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## COMMONSENSE

MARICHU A. VILLANUEVA

### Remove the chaff from the grains

Other than the questioned selling of the buffer stock of rice to traders, what's happening at the National Food Authority (NFA)? With 132 of around 2,000 NFA officials and employees all around the country suspended for six months without pay, this agency attached to the Department of Agriculture (DA) is struggling to stay relevant in the over-all schemes of the government on food security.



Under Republic Act (RA) 11203, better known as the Rice Tariffication Law (RTL), the NFA was mandated to keep the country's rice buffer stock at the optimal level of 15 to 30 days of the national rice consumption. Included in this estimation the rice buffer stocks needed in case of man-made or natural disasters and other emergency situations.

Prior to the implementation of the RTL, the required inventory of rice was at 90 days – 60 days for the private sector and 30 days inventory for the NFA. Under the RTL, the private sector needs at least 81 days inventory and nine days stocks for NFA. The RTL also removed the various regulatory powers of the NFA from import licensing to warehouse inspection.

The Philippines has been dependent on rice importation due to the country's poor annual production of the Filipino staple food. Worsened by rampant smuggling, the implementation of the RTL has been seen to have stabilized the supply and prices of rice. Thus, the RTL was hailed as a landmark reform law that supposedly cut much into the nefarious trading of smuggled rice in the Philippines through these years.

It was former President Rodrigo Duterte who signed RTL as RA No. 11203 on February 14, 2019. The RTL amended RA 8178, or Agricultural Tariffication Act of 1996 and replaced the system of quantitative restriction (QR) such as import quota on rice procured from other countries with tariffs of 35 to 40 percent.

Former Finance Secretary Benjamin Diokno, in fact, maintains it was the RTL that actually tamed the galloping inflation in our country. The rice inflation averaged to a high of 1.4 percent in the first quarter of 2022. From rice being a major inflation-driver in the past, Diokno noted with great satisfaction, the RTL enabled rice traders to contribute to the welfare of Filipino rice farmers and helped them modernize and improve their palay production.

This was largely attributed to the benefits of the Rice Competitiveness Enhancement Fund (RCEF) out of tariff collections from imported rice that RTL mandated. The RCEF consists of an annual appropriation of P10 billion in six years to fund programs for farm mechanization, seed development, propagation and promotion, credit assistance, and extension services. These programs were specifically identified to improve the productivity of rice farmers, reduce production costs, and link them to the value chain.

**As much as P30 billion in tariff collections are projected this year from importers of rice under RTL.**



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The implementation of RTL reportedly benefits two million farmers, 110 million consumers, and tens of thousands of retailers, wholesalers, millers, and those in the warehousing and transport businesses.

As much as P30 billion in tariff collections are projected this year from importers of rice under RTL.

The excess from the P10 billion tariff revenue collection as provided for by RTL is appropriated by Congress the following years for the direct financial assistance to rice farmers, titling of agricultural rice lands, expanded crop insurance program, and crop diversification program.

The six-year period for the annual P10 billion allocation for RCEF lapses later this year, DA assistant secretary and official spokesman, Arnel de Mesa told us at the *Kapihan sa Manila Bay* news forum last week. This is why, De Mesa noted, a number of bills have been filed before the 19th Congress to extend the RCEF, among other proposed amendments.

Several bills seek to review the RTL such as House Bill (HB) 1920 filed and authored by Agri party list representative Wilbert Lee. Speaking at the same *Kapihan sa Manila Bay* news forum, Lee explained HB 1920 seeks to return to the NFA its rice retail function to buy palay from the farmers at the highest price possible and sell the most affordable rice to the consumers.

De Mesa concurred that the NFA needs "to intervene in the market and enable it to appropriately respond to emergency needs" to stave off a rice crisis. Under the RTL, he cited, "the government's hands are tied" because the NFA is allowed only to sell rice stocks to government agencies such as the Department of Social Welfare (DSWD). "All rice are now in the hands of the private sector. The State no longer has the power to intervene in the market," De Mesa pointed out.

Because of the rigidity of the RTL, he recalled, the government was forced to impose last year at one time a temporary, short-period price cap when the price of rice shot up to more than P50 per kilo.

While he was the concurrent Agriculture Secretary, President Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr. (PBBM) backed the review of the RTL and to return the powers of the NFA at the height of spike in rice prices early last year. In one of the meetings at Malacañang with the country's various agriculture stakeholders, Agriculture assistant secretary and deputy spokesman Rex Estoperez disclosed: "President Marcos said, 'review what needs to be reviewed necessary to empower the NFA.' Its (previous functions) should be returned. You cannot totally remove its powers."

The bills to review RTL are not among, though, the 57 priority bills in the list jointly agreed by the Legislative-Executive Development Advisory Council (LEDAC). De Mesa, however, clarified Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu-Laurel is supportive of the proposed review of the RTL, especially on extending the RCEF.

But for now, De Mesa conceded, the priority of Secretary Tiu-Laurel is to re-open at the soonest possible time the 99 NFA warehouses that were closed down after the warehouse supervisors, or bodegeros were suspended by the Ombudsman. The DA chief designated last week former Bureau of Plant Industry director Larry Lacson as the NFA officer-in-charge Administrator to get these things done quickly.

Other than gaslighting these bureaucrats, the NFA needs to clean up the agency like winnowing the palay to remove the chaff from the grains.







## *DA, FDA collab to expedite ASF, AI vax approval*

**THE Department of Agriculture (DA) on Friday said it collaborated with the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to expedite the process for the approval of the African swine fever (ASF) and the Avian Influenza (AI) vaccines.**

At the Bagong Pilipinas Ngayon briefing, Agriculture Assistant Secretary Arnel de Mesa said the move was in line with the directive of President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. to fast-track the vaccine procurement to combat the effects of ASF

and AI.

"Isa po doon sa napag-usapan ay paano na po ma-harmonize iyong mga proseso at iyon pong mga approval process ay masigurado na iyong criteria na ginagawang Bureau of Animal Industry (BAI) at ng FDA ay maayos na po para mapabilis iyong pag-approve," he said.

Discussions conducted between DA Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. and FDA Director General Dr. Samuel Zacate on Thursday involved the immediate approval of procedures for

vaccines, bioproducts, and veterinary products.

Laurel and Zacate also discussed intensifying border control in partnership with the Bureau of Customs to combat the entry of illegal food products into the country.

The DA, meanwhile, earlier requested vaccine suppliers from the US and Vietnam to secure approval before the FDA.

ASF vaccines may be available by the year-end or early 2025, according to the DA. PNA





## **NFA to collaborate in Ombudsman probe**

THE Department of Agriculture assured that the National Food Authority (NFA) shall provide all information needed for the investigation of the alleged improper sale of rice buffer stock.

The DA made the remark following a report that an unnamed NFA official allegedly

intended to withhold documents amid the investigation of the Office of the Ombudsman.

"Nag-utos na rin si Secretary (Francisco) Tiu Laurel Jr. sa bagong naitalagang OIC (Officer-in-charge) Administrator si Director Larry Lacson na siguraduhin na lahat ng dokumentong kinakailangan ng Ombuds-

man ay maibigay kaagad," Agriculture Assistant Secretary Arnel de Mesa said at the Bagong Pilipinas Ngayon briefing.

