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NEWS

## DA halting mackerel, bonito, 'GG' imports

The Department of Agriculture (DA) has suspended the importation of frozen round scad ("galunggong"), bonito ("tulingan") and mackerel ("alumahan") on reports that these products were being diverted to wet markets and affecting the sales of local fishermen. These fish products were earlier allowed to be imported solely for canning, processing and institutional buyers supplying hotels and restaurants. —STORY BY JORDEENE B. LAGARE **A4**

# DA suspends importation of 'galunggong,' bonito

By **Jordeene B. Lagare**  
@jordeenelagare

The Department of Agriculture (DA) has suspended the importation of frozen round scad (galunggong), bonito (tulingan) and mackerel (alumahan) after receiving several reports that these commodities were being diverted to wet markets to the detriment of local fisherfolk.

In Memorandum Order No. 14, the DA put on hold the issuance of import clearances for these fishery products intended solely for canning and processing and for institutional buyers catering to the requirements of hotels and restaurants.

"The top commodities that are identified as prone to diversion [to local wet markets] are round scad, bonito and mackerel," the order read.

The suspension order, signed by **Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr.** on April 1, will take effect 15 days after its issuance.

The order excludes the importation of mackerel for canning purposes, provided that the volume should be based on the sales of the canned product from the previous year plus an additional 10 percent for buffer.



**PREVENTIVE MEASURE** Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. signed the suspension order on April 1 based on reports that the fish varieties were being diverted to wet markets, affecting supply and demand and reducing the income of local fishermen. —INQUIRER FILE PHOTO

It added that all mackerel imports entering the country should carry the following label in a clear and readable font size: "Imported Under FAO (Fisheries Administrative Order) No. 195 for Canning Purposes Only and not for Sale or Distribution to Wet Markets and Supermarkets."

**Protecting local fishers**  
Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) spokesperson Nazario Briguera said the diversion of these fish varieties to wet markets "could disrupt the supply

and demand" and "would have a repercussion on the local fishery industry."

"First, this is illegal. Aside from this, it will cause the disruption of supply and demand dynamics in the wet markets [and] create competition with the locally produced [fish]," Briguera said in a message to the Inquirer.

Promulgated in 1999, FAO No. 1995 allows institutional buyers to source fish and fishery/aquatic products from abroad, but only for canning and processing and when certified as necessary by the agricul-

ture secretary to achieve food security.

Institutional buyers, which refer to entities or corporations that are authorized to import fish for final consumption or processing as food requirements for accredited hotels and restaurants, may do so without the required certificate of necessity to import.

### Illegal diversion

However, this led to the diversion of some of the imported fish to wet markets, at times pushing down prices that affected the earnings of local fisherfolk.

The last time the DA imposed an import suspension due to such diversion was in December 2022.

At that time, the agency temporarily banned even canners from importing round scad and moonfish (bilang-bilong) as well as processors from purchasing imported round scad, bonito, mackerel, moonfish, pompano, and tuna byproducts.

In Metro Manila, local round scad retailed for as low as P160 a kilo as of Tuesday, down from P180 a year ago, based on the DA's monitoring of wet market prices. INQ



# DA suspends *galunggong* imports

By JASPER EMMANUEL ARCALAS

The Department of Agriculture has suspended the importation of frozen *galunggong*, bonito and mackerel for canners, processors and institutional buyers following reports that imported fish stocks are diverted to the wet markets.

DA Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. issued Memorandum Order 14 authorizing the suspension of the issuance of the sanitary and phytosanitary import clearances (SPSICs) for the importation of frozen round scad, mackerel and bonito for canning and processing processes as well as for institutional buyers.

The issuance of the SPSIC is required prior to any importation of agricultural and fishery products in the country since the document certifies that the imported items are safe for human consumption.

The suspension will take effect 15 days after the issuance of the memorandum order dated April 1.

"The DA received several

reports that fish and fishery/aquatic products imported under Fisheries Administrative Order 195, series of 1999 (FAO 1995), intended for canning, processing or for institutional buyers are being diverted to wet markets," Tiu Laurel said.

He pointed out that the identified imported fish that are "prone" to diversion were round scad, bonito and mackerel.

Tiu Laurel explained that he suspended the issuance of the SPSICs for imported fish to "prevent diversion to wet markets" of the products.

However, the importation of mackerel for canning purposes is still allowed, although it will be subjected to an additional condition stipulated un-



der the memorandum order.

The volume of imported mackerel for canning purposes shall be based on the "VATable (value-added tax) sales of the canned product from the previous year with additional 10 percent of said sales for buffer," according to the order.

The DA chief also imposed additional labeling requirements for all imported fish products under FAO 195, which would state that the imported stocks are intended for canning purposes and not

to be sold in wet markets.

The imported fish products must contain the following label in a "clear" and "readable" font size: "Imported under FAO 195 for canning purposes only and not for sale or distribution to wet markets and supermarkets."

In 2022, the DA tightened its rules on the importation by canners, processors and institutional buyers of various fish species including round scad, bonito and mackerel to prevent market diversion.



