for agrarian reform beneficiaries and boost the connectivity of farms to trading centers in the province.

The projects, with a total budget of P500 million funded under the 2023 Agrarian Reform Fund, will be implemented by the Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR).

"The improvement of these roads is essential in connecting our farmers to marketplaces, ultimately increasing opportunities for agrarian reform communities," DAR Provincial Agrarian Reform Program Officer I Patricia T. Rastrullo of DAR Albay said.

In Polangui town, the P200-million three-segment project includes the P100-million Pintor-Kinuartilan-La Purisima

project which involves concreting of a 5-kilometer stretch. Additionally, the Itaran-Sitio San Luis-Lourdes and Lourdez-Lanigay projects, covering 2.5 kilometers each, cost P100 million in total.

In Guinobatan, the 4-kilometer concreting of Sitio Parina-Mapaco, Sitio Banban, Mapaco-Sitio Manapaonapao-Maguiron, Maguiron-Libas farm-to-market road (FMR) amounts to P100 million.

The Tablon-Cagmanaba project in Oas, covering a distance of 1.2 kilometers focuses on road opening and concreting. The groundbreaking ceremony for this project was held last March 9, marking the commencement of the construction phase.

In the municipality of Libon, the San Vicente-Nino Jesus-San Ramon FMR project is set to cover 3 kilometers, involving the concreting of the road.

Under the MOA between DAR and the local government units, at least 50 percent of ARBs must be employed as laborers in the implementation of the project including out-of-school-youth.



Banana producers urged to pursue variety diversification

THE Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) said countries should pursue variety diversification as a key strategy to ensure the future of banana trade, as the Cavendish variety is vulnerable to Fusarium wilt Tropical Race 4 (TR4).

FAO noted that the spread of diseases is a big concern in the sector. In 2019, TR4 reached several countries in Latin America after many years of spreading worldwide.

"However, acceptance by retailers and consumers of different varieties remains a

challenge," FAO Director General Qu Dongyu said in his opening remarks to the recently concluded 4th Global Conference of The World Banana Forum (WBF).

Participants to the WBF, which was hosted by the UN agency, discussed challenges faced by banana producers, including the impacts of the climate crisis, high energy and fertilizer costs, and the spread of the destructive TR4.

"Bananas are among the most produced, traded and consumed fruits globally, with more than 1000 varieties produced worldwide they provide vital nutrients to

many populations."

Qu noted that the banana sector is particularly significant in some of the least developed and low-income food-deficit countries, where it contributes not only to household food security as a staple, but also to job creation and income generation as a cash crop.

"Income from growing bananas can account for up to three quarters of the total monthly household income for smallholder farmers and generate over \$10 billion in export revenues annually, the bulk of which accrues to developing countries."

The conference is aimed at finding ways to boost the banana sector, which faces several constraints including high costs of transportation, energy, and inputs, in particular fertilizer prices, and the spread TR4.

In response to the various constraints, the sector should "turn these challenges into opportunities through close collaboration by partners across the banana sector," Qu said. He called for all stakeholders to work together to boost investments and adopt more sustainable production practices.

As high inflation has reduced the purchasing power of consumers placing bananas under an increasing competition

from various tropical fruits, Qu said better market access will require "substantial investment of resources, including financial."

The forum also highlighted the impact on the sector of high transportation costs and shipping disruptions in various areas of the world, including in the Black Sea, Red Sea and Panama Canal, caused by conflicts, geopolitical tensions and low water levels.

In terms of market access, FAO said stringent requirements can make the production and export of bananas more complicated. These cover a range of aspects, including fruit quality, pesticide residue levels, and environmental and social

sustainability, and affect smaller players in the market disproportionately.

"However, they may also offer producers opportunities for enhancing their operations, brand reputation and market access, with the needed substantial investments of time and resources."

The forum, which was established in 2009, offers its members a range of tools and resources to help the sector become more efficient, inclusive, resilient and sustainable. These include a practical tool for measuring carbon and water footprints, being piloted in nine countries and a Banana Occupational Health and Safety Initiative, being implemented in Ecuador and Cameroon.



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Hoover Feeds customer shares about profit potentials of cattle farming



From left: RJM Farm Owner Monching Tan and Hoover Feeds Agent Adrian Concepcion

CATTLE FARMING is one of the vital parts of the agriculture sector for its contribution to the economy and food security. But for Hoover Feeds ruminant feeds customer Monching Tan of RJM Farms, cattle farming is also one of the most profitable businesses in the country and is recommended for anyone looking for a business with high investment return and potential growth.