This is to ensure continuous purchase of palay amid the peak harvest season, as the country secures 300,000 metric tons of national rice buffer stock. PNA



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## Ecija onion farmers get storage facilities

SAN FERNANDO, Pampanga – The Department of Agriculture has turned over two onion cold storage facilities to the DA-Central Luzon office in Nueva Ecija.

Each facility is capable of storing 20,000 bags or about 540,000 kilos of onions, and will help farmers preserve their produce, according to AB David, DA-Central Luzon high-value crops development program coordinator.

“With these post-harvest facilities, onion farmers will now have areas to store their produce. These will also ensure a stable supply of onions, especially during the close cropping season. Cropping season for onion occurs only once a year,” David said.

Onions stored in a regular facility can last up to three months. But if these are kept in cold storage facilities, these can last from six to eight months for red, and four to six months for yellow onions.

The facilities will also help farmers to properly program and market their produce at competitive prices to avoid losses.

David said the facilities, each worth P38.07 million, will serve around 122 farmer-members of the San Vicente Alintutuan Irrigators Association in Laur, and 71 members of the Calancuasan Sur Farmers Association in Cuyapo.

“The construction of these onion cold storage facilities did not cost farmer-beneficiaries anything. Their contribution is the land or site where the facility was built,” David said.

The DA is set to build two more similar facilities in Palayan and Gabaldon.

– Ric Sapnu





## *Fish catch in WPS grows despite tensions with China*

By **JASPER EMMANUEL ARCALAS**

Despite rising tensions with China, the Philippines expanded its fish catch in the West Philippine Sea (WPS) last year to a four-year high of over 200,000 metric tons on the back of higher state support to fishermen.

Citing Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) data, the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) said the country's fisheries output in the WPS in 2023 reached 201,894.49 metric tons, almost 15 percent more than the 175,784.73 MT recorded in 2022.

The BFAR explained that the fisheries output in the WPS was based on the fish catch recorded by both commercial and marine municipal subsectors in eight provinces: Ilocos

Norte, Ilocos Sur, La Union and Pangasinan (Region 1); Bataan and Zambales (Region 3), and Occidental Mindoro and Palawan (Region 4A).

The data were culled by the BFAR from the latest figures released by the PSA on the country's fisheries production.

BFAR, an attached agency of the Department of Agriculture, attributed the increase in WPS fish catch to its interventions last year to fisherfolk through its Livelihood Activities to Enhance Fisheries Yields and Economic Gains from the West Philippine Sea (LAYAG-WPS) program.

BFAR said it provided fuel subsidies and various

**Turn to B2**





## Fish catch From B1

fishing equipment like fiberglass boats, payao and post-harvest equipment to some of the estimated 385,000 Filipino fishermen catching in the WPS.

"These key interventions not only alleviated financial burdens on small-scale fishermen, but also enhanced their mobility and safety, and enabled them to explore broader waters and increase catch volumes," BFAR told **The STAR**.

Historical government data showed that the country's fisheries output in the WPS last year was the highest in four years or since the 212,830.87 metric tons recorded in 2019.

Fish catch from the WPS accounts for about seven percent of the country's annual fish supply for food consumption.

### Sustained government support

The BFAR vowed to sustain its interventions to fishermen sailing to the WPS under its LAYAG-WPS program, which had an P80 million budget last year.

The BFAR earlier disclosed that it is spending P2.5 billion this year for the procurement of new floating assets as it boosts its presence in the WPS and assists fishermen better.

"Resources have also been allocated for the construction of an aqua feed mill, operation of a community fish landing center, and implementation of the salt program in the regions covered by the WPS," the BFAR said.

International marine conservation organization Oceana urged BFAR to enhance the implementation of the mandatory installment of vessel monitoring measures (VMM) in all commercial fishing vessels to have better monitoring of the country's fish stocks, including those in the WPS.

Citing BFAR data, Oceana said only 81 percent of the commercial fishing vessels are installed with VMM. The mandatory installment of VMM began in 2020.

"With all Philippine-registered commercial fishing vessels identified and their location of fishing activities traced, the Philippine government will be able to track them while plying the West Philippine Sea, record their catch and enable the government to monitor the state of our fish stocks in this important fishing ground," Oceana vice president Gloria Estenzo Ramos told **The STAR**.

### Intensify monitoring

Ramos emphasized that the VMM would address issues of overfishing and illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing across the country's waters by tracking and determining the state registration of commercial fishing vessels.

Ramos pointed out that the VMM will help the government to determine illegal fishers in the WPS as the measure would determine "non-Filipino" fishers in the country's EEZ.

"Without the VMM, the government is blind to the identities of Philippine-

flagged fishing vessels," she said while noting that foreign fishing vessels are difficult to identify once they switch off their automatic identification systems.

The BFAR added that it will also intensify its monitoring, control and surveillance (MCS) activities in the WPS by procuring two units of MCS vessels and a food boat.

Furthermore, the bureau said it will operationalize an integrated marine environment monitoring system and implement an information systems strategic plan.

BFAR earlier noted that its P1.817 billion confidential and intelligence fund would boost its MCS activities in WPS and ensure "sustainable" use of marine resources and "safeguard" the livelihoods of Filipino fishermen in the WPS.

BFAR documents showed that it recorded 305 vessels within the country's exclusive economic zone in the WPS between 2022 and 2023.

Of the total figure, about 266 were identified as fishing vessels while the remaining vessels were for military operations.

BFAR said 144 of the monitored fishing vessels came from China and 71 from Vietnam, during the reference period. Meanwhile, there were 49 Philippine fishing vessels monitored and documented in the WPS that came from Regions 1, 3, 4B, 12 and the National Capital Region.





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## Japan, FAO, MAFAR hold sustainability workshop in BARMM

JAPAN Embassy's First Secretary and Agriculture Attaché Jumpei Tachikawa attended on March 12 the After-Action Review and Sustainability Workshop in Davao City. The event is a pre-cursor to the culmination of the JPY 200 million Japan-funded project for sustaining rice and corn production in BARMM through the provision and efficient use of fertilizers amidst the global impacts of Ukraine war.

The current Russia-Ukraine war has caused food, fertilizer, and fuel costs to rise in several countries, including the Philippines. This includes the global fertilizer shortage, as Russia is among its biggest exporters. While the Philippines does not directly import fertilizer from Russia, it is equally affected by rising fertilizer costs induced by the shortage as a net importer of fertilizer. This is especially true for BARMM, which is already struggling with high poverty rates, low rice and corn output, and rising farm input costs.

Through this project, a total of 4,474 farmers have benefited from fertilizer inputs, of which 1,203 are rice farmers and 3,571 are corn farmers from the

municipalities of Lanao del Sur, Maguindanao del Sur, Maguindanao del Norte, and Special Geographic Area (SGA) as of January 2024. In view of promoting efficient use of fertilizers, the project is also coupled with other interventions, including capacity-building activities on soil testing and soil fertility management.

The workshop brought together the project's major partners and stakeholders to discuss the valuable insights from its successful implementation. Tachikawa's remarks encouraged everyone to apply the lessons learned from this project. He also advised everyone to utilize fertilizers judiciously to attain the best outcomes while also protecting the environment.

The government of Japan, in collaboration with project partners such as the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries, and Agrarian Reform (MAFAR), and local government units, hopes to empower small-holder rice and corn farmers in BARMM along with increasing their productivity and income.