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## PH to produce 20,000 doses of anthrax vaccine in 2024

By JEL SANTOS

The country is now eyeing the production of more than 20,000 doses of anthrax vaccine this year in a bid to prevent an outbreak, an official of the Department of Agriculture (DA) said on Tuesday, April 2.

DA Assistant Secretary Constante Palabrica said the Bureau of Animal Industry (BAI) is now working on producing 8,750 doses of anthrax vaccine this month "for distribution to areas if needed."

"We intend to produce more than 20,000 [doses of anthrax vaccine] before [the] end of this

year," he told Manila Bulletin in a text message.

"Usually, before rains come in, animals in Region 2 have to be vaccinated," he said.

On March 15, Palabrica sent 12,750 doses of the vaccine to Region 2 or Northern Luzon after the area recorded anthrax cases. He said the anthrax situation in Region 2 is now under control following the delivery of the vaccines.

Vaccination, the official said, is the only way to prevent the spread of anthrax.

On Monday, April 1, Palabrica had a meeting with officials of the BAI following the

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## PH to produce 20,000 doses of anthrax vaccine in 2024 1◀

order of Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. to work with the attached agency in addressing the threat of anthrax.

Earlier, Palabrica assured the public that the DA is prepared for any anthrax outbreak, citing the capability of the Philippines to produce its own anthrax vaccine as the BAI has a "seed virus".

To prevent the spread of anthrax, farmers must immediately report to provincial veterinarians suspected cases, Palabrica said,

adding that the government provides free testing for anthrax.

The DA official said some of the signs that an animal is positive for anthrax are its refusal to eat, having fever, and developing vesicles.

Palabrica warned that anthrax can be fatal to people with comorbidity as anthrax can be transferred to humans due to its zoonotic nature.

He warned the public not to slaughter and consume animals positive for the infectious disease.

He said animals that die due to anthrax must be buried in the ground because the disease is transferred through spores.

Anthrax is a serious infectious disease caused by gram-positive, rod-shaped bacteria known as *Bacillus anthracis*, according to the Center for Disease Control (CDC) website.

But he said anthrax does not spread as fast as the African Swine Fever (ASF), a highly contagious and deadly viral disease affecting domestic and feral swine of all ages.

Palabrica said ruminants, a large group of herbivores with a four-chambered stomach, are the ones usually affected by anthrax.



## DA suspends importation of select fish species

BY JED MACAPAGAL

18/07 1A

THE Department of Agriculture (DA) issued a memorandum order (MO) suspending the issuance of sanitary and phytosanitary import clearance for the importation of round scad, mackerel and bonito under the Fisheries Administrative Order (FAO) 195 series of 1999.

FAO 195 prohibits the entry of imported fish into domestic wet markets if not covered by a certificate of necessity to import.

The DA said MO 14 series of 2024 signed by Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. on Monday was made after receiving reports imported fish intended for canning are being diverted to wet markets.

The MO said importation of mackerel will be allowed as long as

these be used for canning.

The volume is capped based on the sales of the canned product covered by value-added tax in 2023, plus 10 percent of the amount for buffer.

Imported mackerel must be labeled that the shipment is only for canning purposes and not for sale or distribution to wet markets and supermarkets.

The MO will take effect 15 days from the date of issuance and will remain in force unless revoked in writing by the DA.

Based on DA's monitoring of public markets in the National Capital Region, per kg prices of monitored fish products as of yesterday P160 to P300 for local round scad.

Price range for imported round scad was not available.



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## Rice voucher system to be revamped

THE voucher system under the National Rice Program is being reviewed in preparation for major changes in the coming months, according to the Department of Agriculture (DA).

The program involves the distribution of vouchers to farmer beneficiaries that could be exchanged for farm inputs, including fertilizers and rice seeds at accredited merchants.

But the DA said many merchants refuse to honor vouchers as payables have reached P892 million with some dating as far back as 2021.

Bulk of the accumulated arrears at P849 million are payables from the recently concluded 2023 to 2024 dry season implementation.

Payment delays were attributed to incomplete documentary requirements.

The DA is proposing for new processes for settling accounts with accredited merchants.

The DA said the system is a major channel for the agency's distribution of the P22.9-billion

budget this year for farm inputs including hybrid rice seeds, organic and inorganic fertilizers as well as funds for the use of drone technology in rice cultivation.

Nearly P10 billion in inputs and assistance will be delivered to farmers via the voucher system.

Apart from the voucher system, other modes allowed under the General Appropriations Act this year include the use of intervention monitoring cards, e-wallets used for distributing P5,000 assistance to farmers under the Rice Tariffication Law and direct distribution of inputs that DA regional offices are authorized to procure from qualified suppliers.

DA Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. said changes to the voucher system may involve the security of physical vouchers that may not be duplicated. He also assured the distribution mode that best suits rice farmers will be used by the DA.

"By doing this, we will not only

.....  
See RICE > Page A2

## RICE

increase farm output but optimize the use of post-harvest and milling facilities to reduce wastage. It will increase farm yield, boost financial returns for farmers, and substantially bolster supply that could eventually bring down food cost

for consumers," Tiu Laurel said.

