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DA's Laurel suspends fish imports

THE importation of fish — including frozen round scad (galunggong), bonito (tulingan) and mackerel (alumahan) — has been suspended.

The Department of Agriculture (DA) ordered the suspension after the agency said it received reports that these commodities “were being diverted to wet markets to the detriment of local fish-erfolk.”

The DA issued Memorandum Order No. 14, which will 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 order, which was signed by Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. on April 1, will take effect 15 days after its issuance.

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

According to the memo, “The top commodities that are identified as prone to diversion [to local wet markets] are round scad, bonito and mackerel.”

The DA further said 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.”

The DA memo further said all mackerel imports entering the country should carry the following label: “Imported Under FAO (Fisheries Administrative Order) No. 195 for Canning Purposes Only and not for Sale or Distribution to Wet Markets and Supermarkets.”

Earlier, 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,” reports said.

FAO No. 195 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 agriculture secretary to achieve food security.

Institutional buyers refer to entities or corporations authorized to import fish for final consumption or processing as food requirements for accredited hotels and restaurants.

The BFAR however said this has led to the diversion of some of the imported fish to wet markets, which caused prices to go down, affecting local fish-erfolk. **With Othel Campos**



BBM: Ensure public safety, help farmers amid El Niño

By ALEXIS ROMERO

President Marcos has ordered a "whole-of-government approach" to help farmers and to ensure public safety as the Philippines faces the impact of El Niño and La Niña.

"The Department of Agriculture (DA) was ordered to closely coordinate with the Philippine Crop Insurance Corp. to assess any regulation barriers imposed by the insurance commission to ensure that prompt financial aid reaches affected farmers," a Presidential Communications Office (PCO) statement released yesterday read.

The environment department, the PCO said, was tasked "to engage in collaborative efforts to devise engineering solutions that alleviate the need for extreme water conservation measures."

The El Niño task force previously said it is not discounting the possibility that Metro Manila may experience a water shortage because of the expected increase in consumption during summer. It has urged the public to save water and to limit the use of appliances.

The agency was also directed to work with the Office of Civil Defense (OCD) to gather data on water oversupply and undersupply situations and to raise public awareness on the importance of building additional dams in mitigating the impact of El

Niño.

The President has also ordered the Bureau of Fire Protection to coordinate with the health department to assess and implement requisite measures to ensure the safety of health facilities from fire hazards.

The OCD was also instructed to work closely with the tourism department to address the impact of the weather phenomenon on tourist spots, including issues related to water availability, energy resources, public health and safety.

Agri damage hits P2.6 B

The damage of the El Niño phenomenon to the agriculture sector in 10 regions has reached P2.63 billion affecting 54,2023 farmers as of April 3, according to data from the DA.

Among the regions affected are Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR), Ilocos Region, Cagayan Valley, Central Luzon, Calabarzon, Mimaropa, Bicol Region, Western Visayas, Zamboanga Peninsula and Soccsksargen, DA spokesman Arnel De Mesa said.

"The bulk of the damage was in rice with P1.7 billion, followed by corn at P591 million. In terms of areas, severely hit was Mimaropa region or Region 4-B at P770 million; followed closely by Western Visayas, at P739 million damage," De Mesa said.

He added that despite the increase in the impact of El Niño to palay plan-

tations, of the 34,264 hectares affected, 9,300 hectares were totally damaged while 25,000 hectares were partially damaged and can still recover.

"The Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration has declared that El Niño is already decaying but its effect could still persist until May so we expect that (damage) will peak in April and will go down in May," he said.

Based on data from the DA, the total volume loss for palay could reach 72,733 metric tons; 35,885 MT for corn, and 8,173 MT for high value crops.

"The affected rice area of 34,264 hectares is 3.57 percent of the total target area planted of 960,864.48 hectares, while the production loss of 72,733 MT is equivalent to around 0.79 percent of the target production of 9,218,358.28 MT, both for the dry cropping season this 2024," the DA said.

It added that for corn, area affected by the dry spell was at 16,956 hectares or 1.54 percent of the total target area planted of 1.1 million hectares with production loss of 35,885 MT or 0.80 percent of target production of 4.5 million MT, both for the dry cropping season this 2024.

The DA added that at least P1.08 billion worth of assistance was distributed to the affected farmers, including hybrid rice seeds worth

P 7.87 million and fertilizers worth P7.63 million to non-vulnerable areas in Western Visayas, and corn seeds worth P1.16 million in Ilocos Region.

"Also, financial assistance from the Rice Farmers Financial Assistance Program has been given to 139,002 farmers in Cagayan Valley with a total amount of P701.96 million and 71,795 farmers in Mimaropa Region with a total amount of P 362.56 million. Through the Philippine Native Animal Development Program, the DA has also distributed a total of 60,013 native animals to 334 groups and 534 individual farmers nationwide," it added.

According to the DA, at least P10.20-million indemnity was awarded by the Philippine Crop Insurance Corp. to at least 994 farmers in CAR, Ilocos, Cagayan Valley, Central Luzon, Calabarzon, Mimaropa, Zamboanga Peninsula and Soccsksargen regions.

No rice price reduction

Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. admitted that he does not expect the retail price of rice to go down amid the impact of the El Niño, adding that the cost ranged between P47 and P57 per kilo.

He added that the retail price of the staple varies in the different markets in the country.

According to Laurel, prices of rice in the world market are on a down-

ward trend.