■ Through this project, a total of 4,474 farmers from BARMM have benefited from fertilizer inputs. CONTRIBUTED PHOTO





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## Gov't should focus on climate-resilient rice varieties to cushion El Niño impact

By DEXTER BARRO II

Agri Party-list Rep. Wilbert T. Lee has called on the Department of Agriculture (DA) to invest in the development of climate-resilient varieties of major crops as a way to cushion the impact of the El Niño phenomenon.

"Panahon na upang pagtuunan natin ng pansin ang pagdevelop ng climate-resilient na palay at mais para maibsan ang epekto ng El Niño sa hinaharap," Lee said in a statement.

(It is time for us to focus on developing climate-resilient rice and corn to mitigate the impact of El Niño in the future.)

According to Lee, the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) has already started work on rice varieties that can survive extreme climate conditions such as the intense heat brought by El Niño.

"We just need to adopt and build on this technology in order for our farmers to benefit from it," he added.

The IRRI has recently developed drought-tolerant varieties that were released in several countries. These include the Sahbhagi Dhan in India, the Sahod Ulan in the Philippines, and the Sookha Dhan varieties in Nepal.

Lee says that the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) is also developing drought-tolerant

(DT) corn varieties.

"I suggest we propose a knowledge exchange of sorts para mapakinabangan nila ang pag-aaral natin sa palay at makuha naman natin ang teknolohiya nila sa mais (so that they can benefit from our studies on rice and we can learn their corn technology)," the lawmaker said.

"We need to utilize and maximize all available agricultural technologies so as to make our farmers—our food security soldiers—more resilient to climate change," he noted.

The DA recently announced that the agricultural damage caused by the intensifying El Niño has already reached P1.75 billion, affecting eight regions in the country.

More than 32,000 hectares of farmlands were damaged by the severe heat, with almost 30,000 farmers displaced as a result.

"Kapag hindi na apektado ang ating mga magsasaka sa pagbabago ng klima, tataas ang produksyon at kita nila, at bawas pangamba naman sa ibang mga pangangailangan tulad ng gastos sa pagkakasakit o pagpapospital," Lee said.

(When our farmers are no longer affected by climate change, their production and income will increase, and they will have less concern with other needs such as the cost of illness or hospitalization.)





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## Rice output seen hitting 12 million MT

THE Philippines is forecast to produce about 12.125 million metric tons (MT) of rice this year due to increased funding from the government, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) said.

The USDA's latest expected production for the marketing year is slightly higher than their previous forecast of 12 million MT, adding that El Niño is forecast to weaken in the April-May period.

"The [Philippine] government continues to prioritize the sector with funding, and farmers increase use of fertilizer and hybrid seeds," said USDA in its latest Grain and Feed report.

It added that the Department of Agriculture's (DA) Masagana Rice Program is set to receive funding worth P30.8 billion this year, roughly the same as in 2023, but double the P15.8 billion it received in 2022. The rice program aims to help 2.3 million farmers.

Citing data from the Fertilizer and Pesticides Authority, USDA said that

fertilizer prices are more stable than in previous years, also affecting the rice production level.

Area to be harvested, meanwhile, is expected to remain the same at 4.8 million hectares.

In terms of consumption, the USDA forecasts rice consumption to increase to 19.6 million MT for marketing year 2024-2025 in line with population growth.

"Global wheat prices have stabilized, but there was no measurable shift from rice to bread over the past year as both staples experienced inflation," it said.

The country's rice imports were earlier projected to hit 4.0 million MT due to smaller harvests from local farms. This was higher from USDA's previous estimate of 3.9 million MT.

This indicates that the Philippines will continue to be the top importer of rice globally, with Indonesia, China, and the European Union closely behind.

In 2023, the DA's Bureau of Plant Industry showed that inbound ship-

ments of the staple totaled 3.6 million MT for the whole year, down 8.96 percent from the 3.82 million MT logged in 2022.

From January to March 8, 2024, the country shipped in about 793,75 MT of rice. And according to the DA, the government should import a minimum of 330,000 MT of rice per month to fill in the average consumption of 37 MT per day.

This is equivalent to around 2.6 to 2.8 million MT of rice imports.

The department also assured the public that rice supply remains sufficient despite the upcoming lean season and risks of the El Niño weather pattern.

However, prices of the staple remain elevated due to the weather pattern and the global market situation.

Based on the price monitoring report of the DA as of March 22, prices of imported well-milled rice range between P51 to P54 per kilo (kg) while locally milled rice is sold from P49 to P58 per kg. **JANINE ALEXIS MIGUEL**



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## USDA REVISES FORECAST

# PH EXPECTED TO CUT DOWN RICE IMPORTS ON WEAKER EL NIÑO

With domestic production able to meet the slight increase in consumption due to a weaker El Niño, the Philippines may still reduce its imported rice purchases.

In a report, the US Department of Agriculture's (USDA) Foreign Agricultural Service said the country could import 4 million metric tons (MT) of rice this year instead of the previous projection of 4.1 million MT as

“domestic production will cover the slight increase in demand.”

The USDA's import projection is relatively flat as “the weakened El Niño forecast will support improved growing conditions for the wet season rice crop resulting in stable import demand.”

It also said the minimum access volume or tariff rate quota for rice imports, set at 350,000 MT, was rendered “largely irrelevant” since at least 90 percent

of imported rice comes from Southeast Asian countries.

All rice imports are subject to the tariff rate of 35 percent until end-2024, per Executive Order No. 50 signed by President Marcos in December last year.

The country imported 793,753.49 MT of rice as of March 7, based on data from the Bureau of Plant Industry. Vietnam, as in the previous years, accounted for the major-

ity of the supply with 431,846.72 MT, followed by Thailand with 210,127.38 MT.

In 2023, the volume of rice that entered the Philippines totaled 3.6 million MT, lower than 3.8 million MT last year.

The USDA pegged rice production at 12.125 million MT, citing the latest forecast that El Niño could weaken by April and May, along with the government's program to support the

rice sector and the increased usage of fertilizer and hybrid seeds.

The government, through the Department of Agriculture (DA), funneled P30.8 billion in funding this year to 2.3 million rice farmers nationwide. The allocation was higher than the P15.8 billion the DA received in 2022.

Meanwhile, the USDA estimated local consumption to rise in line with population growth.

“Global wheat prices have

stabilized, but there was no measurable shift from rice to bread over the past year as both staples experienced inflation,” it added.

The Philippines produced a total of 20.06 million MT of rice in 2023, up by 1.5 percent, according to the Philippine Statistics Authority. It surpassed the previous record output of 19.96 million MT in 2021.

—JORDEENE B. LAGARE INQ





EL NIÑO RESPONSE

# MORE SPENDING ON CLIMATE-RESILIENT CROPS PROPOSED

**By Jeannette I. Andrade**  
@jiandradeINQ

A party list lawmaker on Sunday called on the **Department of Agriculture (DA)** to invest more on research for climate-resilient varieties of major crops, particularly rice and corn, to reduce the impact of future El Niño phenomena.

AGRI party list Rep. Wilbert Lee cited DA reports placing at P1.75 billion the estimated cost of damage in 32,000 hectares of farmland due to the El Niño phenomenon currently being experienced in the country, which has also caused the displacement of tens of thousands of farmers.

There are eight regions currently most affected by the El Niño phenomenon, includ-

ing: Ilocos, Cagayan Valley, Central Luzon, Calabarzon (Cavite, Laguna, Batangas, Rizal and Quezon), Mimaropa (Mindoro, Marinduque, Romblon and Palawan), Western Visayas, Zamboanga Peninsula, and Soccsksargen (South Cotabato, Cotabato, Sultan Kudarat, Sarangani and General Santos City).