DA also cited the case of Vietnam wherein a single rice variety is cultivated in large tracts of land around a drying and milling facility to ensure the mill runs efficiently.

"We cannot allow farmers to plant different types of rice seeds in areas around rice processing centers. Diverse rice varieties will make it impossible to process all of them efficiently," Tiu Laurel said. -Jed Macapagal



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## Laguna, BFAR focusing on aquaculture production

STA. CRUZ, Laguna—The provincial government here is collaborating with the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources and municipal authorities to substantially increase aquaculture production to partially compensate for a projected decline in farm output due to the El Niño dry spell.

In an interview on Monday, Provincial Agriculturist Marlon Tobias said the Capitol's campaign is anchored on the propagation of "tilapia" fingerlings in both backyard fishponds, and in the provinces' fresh water rivers and lakes.

He said his office has been distributing fingerlings to both fishermen and land farmers who are currently struggling with the drought.

"We have regular fingerling distribution conducted monthly and as we see any immediate need in the rivers connected to Laguna Lake. This is important for us to increase the catch of our fishermen and to have a stable supply this dry season," Tobias said.

More than 50,000 fingerlings have been distributed to 110 fishpond operators in the town of Luisiana in collaboration with its municipal government, he added.

The Provincial Agriculture Office has also been releasing tilapia fingerlings into the wild to ensure that agriculture workers displaced by El Niño can find food in Laguna's bodies of water.

Tobias said that during the Holy Week, he led the release of 31,000 fingerlings in the Balanac River in Magdalena town in response to the request of the municipal government.

In Biñan City, another 31,000 fingerlings have been dropped in the river seeding activity in Barangay Malaban in partnership with City Agriculture Office and Fisheries and Aquatic Resources Management Councils (FARMCs).



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## DA: Rabies infections in M'duque, Pampanga not seriously alarming

THE Department of Agriculture (DA) rules out rabies epidemics in Marinduque and Pampanga provinces, but nonetheless cautioned against eating meat of animals infected with the virus.

In a phone interview, Agriculture Assistant Secretary Constante Dante Palabrica said although the reported cases in the two provinces may be a cause for concern, provincial veterinarians are closely monitoring the situation on the ground.

"I reported this because it is unusual, but it's not alarming. The important thing is to contain the rabies among cats and dogs," he added.

According to the DA, recent reports in Marinduque included three cases of rabies among cattle and six cases of rabies among pigs; while around 20 cows in Pampanga were reported infected in 2023 due to rabid dog bites.

Palabrica clarified however, that such incidents do not happen naturally to animals.

"It's not true, it takes another rabid dog to transfer the virus to another dog or cat. Perish the perception that it naturally occurs among animals, he said.

Among the symptoms of rabies infection include drool-

ing, dizziness, and uneasy behavior for infected cows, while pigs tend to bump their heads and snouts.

The DA official also said it is closely monitoring the possible transmission of rabies to wildlife which might more alarming.

He emphasized the urgency of anti-rabies vaccination among pets to ward off transmission of the virus to animals and humans, which could be potentially fatal.

To date, the Department of Health has reported over 80 deaths due to rabies among humans from January to March this year.

Although there is no reported negative effect yet on individuals who ate one of the infected cows in Marinduque, Palabrica said that it would be wiser to avoid its consumption.

"Of course, just to be safe, we know this is zoonotic. We might as well not eat its meat," Palabrica said.

"We normally boil beef and pork before we eat it so the virus has less chances to survive because of the heat. But we do not encourage them, that's why we're very careful in the NMIS (National Meat Inspection Service)," he added.





## New approaches needed

### COMMENTARY

ERNESTO M. ORDOÑEZ

To achieve our agriculture transformation, new approaches are needed. Last March 27, this was the consensus of six leaders of the Coalition for Agriculture Modernization of the Philippines (Camp). This represents the science and academe component of the Agriculture Fisheries Alliance. The other two components are from farmers and fisherfolk (Alyansa Agrikultura) and agribusiness (Chamber of Agriculture and Food, Inc.-PCAFI). Leading the discussion was chair Emil Javier, national scientist, former University of the Philippines president and former science and technology minister. The other leaders were Camp president Eufemio Rasco, Dolores Ramirez, Roger Cuyno, Ruben Villareal and Violeta Villegas. Each is either a national scientist, a former chancellor, or a former institute head.

**Agriculture gaps:** The previous Department of Agriculture (DA) leadership had done commendable work, but improvements still have to be done. The DA budget has averaged 2 percent of the total budget, compared with Vietnam's 7 percent. Worse, for 2019, 2020 and 2021, the Commission on Audit consistently reported that a disastrous one-third of this already small budget had been squandered in unliquidated and unexplained expenses.

The current budget does not address key gaps in our agriculture governance. Two of these are in information and economies of scale. On DA's P202-bil-

lion budget this year, less than P30 million was allocated for information for agriculture and marketing service. Only P145 million was provided for the consolidation and clustering for farmers and fisherfolk, to attain economies of scale.