A resident farmer in Zambales, Monching Tan started early in sales. But his late wife encouraged him to try raising cattles. Currently, they own 15 hectares of farm and manages the business with his three children.

"Sa experience ko po, magandang negosyo ang cattle kung makakayang nating mamuhunan. Maganda ang

kikitain basta matutunan ang mag invest. Wala din peak or low season ang mga baka. Pag malaki na, pwede nang katayin o ibenta," he added.

Whether one is a cattle raiser for many years or a beginner in the field, Mr. Tan points out five key points will help to ensure productivity and high profitability for anyone who looks into investing a cattle farming business: an adequate shelter from extreme weather conditions such as heat and harsh rain; feeds; healthcare such as vaccinations, vitamins, and deworming; breeding with the right match; and proper handling and time management.

For Mr. Tan, discovering Hoover Feeds is not only a more affordable feed brand. He also observed that his cattle achieved an ideal amount of weight in a shorter period.

Hoover Feeds ruminant feeds are formulated to enhance cattle, goat, and carabao's nutritional needs. It possesses a complete balance of protein, vitamins, minerals, and fiber. It comes in a pellet form, which makes the animal better able to consume the feed more efficiently and guaranteed to keep all nutrients intact.

Hoover Feeds is also a Filipino-owned company with over 23 years of product excellence, covering hogs, poultry, ruminants, and rabbit feeds, expertly crafted by nutritionists.

Hoover Feeds is located at Brgy. Caphihan, Balubaran, San Rafael, Bulacan. Order at 09228023784, (044)8931069, or hvoerfeedscorporation@gmail.com.



Perwisyo ng El Niño pumalo sa P1.75B

Umakyat na sa P1.75 bilyon ang kabuuang halaga ng pinsalang idinulot sa agrikultura ng nararanasang El Niño phenomenon.

Sa Bagong Pilipinas public briefing nitong Miyerkoles, Marso 20 sinabi ni Task Force El Niño Spokesperson at Presidential Communications Office (PCO) Assistant Secretary Joey Villarama na bagama't huhumupa na ang epekto ng tagtuyot, marami aniyang mga magsasaka ang nagdusa dahil naapektuhan ang kanilang mga pananim na siya ngayong tinutugunan ng pamahalaan.

"Nagkaroon po ng meeting ang Task Force El Niño sa Camp Aguinaldo, at dito nga ay iniulat ng Department of Agriculture na nasa 1.75 billion na po ang losses in terms of agriculture. 1.75 billion, maliit pa po ito pero siyempre hindi po natin minamaliit iyong impact nito sa mga magsasaka," ani Villarama.

Posible namang umabot ng hanggang 76 mula sa kasalukuyang 67 na mga probinsiya ang maaapektuhan ng tagtuyot kaya manatiling handa umano upang malampasan ang epekto ng El Niño.

"So, hindi po tayo dapat maging kampante, bagkus dapat tayo ay maging handa at maging listo at dapat po tayo ay patuloy na magtipid given the limited resources we have para po malampasan po natin iyong pinakamatindi na puwedeng maidulot ng El Niño phenomenon," dagdag ni Villarama. **(Aileen Taliping)**



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Senate bill aims to revitalize agri industry

SENATOR Cynthia Villar has sponsored a bill "crucial" to unlock the immense potential of the country's livestock, poultry, and dairy industry, ensuring the sustainable growth and development of our agriculture sector.

Villar sponsored Senate Bill 2558 under Committee Report 193 to advance the development and competitiveness of the LPD industry since it accounts for more than a quarter of the agricultural sector's out-

put in 2023.

In filing the bill, Villar, chairperson of the Committee on Agriculture and Food, said: "It stimulates economic growth, especially in rural areas and provides livelihood opportunities to more than 2.8 million livestock and poultry farmers."

She added that pork and chicken are integral components of the Filipino diet, helping ensure a balanced intake of nutrients.

"It is estimated that 52.0 per-

cent of our protein consumption comes from pork and chicken, and this is projected to grow even higher to 58.0 percent in 2030," said Villar.

"We know too well of the effect of disease outbreaks such as the African Swine Fever, which has been afflicting our hog industry and decimating our pork supply since 2019. This has resulted in a significant increase in the prices of pork products," emphasized Villar.