### Maximize technologies

In a statement, Lee pointed out in Filipino that it was time to focus on developing climate-resilient rice and corn to mitigate the effects of El Niño in the future.

He noted that the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) has developed climate-resilient rice that can “tolerate ex-

treme climate conditions.”

“We just need to adopt and build on this technology in order for our farmers to benefit from it,” Lee pointed out.

Drought-tolerant rice varieties developed by the IRRI have already been released, including the Sahbhagi Dhan in India; Sahod Ulan in the Philippines; and the Sookha Dhan in Nepal.

The IRRI has also been studying flood-tolerant rice varieties, which have been released and are being planted including Swarna-Sub1 in India; Samba Mahsuri in Bangladesh; and IR64-Sub1 in the Philippines.

Lee further noted a study by the United States Department of Agriculture on drought-tolerant corn, point-

ing out in mixed English and Filipino, “I suggest we propose a knowledge exchange of sorts so they could benefit from our rice research and we could obtain their corn technology.”

He noted that drought-tolerant corn varieties were made available to US farmers between 2011 and 2013 after decades of research by crop breeders and plant scientists.

“We need to utilize and maximize all available agricultural technologies so as to make our farmers—our food security soldiers—more resilient to climate change,” he said, stressing that having climate-resilient crops would ultimately help the country achieve food security and sufficiency. INQ



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## More investment urged in climate-resistant crops

THE DEPARTMENT of Agriculture (DA) needs to consider developing more climate-resistant crops to mitigate the impact of El Niño on agriculture, a legislator said Sunday.

Party-list Rep. Wilbert T. Lee said in a statement that making climate-resilient crops available to farmers would help achieve food security amid the threat of food shocks due to dry conditions brought about by El Niño.

"We need to utilize and maximize all available agricultural

technologies so as to make our farmers more resilient to climate change," Mr. Lee said in a statement. "Climate-resilient crop varieties are important in achieving food security," he added.

The DA reported last week that damage to agriculture has been valued at P1.75 billion due to intensifying El Niño conditions, displacing at least 29,437 farmers across 32,231 hectares of affected farmland.

Rice and corn crops sustained most of the damage, valued at P1.1 billion and P317 million, respectively.

"We should now consider developing climate-resilient rice and corn crops to mitigate the effects of El Niño," Mr. Lee said in Filipino.

While he noted the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) has conducted initial studies on climate-resilient staple crops, the government should

further "build on this technology" to help farmers reduce their losses.

The IRRI has developed drought-tolerant rice crops such as the Sahod Ulan rice variety released throughout the country. Approved for release last year, Sahod Ulan 39 was the latest drought-resilient rice variety developed by IRRI, which features a fast maturity period and resistance against pests and disease.—  
**Kenneth Christiane L. Basilio**





## USDA downgrades PHL rice import forecast as milled rice output picks up

THE US Department of Agriculture (USDA) said it downgraded its forecast for Philippine rice imports amid a rise in firecast milled rice production, which it said is sufficient to partly offset growing demand.

In its Grain and Feed Annual report published on Friday, USDA Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS) said that its forecast for rice imports for the marketing year (MY) 2024-2025 is flat at 4 million metric tons (MT) as “domestic production covers the

slight increase in demand.” Early this month, the USDA made an import forecast of 4.1 million MT, citing expectations of a “smaller crop.” The marketing year starts in July and ends in June of the following year.

“FAS is forecasting MY 2024/2025 imports at the same level as MY 2023/24 as the weakened El Niño forecast will support improved growing conditions for the wet season rice crop resulting in stable import demand,” the report said.

The Philippines is expected to produce 12.125 million MT of milled rice in MY 2024/2025 with the expected weakening of El Niño by April or May, continued government funding, and increased use of fertilizer and hybrid seed.

This is higher than the adjusted 12 million metric tons forecast for MY 2023/2024 which had been downgraded from 12.3 million due to the effects of El Niño.

FAS noted that the Philippine Department of Agriculture’s

Masagana Rice Program targeted at 2.3 million farmers is expected to disburse P30.8 billion in aid, while fertilizer prices are stabilizing, except for ammonia.

It added that rice consumption is expected to increase for MY 2024/2025 in line with population growth. Total consumption and residual amounts are expected to increase to 16.48 million MT from 16.05 million MT in MY 2023/2024.

“Global wheat prices have stabilized, but there was no mea-

surable shift from rice to bread over the past year as both staples experienced inflation,” FAS said.

“As of the time of publication, the dry season harvest was having a slight downward effect on retail rice prices. Thus far, rice consumption has proven durable despite inflation,” it added.

Meanwhile, the FAS forecasts flat corn production growth amid continued subsidies to help maintain yields even though the crop was not being significantly affected by El Niño.

“This is due in part to the slightly later growing season and the varying effects of El Niño on different growing regions,” the FAS said.

However, imports of corn are projected to be higher for MY 2024/2025 as its production lags the expansion of the livestock and poultry sectors.

FAS said that the extension of the lower corn tariff rates until the end of 2024 will help preserve many global sourcing options for importers. — **Justine Irish D. Tabile**





## DA told to invest in research on climate-resilient crop varieties

**T**HE Department of Agriculture (DA) must focus on the development of climate-resilient varieties of major crops to mitigate the impact of weather phenomena like El Niño, according to a lawmaker.

AGRI Partylist Rep. Wilbert T. Lee issued the statement after the DA announced that agricultural damage caused by intensifying El Niño has already reached P1.75 billion, covering more than 32,000 hectares of farm lands and displacing almost 30,000 farmers.

"Panahon na upang pagtuunan natin ng pansin ang pagdevelop ng climate-resilient na palay at mais para maibsan ang epekto ng El Niño sa hinaharap," Lee said.

"Mayroon nang mga naunang pag-aaral ang IRRI [International Rice Research Institute] sa climate-resilient rice na kayang magtolerate sa extreme climate conditions. We just need to adopt and build on this technology for our farmers to benefit from it.

The IRRI has developed drought-tolerant rice varieties which have been released in several countries including Sahbhagi Dhan in India, the Sahod Ulan in the Philippines, and the Sookha Dhan varieties in Nepal.

It is also currently studying flood-tolerant rice varieties which have been released and are now being planted in various areas including Swarna Sub1 in India, Samba Mahsuri in Bangladesh, and IR64-Sub1 in the Philippines.

"Mayroon ding pag-aaral ang United States Department of Agriculture [USDA] tungkol naman sa drought-tolerant [DT]

corn. I suggest we propose a knowledge exchange of sorts *para mapakinabangan nila ang pag-aaral natin sa palay at makuha naman natin ang teknolohiya nila sa mais,*" Lee said.

DT corn varieties became available to US farmers between 2011 and 2013 after decades of research on drought tolerance by crop breeders and plant scientists.

"We need to utilize and maximize all available agricultural technologies so as to make our farmers—our food security soldiers—more resilient to climate change," the solon said.

*"Kapag hindi na apektado ang ating mga magsasaka sa pagbabago ng klima, tataas ang produksyon at kita nila, at bawas pangamba naman sa ibang mga pangangailangan tulad ng gastos sa pagkakasakit o pagpapa-ospital."*

The DA earlier announced that eight regions in the Philippines were most affected by El Niño: Ilocos, Cagayan Valley, Central Luzon, Calabarzon (Cavite, Laguna, Batangas, Rizal and Quezon), Mimaropa (Mindoro, Marinduque, Romblon and Palawan), Western Visayas, Zamboanga Peninsula, and Soccsksargen.