The current leadership is now addressing these inherited gaps with decisive action and strong political will. However, in addition to these, the CAMP leaders suggest 10 game-changing initiatives. They emphasize that farmers and fisherfolk must be partners, get their just share and not be left behind again. Here are two such initiatives.

**1. Coconut-coffee towns:** We currently import more than 70 percent of our coffee. Our average coffee yield is 600 kilos per hectare, compared with Vietnam's two tons. But by just doing basic pruning, weeding and fertilization, yield can easily increase to one ton.

Two million out of our 3.5 million coconut hectares have

nothing planted in between them, where coffee can be grown. An immediate objective is to have import substitution of 100,000 coffee tons a year. First, DA selects 100 towns with already existing coffee orchards under coconut trees. With DA support, the relevant mayors can each identify 1,000 hectares for this initiative. This results in the 100,000-ton target.

DA should then mobilize groups like the Philippine Coffee Board, Nestle, state universities and colleges (SUCs), and the Land Bank to act as a team. They will help provide good seedlings, proper training, buying stations and the needed financing for these coconut-coffee towns.

### 2. Mango districts:

Though our mangos are the best in the world, we are now losing our market share. This is because we have not given the needed support that other countries give their farmers.

For example, Vietnam announced early on that they would be a major global coffee player. They followed this up by identifying specific areas and giving full government support. Today, we import 80 percent of our coffee from them.

Aside from learning from other countries, we should also learn from our own globally competitive banana and pineapple producers. They concentrate on specific production areas organized around packing houses and processing plants. We must do the same by organizing mango districts with the same characteristics, using economies of scale.

Local governments play a critical role for these mango districts. They must invite fruit processors and exporters to invest, facilitate effective contact growing schemes so there is no pole-vaulting, encourage SUCs to give technical assistance, and get Landbank and their own rural banks to provide the necessary financing. This kind of public-private initiative is already being implemented in Batangas, where Gov. Hermilando Mandanas is working closely with Batangas Forum's Cristanto Gualberto.

These are only two of the new innovative approaches for us to leapfrog to meaningful agriculture development. From what we have observed in the impressive results-driven performance of the current DA leadership, we believe this kind of innovation will soon be seen. INQ



The author is Agriwatch chair, former secretary of presidential flagship programs and projects, and former undersecretary of the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Trade and Industry. Contact agriwatch\_phil@yahoo.com.



## *FTI urged to build cold storage facilities for onions*

By **JASPER EMMANUEL ARCALAS**

Food Terminal Inc. (FTI) should consider undertaking a P1.5 billion cold storage program to stock onions and provide farmers with guaranteed market while preventing another runaway in prices, an industry group said.

Cold Chain Association of the Philippines president Anthony Dizon proposed a "transactional" business model that would allow the FTI to fill in about half of the shortage in cold storage space for onions without incurring losses.

Dizon said the FTI could consider building 10 cold storage facilities nationwide with 5,000 metric tons of capacity each valued at P150 million per facility.

The total cost of P1.5 billion, Dizon noted, can be funded through a loan from state-run Land Bank of the Philippines (Landbank).

The government can provide the FTI with the necessary funds to procure as much as 50,000 metric tons or 50 million kilograms of onions during harvest season, he said.

The FTI can buy onions at a farmgate price of at least P30 per kilogram, providing farmers with a return on investment of 50 percent since they spend P20 to produce a kilogram, Dizon added.

The FTI can now store the onions for at least six months to ensure that the country has sufficient supply of the com-

modity throughout the year.

In doing so, it will cost FTI about P2 per kilogram per month or about P12 per kilogram in the course of six months.

The FTI can sell the onions at about P100 per kilogram, resulting in a net profit of P58 per kilogram since its total costs will be about P42 per kilogram, Dizon said.

The FTI can post a net income of as much as P2.9 billion if it will be able to store and sell 50,000 metric tons of onions.

"That way you can now pay the loan from Landbank," Dizon told **The STAR**.

"(The construction of the facilities) does not have to be a developmental strategy. It can be transactional," he added.

Due to lack of post-harvest facilities like cold storages and improper handling, the **Department of Agriculture** estimated that the country lost 100,000 MT of onions in 2022.

"We already recognize the situation we are up against. We lack cold storages especially during harvest season," Dizon said.

"Some are blaming the traders for controlling the stocks but that is only possible when there is a shortage in capacity," he added.

According to Dizon, nobody will invest in putting up cold storages just to store onions without becoming traders themselves.

# The Manila Times®

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## DTI holds postharvest training in Nueva Vizcaya

THE Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) in Nueva Vizcaya, in partnership with the Department of Agriculture Regional Field Office 2 (DARFO2), kicked off on Tuesday, April 2, the 3-day training on postharvest handling and management for vegetables and fruits.

DTI Nueva Vizcaya director Michael Paggabao said the University

of the Philippines Los Baños-Postharvest Horticulture Training and Research Center (UPLB-PHTRC) served as the training provider for the more than 40 participants composed of farmers, traders and disposers, buyers, and government employees.

DTI Region 2 cited the necessity of preserving and prolonging the freshness of agricultural commodities

reaching Metro Manila markets, and the training will help identify the gaps in postharvest practices of suppliers and traders of the Nueva Vizcaya Agricultural Trading.