Camille P. Balagtas



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Soybeans futures rise

SINGAPORE- Chicago soybean futures rose on Wednesday, supported by traders unwinding short positions, although a rapidly advancing harvest bumper crop in Brazil curbed gains.

Wheat fell for the first time in three sessions, while corn lost ground.

The most-active soybean contract on the Chicago Board of Trade (CBOT) added 0.1 percent to \$11.87 a bushel, as of 0323 GMT.

Wheat fell 0.4 percent to \$5.50-1/2 a bushel and corn slid 0.2 percent to \$4.38-1/2 a bushel.

Short covering is supporting the soybean market ahead of the US March 28 Prospective Plantings and quarterly stocks reports,

which have a history of jolting markets.

Overall, strong crop prospects in South America are limiting the upside potential in prices.

Brazil's soybean harvest reached 63 percent of the planted area as of last Thursday, agribusiness consultancy AgRural said on Monday, up 8 percentage points from the previous week and just ahead of the 62 percent a year earlier.

Russian attacks on Ukrainian agriculture infrastructure over the weekend revived worries about disruption to massive grain exports through the Black Sea. Huge supplies of cheap Russian wheat continue to hang over the market. - Reuters



\$6B in fertilizer plants to help Indonesia curb food cost

INDONESIA'S state-owned PT Pupuk Indonesia will invest more than \$6 billion to boost fertilizer supply as part of a bid to temper food costs.

The company plans to spend 100 trillion rupiah (\$6.4 billion) over the next five years, which includes a new \$1.2 billion ammonia and urea fertilizer plant in Fakfak in Papua province and about \$640 million of upgrades to its old Palembang complex, said President Director Rahmad Pribadi.

"We need it to improve food security in our eastern regions by providing affordable fertilizer with less logistic cost," Pribadi said in an interview in Jakarta.

The expansion plan could help the nation boost food output for its nearly 280 million people. Rice imports have already surged sevenfold last year, and the government is issuing more import permits this year as production lags demand. Volatile food prices rose 8.47 percent in February, the fastest pace in more than a year, as the cost of staples like rice and chili climb.

Construction of the Fakfak plant will start next year with production set for early 2028, Pribadi said.

Here's more from the interview:

- Company is considering debt financing or strategic equity partners to fund the expansion

- Pupuk Indonesia has picked advisers to arrange the IPO of its unit Pupuk Kalimantan Timur, pending better market situation and approval from the State-Owned Enterprises Ministry

- Company is also actively engaging with potential partners and likely M&A targets to boost its presence in Asia Pacific

- Pupuk Indonesia targets 8.5 million tons of urea output and 4.2 million tons of NPK fertilizer this year, with a goal of doubling its ammonia output in 2050 from 7 million tons currently

- Company will build a methanol plant in Aceh that will get gas supply from the Andaman project.

Export aid

THE United States is seeing fervent industry support for its program to help the nation's farmers win back overseas

markets from rivals including Brazil and Russia, with agriculture groups seeking more than \$900 million in aid.

The US Department of Agriculture (USDA) received applications for more than three times the \$300 million made available in the first round of a five-year export promotion plan, according to Daniel Whitley, the administrator of the USDA's Foreign Agricultural Service. The \$1.3 billion Regional Agricultural Promotion Program, announced last year, is designed to help the industry tap new destinations for American crops.

The US is throwing money at the agriculture industry in a bid to recoup markets lost over the past decade. Brazil overtook the US last year as the world's top exporter of corn, after earlier doing the same for soybeans, while Russia has surpassed the US with wheat.

"Many of our competitors are extremely busy and active promoting their products around the world," Whitley said at the National Grain and Feed Association annual convention in Orlando on Monday. "It's important that we give you all the tools you need to be successful, and that's what this RAP program does—it allows you to grow and expand your market and promotion activities."

Funds must be used to diversify markets, with one of the main bets to reverse the US's decline being new export markets in Southeast Asia, the Middle East and Africa. Whitley expects applications to be selected by late spring or early summer.

The US is encouraging the private sector "to look at more markets, to be more diversified in where you're promoting your products, and where you're building your consumers," he said in an interview at the event.

He is particularly bullish on Africa. The continent, which is expected to be home to 25 percent of the global population by 2050, has a growing middle class, increased buying power and a "strong recognition and appreciation for the US brand."

"It is vital that we get our companies, our products and our industries there now, and we don't wait until it's too late," Whitley said, noting that competitors such as China are already in the region. "I think Africa presents such a tremendous opportunity." **Bloomberg News**