Most affected was Mimaropa, which incurred a P770-million damage to agriculture, followed by Western Visayas with P560 million; Cagayan Valley, P180 million; Central Luzon, P158 million; Ilocos, P54 million; Zamboanga peninsula, P13 million; Calabarzon, P7 million, and Soccsksargen, P2 million.





## Inefficiencies stunt growth of local corn sector—Villar

BY BUTCH FERNANDEZ

X@butchBM

**I**NEFFICIENCIES in supply and market chains as well as inadequacies in policies and governance continue to limit corn productivity, according to Senator Cynthia A. Villar.

Saying the government can “no longer turn a blind eye to the struggles of the yellow corn industry and the people who depend on it,” the chair of the Senate’s agriculture committee endorsed to plenary a measure for a comprehensive framework for its promotion and development.

Just before the Senate went on Holy Week break, Villar delivered her sponsorship speech for Senate Bill (SB) 2625, under Committee Report No. 246 entitled “An Act to develop the Philippine



**THIS BUSINESSMIRROR file photo shows farmers in Cauayan City, Isabela threshing their corn harvest to take advantage of the good weather.**

Corn Industry, enhance the availability and affordability of quality feeds and staple food, and provide for a corn competitiveness enhancement fund.”

“The measure acknowledges the organizational and institutional constraints and ensures that corn farmers are provided with adequate resources and support mechanisms that they need to thrive and compete in the market.”

Villar’s Committee on Agriculture, Food and Agrarian Reform together with the Committees on Finance, and Ways and Means conducted one public hearing, two technical working group meetings, and several consultative meetings before crafting the panel report.

In seeking to propel the competitiveness and expansion of the yellow corn industry, the bill is deemed a “crucial supplementary measure aligned with the objectives of the Livestock, Poultry and Dairy Industry Development Act” which Villar earlier sponsored. “It is imperative that we also bolster the corn industry.”

The yellow corn industry, Villar said, “plays a pivotal role in sustaining our livestock and poultry industry and feeding the nation.” She cited data showing that in 2023, the combined corn-livestock-poultry





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...sector contributed 27.17 percent of gross value added in agriculture. It provided livelihood opportunities to more than 1.28 million corn farmers, 2.8 million livestock and poultry farmers and thousands of other industry players throughout the value chain.

"This underscores the impact of the industry on our economy, particularly on job creation, food security, and potentially on poverty alleviation."

Despite its significance, the yellow corn industry "faces its share of challenges that require greater government attention," according to Villar.

For instance, amid increasing demand in the feeds, foods and other industrial markets, the Philippines remains a net importer of yellow corn. Approximately 84 percent of the yellow corn produced locally is being used by the animal industries as feeds, but in 2020, the country achieved only 57 percent self-sufficiency in yellow corn for feed use.

Villar noted that in broiler and swine production, feeds make up about 50 percent and 60 percent of the overall production costs, respectively. The Philippines has the highest cost of production for livestock and poultry among Asean countries primarily

due to feed costs.

## 'Laggard'

"EVEN while our yellow corn productivity has increased at an average of 4.2 metric tons per hectare from 2018 to 2022, the Philippines is still lagging behind, ranking 8th among its neighboring countries in Asia."

She attributed this to several factors including the existing legal restriction (Presidential Decree No. 4) which prevents corn farmers from exporting corn unless there is excess production or supply. As a result, they cannot fully take advantage of the opportunities presented by the export market.

Another pressing challenge that corn farmers must grapple with is the high cost of inputs such as seeds and fertilizers.

Also, Villar noted that almost all yellow corn hybrids sold are genetically engineered, which are about five times more expensive than the conventional seeds.

She said the stringent standards for developing high-yielding varieties have hampered the participation of local Filipino companies in the seed industry.

This, she said, underscores the need for more investments in research and

development especially on seeds and biotechnology. Furthermore, she said most of the corn budget goes to the white corn program, with little attention paid to the growth of the yellow corn industry.

Villar is proposing the crafting of an updated Corn Industry Development Roadmap, to address the current and emerging needs of the industry and set the strategic initiatives and direction to enhance its competitiveness.

"The creation of an updated roadmap shall be spearheaded by the **Bureau of Plant Industry [BPI]** together with relevant stakeholders, particularly small hold farmers, feed processors, livestock farmers, regulatory offices, and academe."

The lawmaker is pushing for the designation of priority corn production provinces which will lead to the modernization and better performance of the yellow corn sector.

These provinces will distribute the high-quality seeds and feeds they produce to other provinces through BPI field offices. According to PSA data for 2023, the top producing provinces which account for 61 percent of the total yellow corn production, includes Isabela (17.04 percent), Cagayan (9.75 percent), Bukidnon (14.83 percent), Maguindanao (8.06 percent), Pangasinan (5.74 percent), and South Cotabato (5.71 percent).

SB 2625 also provides for the creation of the Corn Competitiveness Enhancement Fund. This is in addition to the annual General Appropriations Act regular budget. For 10 years, the Corn Fund will consist of an annual appropriation of P3 billion, to come from tariff collection on imported corn, feed wheat, feeds and other products and ingredients for feeds.

Meanwhile, the white corn will not be left behind, "since the same is being used for human consumption," said Villar. "We are proposing the allocation of 20 percent of the fund to white corn development and other indigenous corn varieties, and 80 percent of the Corn Fund shall be utilized for yellow corn."





# SRA tweaks rules for sugar purchase program

**T**HE Sugar Regulatory Administration (SRA) announced amendments to the guidelines for the implementation of an order that allowed traders to purchase a limited volume of raw sugar produced in the Philippines at a premium.

The SRA released a memorandum dated March 19 which specified the changes to the rules for implementing Sugar Order (SO) 2, or the "Voluntary Purchase of Crop Year 2023-2024 Locally Produced Sugar for Reclassification to Reserve Sugar to Avail of Allocation for Future Import Program." The agency issued Memorandum

Circular (MC) 4 which prescribed the guidelines last March 14.

"Consonant with the observations and feedback in the conduct of implementation of Sugar Order No. 2, Series of 2023-2024 and the Guidelines therefore, there exist the necessity to Amend certain provisions of the 'Guidelines' which took effect on March 14, 2024," the memo read.

The SRA amended Item II of the guidelines which pertained to the application period and volume of the program, which will allow traders to purchase 300,000 metric tons (MT) of raw sugar.

According to the memo, applications for reclassification from "B" (domestic sugar) to "C" (reserve sugar) of quedans should follow this schedule:

- For quedans issued on or before the week ending January 28, 2024, eligible participants may apply for reclassification strictly between 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday to Friday, but not later than March 26;

- For quedans issued starting the week ending February 4, 2024 and until the week ending March 3, 2024, eligible participants may apply for reclassification between 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday to Friday,

but not later than March 26;

- For quedans issued for week ending March 10, 2024, and for quedans issued for the succeeding week endings, and provided the total volume covered by items II(a) and II(B) has not yet reached 300,000 MT, eligible participants for reclassification with the Regulation Department in Quezon City or Bacolod City, from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., every Monday and Tuesday only, starting March 18 and 19, and the Mondays and Tuesdays of the succeeding weeks until the total volume applied for under Sugar Order No. 2, Series of 2023-2024 has reached

300,000 MT.