The UPLB-PHTRC Team said the major concerns arising from their visit "pointed to the importance of the quality of the fresh produce and safety assurance, particularly

on traceability and labeling, and sustainability of supply to meet the different market requirements."

DTI Region 2 Director Leah Pulido Ocampo said this led to the need for continuing capacity-building programs and sessions for the different stakeholders involved in the value chain to which the NVAT Fresh Online project caters.

The training was also held in partnership with the United States Agency for International Development Strengthening Private Enterprises for the Digital Economy (USAid Speed).

Edralina Serrano, Engr. Ryan Anthony Lualhati and Rona Kaye Franco were the resource speakers for Tuesday's training module.

**LEANDER DOMINGO**



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## RICE IMPORTS UP 24% AS OF END-MARCH

THE volume of rice imported by the country rose by 24.2 percent to 995,841.6 metric tons (MT) in the first three months of this year, according to the **Department of Agriculture's Bureau of Plant Industry (BPI)**.

In the first quarter of last year, the country imported 801,732 MT of rice, according to the BPI.

For March alone, rice shipments reached 227,675.13 MT, lower by 33 percent from February's 340,180.69 MT. Rice imports in March declined by 44 percent from the 407,178.36 MT of the same month last year.

Since the year started, the BPI has released 1,403 sanitary and

phytosanitary import clearances to accredited rice importers.

The bulk or 57.8 percent of the country's imported rice came from Vietnam, which remains the country's top source of the staple, shipping in 576,364.3 MT.

Thailand followed with a volume of rice deliveries at 244,059.43 MT, Pakistan with 115,758.50 MT and Myanmar with 53,640 MT.

The remaining volume was shared by Cambodia, Japan, India and Italy.

Last year, inbound shipments of the staple totaled 3.6 million MT, down 5.9 percent from the record-high 3.82 million MT logged in 2022.

In its latest World Markets and Trade report, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) said that the Philippines remains the top importer of the staple in the international market and forecast to import 4.1 million MT this 2024.

However, the USDA said that the Philippines' local rice production is seen to hit 12.125 million MT this year, or slightly higher than the previous forecast of 12 million MT.

The USDA attributed the increase in production to the government's additional funding for the sector and with farmers increasing their use of fertilizer and hybrid seeds.

Area to be harvested, mean-

while, 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 Philippine population growth.

Rice prices, meanwhile, will remain elevated due to the El Niño weather pattern and the global market situation, said the USDA.

Based on the price monitoring report of the Agriculture department as of April 2, prices of imported well-milled rice range between P50 and P54 per kilo (kg) while locally milled rice is selling from P48 to P55 per kg.

**JANINE ALEXIS MIGUEL**



## Our shortsightedness and skewed priorities

It is incredible but true that year after year, under presidency after presidency, the Land Transportation Office (LTO) runs out of drivers' licenses and car plates before mid-year. Lack of government funding cannot be an excuse because licensees pay for these things. Surely, the motor vehicle industry makes projections on total sales for each year, and there must be some idea of how many licenses and car plates are needed each year. Doesn't the LTO consult the industry?

It is also possible that we are the only country in the world where bedbugs and a rat have been videoed in the international airport! And flights had to be canceled for days because of technical problems due to poor maintenance!

Of course, it is common knowledge among Metro Manila commuters that the overhead trains are often on the blink because of poor maintenance and lack of spare parts!

Surely, there are enough professionals in our country who know how to plan beyond today, and to ensure facilities are working properly in the long term — but I guess they are in the private sector. Private business must think beyond the short term if they want to continue being a going concern. I am glad the main international airport is about to be privatized. It can help make our country more attractive to tourists and investors.

Perhaps if our bureaucrats were more prepared as managers rather than, for example, as law-



PHILIPPINE STAR/AL ROSALES

### GRASSROOTS & GOVERNANCE TERESA S. ABESAMIS

yers, public services over the long term would be better provided.

The government has obtained Asian Development Bank help to fund the \$4-billion, 32-kilometer bridge project between Cavite and Bataan. The objective is to reduce the distance between the already prosperous regions of Calabarzon, NCR, and Region 3. The Marcos Jr. government is prioritizing Build Better More as its development agenda.

The Cavite-Bataan Bridge is yet another investment meant to

overcome the traffic problems of Metro Manila and its environs.

Meanwhile, the poverty incidence in our country has grown since 2021. As of 2023, almost 23% or almost one fourth of Philippine households are living below the poverty line. Most of the poor are in the southern regions of the Visayas and Mindanao.

What could we do with \$4 billion, or over P220 billion, to reduce poverty incidence?

Well, we could provide more homes with running water. In many poverty-stricken areas, women must fetch water from distant sources, carrying heavy pails of water back home several times a day, a chore that can drain women's energy. With the provision of

running water, women could have more energy to do the sort of work that can add to family incomes.

We could also provide more irrigation for farms. Then farmers can produce more rice and other crops.

It is ironic that farmers and fishers, those who provide our food, are the poorest people in our country. They must be our top priority in development investment.

We are an archipelago. Fisheries deserve more focus. Currently it hardly contributes to the GDP.

Fishermen have to compete with large, motorized ships with huge nets that harvest the fish, including juveniles, from municipal waters. Many corrupt LGU politicians allow this to happen instead

of enforcing laws that protect the coastal waters for small fishers. These small fishermen also need motors for their boats so they can go fishing in the deeper sea — where they face harassment by Chinese naval vessels in our oceans.

The Department of Agriculture is focused on production. But farmers are at the mercy of middlemen who can consolidate their produce for delivery and sale to urban markets. Perhaps if we re-focus the Department of Agriculture towards agribusiness, they will look at post-harvest support. Tax incentives could encourage investment in warehouses and combine harvesters, for instance, which farmer-producers could rent out to earn more.

As is, the average age of farmers is already at senior level. This is a potentially serious problem that could threaten our ability to feed our families without importing food. The descendants of our farmers would rather work overseas rather than do the unprofitable grueling work that their parents do.

Is the President thinking about this? Does the Cabinet discuss these problems, potential and actual? What do our legislators consider in designing the National Government's budget?

The Bishop of Negros Oriental has raised his objection to the planned merger of his province, together with Siquijor, into Negros Occidental. The lingua franca in Negros Oriental and Siquijor is Cebuano. Negros Occidental's is Ilonggo. It is hard enough for the farmers and fishers of Negros Oriental and Siquijor to learn about opportunities and technologies now. Will the bureaucrats speak to them in Ilonggo or Cebuano? If Cebuano, how will the people of Negros Occidental respond? They are probably more comfortable being in the same region as Panay. Linguists classify Ilonggo and Cebuano as languages, not dialects. Wars have been fought and nations divided over language! Let us learn from history! ■

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## editorial

# Long-term solutions needed to address PHL food inflation

**T**HE Southeast Asian region is home to two of the world's top rice-exporting countries—Vietnam and Thailand. Vietnam is the Philippines's top source of rice imports in recent years, based on official government data. Of the 3.5 million metric tons of imported rice the country bought last year, Vietnam accounted for nearly 3 MMT, according to data from the Bureau of Plant Industry. (See, "High global prices, low stock pull down PHL rice imports," BUSINESSMIRROR, January 5, 2024).

The Philippines, however, is not the only country in the region that purchases rice from neighboring Southeast Asian nations. Indonesia has stepped up its importation of the staple to beef up its domestic supply. Last year, Jakarta allowed the purchase of 2.9 MMT of imported rice to curb food inflation ahead of elections this year. (See, "PHL seen importing 4.1 MMT of rice this year," BUSINESSMIRROR, March 11, 2024).

Indonesia is expected to further increase their importation of rice this year as food prices continue to rise due to production concerns caused by El Niño. While Jakarta will again allow more rice imports as a strategy for mitigating inflationary pressures, it has also announced other measures to boost food production, including investments in expanding its fertilizer output.

State-owned PT Pupuk Indonesia will invest 100 trillion rupiah or \$6.4 billion to boost fertilizer supply. (See, "\$6B in fertilizer plants to help Indonesia curb food cost," BUSINESSMIRROR, March 20, 2024). Some \$1.2 billion was allotted for the construction of a \$1.2-billion ammonia and urea fertilizer plant in Indonesia's Papua province, while \$640 million will be spent on upgrades to its old Palembang complex. The move is expected to provide rice planters with affordable fertilizer, according to the chief of PT Pupuk.

Affordable fertilizer would mean stable food prices as it is one of the most important inputs in producing rice. Many rice-producing countries, including the Philippines, continue to grapple with the high cost of fertilizer due to the conflict in Eastern Europe. In fact, data from the Fertilizer and Pesticide Authority (FPA) indicates that prices of fertilizer grades remain elevated and have not returned to prepandemic levels.

In March 2019, figures from FPA showed that the average prices of a sack of urea, ammosul and complete were at P1,155.90, P625.64 and P1,125.71, respectively. Four years later, average prices of the three fertilizer grades jumped to P2,132.06, P1,098.71 and P2,128.30. As of March 22, the prices of the three fertilizer grades fell, although they remained elevated compared with the prepandemic levels.

While there is little that the Philippines could do when it comes to imported fertilizer, we hope that the government could also come up with long-term solutions for easing inflationary pressures on food prices. The Philippines has enough policymakers and bureaucrats who know what it takes to significantly raise farm productivity. However, the real challenge lies in the political will of the country's leaders to effectively execute the essential policies needed to accomplish this goal.

# REMATE

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## DA: Pinas, nakahanda sa posibleng Anthrax outbreak

TINIYAK ng Department of Agriculture sa publiko na nakahanda ang Pilipinas para sa anomang posibleng anthrax outbreak sa bansa.

Siniguro rin ng departamento na ang Bureau of Animal Industry ay may kakayahang mag-produce ng bakuna laban sa nakakahawang sakit.

Nauna rito, ipinag-utos ng Thailand na mahigpit na bantayan ang livestock matapos mapaulat ang anthrax outbreak sa Laos kung saan may 50 katao ang napaulat na tinamaan ng anthrax. Nagkaroon na kasi ng outbreak ng anthrax sa Laos.