A quedan is the equivalent of a warehouse receipt. It shows ownership of a specified amount of sugar in a warehouse or sugar central. A negotiable instrument, it is a primary trading document in the Philippine sugar industry.

The SRA said its Regulation Department will deny or reject all application for reclassification that did not comply with all the mandatory requirements or procedures stated in SO 2.

It said it will reject applications with incomplete documentary requirements, those covering volumes in excess of 300,000 MT and

applications that did not meet the deadlines.

SRA said the sugar purchase program was implemented to maintain a balanced supply and demand of sugar for domestic consumption and ensure stable farmgate prices.

Eligible participants who purchased raw sugar under SO 2 and have complied with all its conditions and requirements will be prioritized in future government program for sugar importation based on the volume of raw sugar purchased under SO 2, at a ratio of 1.5 (local raw sugar):1 (imported sugar).



# Abante

UNA SA BALITA

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## Agri, DOH kinalampag sa tambakan ng mga patay na manok

KINALAMPAG ng isang alkalde ang mga ahensiya ng gobyerno na imbestigahan ang mga sako na puno ng patay na manok sa lote ng Leyte Poultry Development Corporation (LPDC) sa barangay Naghalin sa Kananga, Leyte.

Ayon kay Palompon, Leyte Mayor Ramon Oñate, dapat siyasatin ni DENR 8 Director Lormelyn Claudio, at ng Department of Agriculture, Department of Health at ng Bureau of Animal Industries ang naturang report na ginawang tambakan ng patay na manok ang nasabing lote.

Binanggit ni Oñate ang drone shots na in-upload sa social media kung saan makikita ang backhoe at mga heavy equipment na binabaon sa malaking hukay ang mga sako na posibleng naglalaman ng patay na manok.

Si Oñate, na ang pamilya ay nagmamay-ari ng DBSN poultry farm sa Palompon, ay nagpahayag din ng pagkabahala sa pagkamatay ng maraming manok sa Kananga poultry. Malaking panganib umano sa kalikasan at kalusugan ng mga residente ang mga nilibing na manok malapit sa ilog.





### **Maglagay ng beterinaryo sa mga pantalan - Tolentino**

Hinimok ni Sen. Francis "Tol" Tolentino ang Philippine Ports Authority (PPA) na kumuha ng veterinarians on-site upang suriin ang mga alagang hayop na kasama ng mga manlalakbay at payagan silang makabiyahe sa mga sasakyang pandagat sa kanilang paglalakbay sa Semana Santa.

Sa isang talakayan kasama si PPA Gen. Manager Jay Santiago noong Sabado (Marso 23), binanggit ni Tolentino ang kaugalian ng mga manlalakbay na pagdadala ng kanilang mga alagang hayop na maaaring magresulta sa alitan sa mga awtoridad sa pantalan. Kung hindi aniya makapagpakita ng mga dokumentong pangkalusugan ay uutusan ang mga may-ari na iwanan ang kanilang mga alagang hayop sa

mga daungan.

Sinabi ni Santiago kay Tolentino na ang mga tauhan ng Bureau of Animal Industry (BAI) ng daungan ang gumagawa ng nasabing trabaho at mayroon aniyang malalaking karatula hinggil sa mga patakaran at pamamaraan sa pagdadala ng mga alagang hayop sa barko.

Wika naman ni Tolentino na ang mga beterinaryo na nakatalaga sa mga daungan ay kailangan para magbigay ng serbisyo sa pamamagitan ng pagsusuri sa mga alagang hayop at pag-iisyu ng mga dokumento para makasakay sila sa mga sea vessel.

Bilang pagtugon sa mungkahi ng mambabatas, sinabi ni Santiago na kanilang gagawin ang inisyatibang ito ngayong Semana Santa. (*Malou Escudero*)



# REMATE

ANG DIARYO NG MASA

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## 'YANG KONTROBERSYA SA NFA

**KAILANGANG magsagawa ng malalimang imbestigasyon ang Department of Agriculture at Ombudsman hinggil sa kontrobersya sa National Food Authority kung saan nagkaroon umano ng ilegal na bentahan ng 75,000 na mga sako ng bigas sa mababang presyo sa dalawang pinaborang negosyante.**

Bagama't suspendido na ang 137 na mga opisyal ng NFA subalit pinaniniwalaang may ilang malalaking isda sa kagawaran ang sangkot sa iskandalong ito kaya naman lumutang na collateral damage lang ang tinamaan ng kaso na mga empleyado.

Kung iiisipin nga naman, maliwanag pa sa sikat ng araw na hindi naman ididispatsa ng mga warehouse manager na kinasuhan ang nakaimbak na mga bigas kung walang pahintulot ng ilang opisyal na nakatataas sa kanila.

Ilan na nga bang iskandalo sa loob ng ahensya ang bumulaga sa mata ng bayan kung saan sangkot ang ilang buwayang matataas na opisyal sa loob kagaya ng sindikato sa importasyon ng bigas, isda, karne

at gulay?

Hindi ba't matagal na panahong inu-  
puan mismo ng Pangulo ang ahensyang ito  
upang matumbok ang mga tiwali sa depar-  
tamento nang mapalayas at matuldukan  
na ang raket na nilumot na ng matagal na  
panahon?

At sa isyu ng bigas na ito, nagkakan-  
darapa na nga ang kasalukuyang adminis-  
trasyon sa paghahanap ng solusyon upang  
makabili ng murang bigas ang sambayanan  
ngunit nagpapasasa naman pala ang mga  
kumag sa NFA kaugnay sa kinita nila sa  
naganap na ilegal na bentahan.

Batid ng mamamayan na ang nakaim-  
bak na mga bigas na 'yan ay bahagi ng ka-  
handaan ng gobyerno laban sa anomang ka-



lamidad na tumatama sa bansa subalit kung  
ibebenta lang naman pala ng mga kabron  
na ito eh 'di ibinagsak na lang sana sa li-  
bo-libo ng bigasang bayan ng NFA sa mga  
palengke na sadyang mabibili pa ng mura  
ng pobreng mga kababayan kesa naman sa  
dalawa lang na negosyante sa bansa.

Hindi ba't hayagang ilegal talaga ang  
nangyaring bentahan dahil nalugi na nga  
ang ahensya, hindi pa pinakinabangan ng  
nakararaming mamamayan?

Kaya naman hangga't hindi sinisipa  
ng gobyerno ang mga anay sa loob, hindi  
rin matitigil ang anomalya sa kagawaran  
na matagal nang pahirap sa mahihirap na  
magsasaka at mga kababayan.





# Wheat imports seen to rise on higher bread demand

By JASPER EMMANUEL ARCALAS

It's a quarter before seven in the morning. A queue starts to form in front of RJS bakery in Barangay Barangka Drive in Mandaluyong City.

The scent of the freshly baked *pandesal* stretches far longer than the line of people waiting for their breakfast rolls along Busilak Street.

A man orders P30 of "tostado" while another customer requests for P50 of "puti." The former being a bread roll toasted all the way around akin to coffee gradients while the latter contrasting it: a softer, fluffier and white on the surface variant of *pandesal*.

Each customer seeks different varieties of the bread, from "medyo puti," "puti" to "katamtaman" and

"tostado."