"Ang Bureau of Animal Industry ay may nakahandang anthrax vaccine, at importante lang na mabakunahan para ma-prevent ang pagkalat ng anthrax," ayon kay Dr. Constante "Dante" Palabrica, assistant secretary for livestock ng DA.

Ang BAI, aniya pa rin ay mayroong "seed virus" kaya't posibleng makapagproduce ang Pilipinas ng sariling nitong anthrax vaccine.

"Itong seed virus na ito ay Philippine seed virus so hindi ito nanggaling kung saan. We're ready for that--the Department of Agriculture is ready," aniya pa rin.

Sa kabilang dako, hinikayat naman ng DA ang mga magsasaka na kaagad na I-report sa provincial veterinarians ang mga pinaghihinalaang kaso ng anthrax infection habang ang gobyerno ay nagbibigay ng "free testing."

Ang ilan aniyang palatandaan na ang hayop ay positibo sa anthrax ay

kung ayaw ng mga itong kumain, may lagnat at nag-develop ng vesicles.

"Our government gives free tests on this, and actually the anthrax vaccine is given for free. Lahat nang ito ay subsidized by the DA's budget," ayon kay Palabrica.

Dahil ang anthrax ay maaaring maisalin o mailipat sa tao dahil sa "zoonotic in nature" nito, Maaari aniyang maging dahilan ito ng pagkamatay ng isang tao na may comorbidity.

"Kailangan tawagan agad ang provincial veterinarian para ma-test agad, kasi zoonotic ito, pwede itong i-transfer sa tao. Any disease na zoonotic, especially kapag may have comorbidity, it can be fatal," aniya pa rin.

Dahil dito, ang mga hayop na positibo sa infectious disease ay hindi na dapat kainin pa.

**KRIS JOSE**



## Let's contribute our share in addressing El Niño challenges

**B**y the end of April, at least 80 provinces will be affected by the ongoing El Niño, a phenomenon characterized by unusually warm ocean temperatures in the equatorial Pacific that disrupts weather patterns worldwide. This situation demands urgent attention — from the government, farmers, and the public in general.

In the Philippines, El Niño manifests as prolonged dry spells, reduced rainfall, and scorching heat. And now that the country is in the hot dry season (March to May), the impact of El Niño becomes more pronounced.

El Niño is already wreaking havoc on agriculture. Crops wither, livestock suffer, and water sources dwindle, leaving the livelihoods of millions of farmers hanging in the balance. As of the latest report, El Niño has caused ₱1.75 billion in damages to the agricultural sector, affecting approximately 32,231 hectares of farmland. Immediate action is imperative.

Apart from its impact on agriculture, El Niño has resulted in scarcity of water supply. Communities struggle to meet their basic water needs as reservoirs shrink and rivers start to dry up. As temperature rises, demand for water rises. According to Task Force El Niño, Regions 1, 2, 3, 4-A, 4-B, 6, 9, and 12 are particularly vulnerable.

The rising temperatures pose health risks, especially for the vulnerable population. Heat-related illnesses become more prevalent. Local governments must prepare for potential emergencies.

To address El Niño-related challenges, the government must swiftly implement mitigation measures. These may include financial assistance to affected farmers like subsidies for seeds, fertilizers, and other inputs. It would be a big help if high-value seeds for drought-resistant crops are distributed to farmers affected by the El Niño.

With dwindling supply, water management is crucial. Investing in water-saving technologies, such as drip irrigation — using pipes with holes to slowly

drip water onto plant roots — and rainwater harvesting is vital not only during the El Niño phenomenon but in the long-term.

Collaboration with local government units (LGUs) is another crucial step. The national government, in close coordination with the LGUs, should regularly assess water availability and prioritize allocation for essential needs.

It should also explore alternative water sources, such as shallow tube wells and communal irrigation systems; and educate citizens about water conservation and heat-related health precautions.

For farmers, it is crucial for them to adapt their crop choices by opting for drought-resistant varieties — drought-tolerant rice, sweet potatoes and other crops which can thrive in dry conditions. They also need to practice soil moisture conservation techniques, including mulching to retain soil moisture, and timely irrigation or watering crops during cooler hours to minimize evaporation.

Responsibility to address the impact of El Niño does not depend on the government and farmers alone. The public must contribute its share. Conserving water — repairing leaks, using rainwater for gardening, among others — is a simple measure the public can contribute and will serve us in good stead in the long run.

Aside from these mitigating measures, we must take health precautions during El Niño. We must stay hydrated by drinking plenty of water; and avoid heat exposure by limiting outdoor activities during peak heat hours. Extra care is needed by vulnerable individuals—the elderly, children, and those with health conditions.

The El Niño is a test of our resilience as a nation. By implementing proactive measures, fostering collaboration, and promoting awareness, we can mitigate its impact.

Let us stand united, ensuring that no citizen suffers needlessly from the harmful effects of the relentless El Niño phenomenon.