The lowly *pandesal* – a staple in Filipino breakfast, usually partnered with freshly brewed coffee – together with other bread products are seen to drive the country's wheat imports in the current market year 2024-2025 as domestic consumption recovers.

The United States Department of Agriculture-Foreign Agricultural Service (USDA-FAS) in Manila projected that the country would have higher demand for wheat-based products as bread inflation continues to slow.

The downward trend on global wheat prices would also provide support to the country's demand for the grain, the USDA-FAS Manila added.

"FSI (food, seed and industrial) consumption is forecast to increase

as inflation for bread has slowed," the USDA-FAS Manila said in its Grain and Feed Annual report published recently.

The country's bread and bakery products inflation sustained its downward trend in February as it settled at 5.2 percent, the slowest rate in 21 months, based on historical Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) data.

The USDA-FAS Manila forecasted that the country's milling wheat demand in the next market year 2024-2025 would reach 3.2 million metric tons, 100,000 metric tons over the 3.1 million metric tons estimated consumption in the present market year.

The country's market year (MY) for wheat starts in July and ends in June of the following year.

The projected demand for milling wheat, which is used to produce flour, is more than half of the 5.83 million metric tons of total wheat requirement of the country.

The remaining demand of 2.63 million metric tons would come from feed wheat, which is used to substitute for corn as poultry feed material.

The country's total wheat imports in the upcoming market year is estimated at 5.9 million metric tons, up from the present market year's 5.8 million metric tons.

"FAS Manila estimates wheat imports for MY 2024/25 to be higher compared to the previous marketing year as global wheat prices are trending downward," the USDA-FAS Manila said.

"While an increase is forecast for

milling wheat imports, feed wheat imports will not gain market share while competing with favorable corn tariff rate through Dec. 31, 2024," it added.

The Philippines virtually imports all of its milling wheat requirements, which are categorized by the flour milling industry into hard and soft wheat, according to the report.

Hard wheat is used to produce *pandesal*, tasty bread and other bread products while soft wheat is used in pastry products, cakes as well as in noodles and crackers.

Milling wheat imports are exempted from tariff but are subject to the 12 percent value added tax on subsequent flour sales that is payable at the time the wheat is imported, according to USDA-FAS in Manila.





# Business groups laud passage of Salt Industry Dev't Act

By **LOUELLA DESIDERIO**

Business groups Philippine Exporters Confederation Inc. (Philexport) and Philippine Chamber of Commerce and Industry (PCCI) welcomed the approval of a law that aims to revive the salt industry which is seen to support economic growth and help create jobs.

In a statement, Philexport president Sergio Ortiz-Luis Jr. said the law signed by President Marcos last March 11, is expected to help the local salt industry bounce back and encourage small-scale sea salt producers forced out of business to resume production.

"It is also our hope that this law will make possible once again the robust exportation of salt from the Philippines," he said.

Philippine salt exports shrunk significantly, declining to almost \$67,894 in 2020 from \$190,029 in 2019.

In 2021, world export of salt exceeded \$2.59 billion,

indicating a vast potential for Philippine exports.

The Philippine Salt Industry Development Act lifts the requirement under the ASIN Law or An Act for Salt Iodization Nationwide Law for all locally produced salt to be iodized.

While the ASIN Law had good intentions to eliminate iodine deficiency in the country through the mandatory iodization of salt, the law affected sea salt production and exportation and made the Philippines reliant on imports, bringing in about 550,000 metric tons of salt every year or 93 percent of its salt requirements.

In a separate statement, PCCI president Eunina Mangio said the group is hopeful the new law will address the gaps in the implementation of the ASIN Law and create opportunities, especially for those in rural areas.

"We are an archipelagic country with over 7,000 islands yet we import more

than 90 percent of our salt requirement. It's a sad reality that we need to collectively address through the effective implementation of the law," Mangio said.

PCCI expects the law to encourage more farmers and producers to return to salt farming and production, as well as generate new investments and new technologies for the industry to become competitive.

"We should aim for our country to become salt self-sufficient and minimize dependence on imports," Mangio said.

In 2022, the PCCI, Philexport and Employers Confederation of the Philippines wrote to the Congress to express their support for the passage of the Philippine Salt Industry Development Act.

The groups believe the salt industry has the potential to generate 100,000 green jobs, especially in the countryside and allow the country to save foreign exchange from import-

ing bulk of its salt requirements

Under the Philippine Salt Industry Development Act technology, research and adequate financial, production marketing and other support services will be provided to salt farmers to revitalize the industry to increase production and achieve sufficiency.

A roadmap to promote the development of the salt industry will also be formulated to ensure the attainment of the objectives of the law and continued implementation of the ASIN Law.

In addition, a salt council will be created to ensure the unified and integrated implementation of the salt roadmap and accelerate the modernization and industrialization of the country's salt industry.

Tariffs collected from imported salt will be used to invest in the local industry with the establishment of the Salt Industry Development and Competitiveness Enhancement Fund.





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## Exporters betting on 'robust' overseas market for PHL salt

THE PHILIPPINE Exporters Confederation, Inc. (Philexport) said that it is hoping that the Philippine Salt Industry Development Act will unlock the overseas market potential of Philippine salt.

In a statement, Philexport President Sergio R. Ortiz-Luis, Jr. said Republic Act (RA) No. 11985 "will help the salt industry recover and encourage small-scale sea salt producers forced out of business to resume production."

"It is also our hope that this law will make possible once again robust exports of salt from the Philippines," Mr. Ortiz-Luis added.

The exporter organization said salt exports declined to \$67,894 in 2020 from \$190,029 in 2019.

"World export of salt in 2021 exceeded \$2.59 billion, indicating vast potential for Philippine exports," the group said.

The group added that the law lifts the requirement for all Philippine salt to be iodized, which was mandatory under the An Act for Salt Iodization Nationwide Law or the ASIN Law, which was designed to eliminate iodine deficiency disorder.

"But while with good intentions, the ASIN Law seriously affected sea salt production and exports and made the Philippines dependent on imports, with the country bringing in about 550,000 metric tons of salt every year or 93% of its salt requirements," Philexport said. "This is despite the country's 36,000 kilome-

ters of shoreline, the fifth longest shoreline in the world," it added.

It said that Philexport, together with other business groups, had been asking for natural sea salt to be exempt from the mandatory salt iodization under the ASIN Law.

Under RA 11985, a salt industry development roadmap will be drafted to ensure the revitalization of the salt industry. "(These) are aligned with the objectives and continued implementation of the ASIN Law," the Philexport said.

Aside from the roadmap, the law will also create a Salt Council which will ensure the implementation of the road map and accelerate the modernization and industrialization of the salt industry. — **Justine Irish D. Tabile**





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## Post-harvest support seen as key in taming inflation

By Kenneth Christiane L. Basilio

ADEQUATE post-harvest support will play a role in easing food inflation by cutting down on food waste, after prices ticked up in February, a legislator said Friday.

Asked about March inflation expectations, Albay Rep. Jose Maria Clemente S. Salceda said post-harvest support measures will cut down on the 15% in lost crops during harvest season.

"The key to keeping inflation under control is to keep an adequate rice supply available," Mr. Salceda, who is a vice chair of the House Agriculture and Food Committee, told *BusinessWorld* in a Viber message. "Any shocks in rice prices will have a pronounced effect on overall price levels."