## Supplementary bill to boost corn industry

TO propel the competitiveness and expansion of the corn industry, Senator Cynthia A. Villar has sponsored Senate Bill 2625 under Committee Report No. 246 entitled "An Act to develop the Philippine Corn Industry, enhance the availability and affordable of quality feeds and staple food, and provide for a corn competitiveness enhancement fund."

"It is a crucial supplementary measure aligned with the objectives of the Livestock, Poultry and Dairy Industry Development Act which I earlier sponsored," said Villar.

"It is imperative that we also bolster the corn industry since it plays a pivotal role in sustaining our livestock and poultry

industry and feeding our nation," she added.

Livestock feed depends on inputs like corn, wheat, and soya. About 40% to 60% of animal feed consists of yellow corn.

The Philippines has a deficit of about 3 to 5 million metric tons (MT) of corn annually.

In 2023, the combined corn-livestock-poultry sector contributed 27.17% 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.

The chairperson of the Senate Committee on Food and Agriculture said this underscores the

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

"Yet despite its significance, the yellow corn industry faces its share of challenges that require greater government attention," the senator said.

Villar added that the proposed measure provides for the creation of the Corn Competitiveness Enhancement Fund. This is in addition to the annual regular budget.

For 10 years, the Corn Fund shall consist of an annual P3 billion budget, which will come from tariff collection on imported corn, feed wheat, feeds and other products and ingredients for feeds. *Camille P. Balagtas*



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## Fishing shelter, pantalan sa WPS pinaapura

PINAMAMADALI ng isang mambabatas ang pagtatayo ng mga fishing shelter at seaport upang lgiit ang pagmamay-ari ng Pilipinas sa pinag-aagawang teritoryo sa West Philippine Sea (WPS).

Inihain ni AGRI party-list Rep. Wilbert Lee ang panukalang Fishing Shelters and Ports Act (House Bill 9011) para sa pagtatayo umano ng fishing shelters at port sa isla ng Lawak, Kota, Likas, Pag-asa, Parola, Panata, Patag, Rizal Reef at Ayungin Shoal.

"Hindi po tayo puwedeng magwalang kibo na lang sa pambully sa atin ng dayuhan sa ating sariling bakuran. Kailangang protektahan ang buhay at kabuhayan ng ating mga mangingisda at suportahan ang ating kasundaluhan na buwis-buhay na nagbabantay at nangangalaga sa ating teritoryo," sabi ni Lee.

Ayon kay Lee ang kanyang panukala ay nakalinya sa Executive Order 57 na inilabas ni Pangulong Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr. na lumilikha sa National Maritime Council (NMC) upang mapalakas ang maritime security at maritime domain awareness sa lugar.  
**(Billy Begas)**

# Malaya Business Insight

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## Wheat, soybeans climb

CANBERRA- Chicago wheat futures rose on Tuesday but remained close to their lowest level since 2020 amid expectations of strong supply and as a rising dollar made US farm exports costlier for importers.

Soybean and corn futures inched higher.

The most-active wheat contract on the Chicago Board of Trade (CBOT) was up 0.3 percent at \$5.58-1/2 a bushel, but prices are still down 11 percent this year and fell to \$5.24 last month, the lowest since August 2020.

"Large supplies of wheat and other grains such as corn are weighing on pricing," said Andrew

Whitelaw at Australian agricultural consultancy Episode 3.

"Heavy exports (of wheat) from Russia are a cause for concern," he said. "With a lack of new bullish information, we expect pricing to remain relatively flat with bearish overtones."

The US Department of Agriculture (USDA) in its first weekly crop progress report of the 2024 growing season rated 56 percent of the US winter wheat crop in good-to-excellent condition, below an average of trade expectations but still the highest for this time of the year since 2019.

- Reuters



## NY cocoa gains 3% to hit record high; raw sugar also closes up

NEW YORK — New York (NY) cocoa futures on ICE gained more than 3% on Monday to hit a record high, as the market for the chocolate-making ingredient remains supported by an outlook of limited supplies, while raw sugar also closed higher.

There was no trading for London cocoa, robusta coffee, and white sugar on Monday due to a bank holiday in London.

**COCOA:** July New York cocoa settled up \$308 or 3.3% to \$9,614 a metric ton after hitting a record high of \$9,806.

Dealers said the market continued to be supported by falling production in West Africa which is leading to a very limited availability of beans to the global chocolate industry.

Lack of rain and strong sun in most of Ivory Coast's main cocoa regions last week could hinder the April-to-September mid-crop, farmers said on Monday.

Ivory Coast's President Alassane D. Ouattara will increase the official cocoa farmgate price to 1,500 CFA francs (\$2.47) per kilogram from Tuesday from the current 1,000 CFA, sources at five different export companies said.

**SUGAR:** May raw sugar settled up 0.2 cent or 0.9% at 22.72 cents per pound, having hit the highest since end-February at 22.91 cents.

The weather has dried up in Brazil's Center-South region after the rains last week, so more mills are likely to start their sugarcane processing operations for the season.

Egypt's state grains buyer, the General Authority for Supply Commodities, is believed to have bought 150,000 metric tons of raw sugar in a tender, traders told Reuters on Monday. — **Reuters**