Food was the primary driver for the rise in February inflation. The Philippine Statistics Authority said February inflation rose to 3.4% from 2.8% in January, with food inflation accelerating to 4.8% from 3.3% in the same period.

Reducing post-harvest losses can reduce dependence on agricultural imports. "Our post-harvest losses account for as much as 15% by total volume. So, if we can reduce losses, we can ease the pressure to import a bit," Mr. Salceda said.

However, Samahang Industriya ng Agrikultura Executive Director Jayson H. Cainglet said post-harvest losses can spike to 40% as the "milling recovery rate currently stands at around 60% to 65%."

"If we can increase the milling recovery rate (from post-harvest support) to 70% to 80%, then we expect to see almost one to two million additional metric tons of rice" being made available to the market, Mr. Cainglet told *BusinessWorld* by phone.

The government can also increase agricultural productivity by providing programs and mechanisms that support harvesting activities. "When it comes to crops: warehousing, storage facilities, millers and crop driers are the most important government interventions," he said in Filipino.





## Russian farmers weigh cuts to wheat planting as profits fall

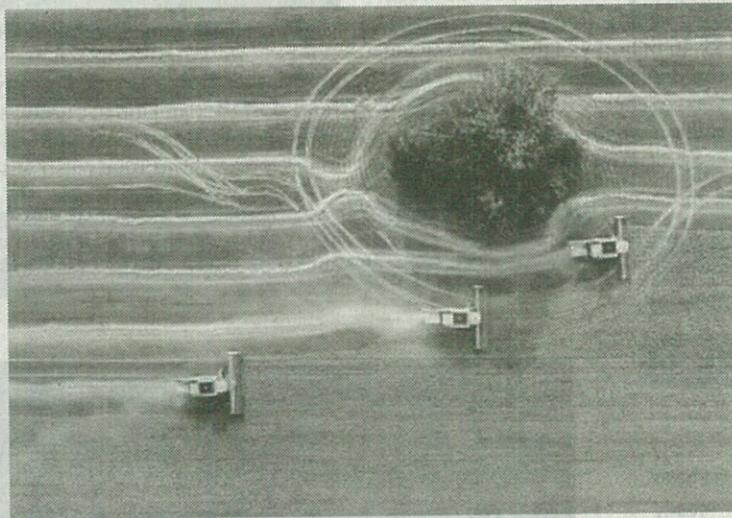
MOSCOW- Russian farmers say they are considering reducing wheat acreage in favor of higher-margin crops like soybeans and peas as low global prices, rising input costs and continued export duties cut into harvests' profitability.

Russia, the world's largest wheat exporter, expects a bumper grain harvest of 147 million tons in 2024 and analysts said they did not see potential cuts as a significant threat to the 2024 crop, in which higher-yielding winter wheat plays a key role.

Data from state statistics service Rosstat cited by Russia's grain union (RZS) show the profitability of grain production fell to 23.9 percent last year from roughly 70 percent in 2022.

The profitability of wheat fell to minus 0.9 percent compared to more than 70 percent in 2022, according to RZS.

Spring wheat profitability is likely to be zero or negative, while winter wheat profitability may average about 15 percent, said Salis Karakotov, head of ShchelkovoAgrochem, a large pesticides and seeds company.



Combines harvesting wheat in a field near the village of Solyanoye in the Omsk region. (Reuters Photo)

"We realize that we're going into a nosedive," said Tatyana Malina, the executive director of AgroGard, which operates in central and southern Russia.

"We are seeing an increase in costs for absolutely all of our inputs... We are, of course, losing profitability," she told an industry conference in Moscow last week.

Russian agriculture minister

Dmitry Patrushev said on Thursday this year's spring sowing campaign is proceeding about twice as fast as last year.

Agriculture consultancy Sovecon estimates the pre-harvest crop of spring wheat has fallen by 0.1 million hectares to 13.0 million as farmers try to switch from wheat to other crops.

-Reuters





## Easter egg price hikes are just the start as cocoa soars

As the Easter holidays approach, higher cocoa prices mean shoppers are paying far more for their chocolate eggs and bunnies. But that's just the tip of the iceberg.

Higher prices in stores now reflect increases in cocoa in 2023. Since then, the rally has gone into overdrive, and cocoa has more than doubled in price already this year, making it the world's hottest commodity.

In just the last three weeks, wholesale beans in New York have jumped more than 47 percent, exceeding \$8,900 a ton—a level that once seemed unthinkable.

That means even higher prices for households as those moves feed through to retailers. But already, UK shoppers are paying more for chocolate, and sometimes getting less for their money, what's known as "shrinkflation." In Brazil, where Easter is a major celebration, chocolate egg prices recently became an internet meme when some stores advertised that people could buy them with loans and payment instalments.

The record surge is being driven by disappointing harvests in cocoa's West Africa heavyweights, Ivory Coast and Ghana, which account for most of the world's production.

The industry is largely made up of

smallholder farmers who have faced a legacy of poor returns, making it harder to invest in their plots or withstand extreme weather events.

"The true cost of chocolate has not been seen by consumers for a long time," said Emily Stone, founder of specialty cocoa dealer Uncommon Cacao. "Persistent low prices to producers and climate change are driving the market up to these heights. Now, that comes as a shock to some, but this was predictable."

The price increase is also a reminder that while headline inflation rates are easing around the world, surges in individual commodities can still put the squeeze on consumers. Chocolate may be seen as more a luxury than a necessity, but brands like Kit Kat and Snickers are often regular parts of weekly shopping baskets.

Consumers may even be more sensitive to such price increases after what they've been through in recent years. Memories of the post-pandemic inflation spike—and the damage it did to household finances—are still very fresh.

"It's really expensive," school counselor Isabel Cristina Brandão said as she picked

up three small private label eggs from a candy store in Sao Paulo. She remembers her shopping cart used to be filled a few years ago. "Now we pay more, for a lot less."

In the United States, the average unit price of chocolate eggs is up 12 percent over the past year, data from researcher NIQ shows. The cost of some popular Easter eggs in the UK has soared by up to 50 percent, according to consumer group Which?

Those changes account for only a small portion of cocoa's colossal rally as key ingredients used to make Easter treats were likely purchased in the fourth quarter of 2023 or earlier.

Confectionery is among the categories where US consumers are noticing shrinkflation the most, according to a YouGov survey this month. Households are already cutting back on treats; 44 percent say they buy chocolate or candy less often because of inflation, according to the US National Confectioners Association.

And there's no relief in sight given what looks like an unstoppable rally, with production shortages expected to persist into the next season. More pain lies ahead when cocoa booked at current sky-high prices will

be used for upcoming holidays like Halloween and Christmas.

Earlier this month, Swiss chocolate maker Lindt & Sprüngli said it would have to raise prices this year and next because of the jump in raw material costs.

While some companies may have cheap inventories to cover production for the next six months, they will opt for gradual price hikes rather than shock customers with steep increases, said Judy Ganes, president of J Ganes Consulting.

"If you push through a price increase now, then you can sustain operations and not have to make a short jump," she said.

Other top chocolate manufacturers have also raised prices and are leaving the door open for more. Mondelez International Inc. Chief Financial Officer Luca Zaramella in February signaled increases are likely, while Hershey Co. Chief Executive Officer Michele Buck said the company remains "committed to pricing to cover inflation."

Nestle SA said while it's absorbed some higher costs through efficiencies, it may need to make "responsible adjustments to pricing in the future given the persistently high cocoa prices." *Bloomberg News*