"From January up to present, from \$700 per ton, it (price in the world market) is down to \$600 per ton, we expect hopefully it (retail price) will go down this second half of this year," Laurel added.

He said the impact of El Niño in the agriculture sector is expected to persist.

"As of the moment, to be honest, we are still at the height of the El Niño," Laurel said.

Meanwhile, the Amihan National Federation of Peasant Women and Kilusang Magbubukid ng Pilipinas criticized the government's alleged neglect and sluggish response amid the damage brought by the El Niño phenomenon.

"The government should release the NFA rice stored in the warehouses and distribute to the farmers and fisherfolk affected by the El Niño instead of selling to the private sector," Amihan secretary general Cathy Estavillo said.

"El Niño is a climate crisis. The response should be immediate and comprehensive, with short-term and long-term relief and rehabilitation efforts. What we have seen so far are the usual government programs already in place before the calamity such as credit assistance, insurance claims and a meager financial assistance," Estavillo added. —With Bella Carioso, Gilbert Bayoran, Ric Sapnu



100K MT imported *galunggong* diverted to markets

By **BELLA CARIASO**

At least 100,000 metric tons of imported *galunggong* or round scad were diverted to wet markets during the last nine months, Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. said yesterday.

A crackdown on importers involved in illegal activities has been ordered, Laurel said at a press conference during the three-day food summit at the Philippine Rice Research Institute in Nueva Ecija.

"Vendors in the markets have no

liability as it is the importers who divert the (frozen round scad). (Vendors) are just doing their job. I don't think the crackdown will be on the market level," he added.

"The concentration (of the crackdown) will be on the registered importers as most of them are identified but we need to be careful. We don't want to hit legitimate (importers)," he noted.

Laurel's Memorandum Order 14 suspended the issuance of sanitary and phytosanitary import clearances for the importation of frozen round

scad, mackerel and bonito for canning and processing as well as for institutional buyers.

This was issued following reports that imported fish stocks were being diverted to wet markets.

At least 30,000 MT of imported round scad were sold to wet markets in just three months, Laurel said.

"It is illegal (to divert imported round scad), that's why we need to enforce the law. Our rough estimate based on a study was at 30,000 tons per quarter or for three quarters the

diversion ranged between 90,000 tons to 100,000 tons," he added.

MO 14 was necessary to stop unscrupulous activities, Laurel said.

"The anomaly was technical. We need (the issuance of MO 14) to prevent this. That's why I came out with an order to investigate," he added.

An enforcement team will be formed to chase importers involved in diverting imported round scad, he noted.

Suspending the issuance of import permits could increase round scad's

retail price, Laurel admitted.

"There will be an effect on the prices but... the order was issued because it is fishing season so the retail prices in the market will not be affected as small, municipal and commercial fishers are allowed from March to November, prices should be stable," he said.

Based on the Department of Agriculture's monitoring, the retail price of local round scad ranged between P160 and P300 per kilo and Indian mackerel, between P240 and P380 per kilo.



'Rabies outbreak a cause for concern'

The outbreak of rabies in the country is a cause for concern, according to the Department of Agriculture (DA).

At a press conference during a three-day food security cluster communications workshop at the Philippine Rice Research Institute in Science City of Muñoz, Nueva Ecija yesterday, DA Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. said a rabies outbreak has been declared in two areas.

Laurel said the disease affected not only dogs and cats but also cattle.

He did not identify the areas, saying "it can cause panic."

A rabies outbreak was earlier declared in Boac and Buenavista towns in Marinduque.

Cases rise in Ilocos

The Department of Health (DOH) reported yesterday that rabies cases are also increasing in Ilocos region.

DOH-Ilocos regional director Paula Paz Sydiongco said six cases were recorded in the region from Jan. 1 to March 9. Only three cases were reported during the same period last year.

Six deaths due to rabies were also reported, a case fatality rate of 100 percent.

Sydiongco reminded the public to immediately seek medical attention if bitten by an animal.

Meanwhile, Laurel said he met with a group dealing with rabies and the Bureau of Animal Industry to address concerns about the disease.

Citing DA data, he said 22 million dogs and cats should be vaccinated against rabies.

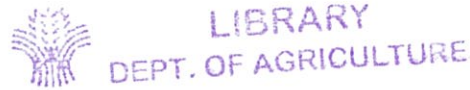
"We need at least P110 million as each dose costs almost P500. We are asking additional funding from the Senate and House of Representatives, and hopefully it will be approved," Laurel said.

DA Assistant Secretary for livestock Constante Palabrica said 20 percent of deaths caused by rabies in the provinces were unreported as the vaccination rate was below 50 percent.

DOH data showed that 84 people have died of rabies since January while at least one died of rabies every day last year.

Palabrica said the DA aims to incorporate the P200 million budget for rabies in its budget for next year.

- Bella Cariaso, Mayen Jaymalin



PH needs ₱110 M for rabies vaccines

By JEL SANTOS

At least ₱110 million is needed to procure rabies vaccines to inoculate around 22 million dogs and cats in the country next year, Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. said on Wednesday, April 3.

Two towns in Marinduque—Boac and Buenavista—have been placed under state of calamity due to soaring number of ra-

bies cases.

“Yesterday, I met with an NGO [non-governmental organization] dealing with rabies with our BAI animal health people. Basically, what they told me is that next year, we need ₱110 million on the vaccine alone, that does not include the application, the syringe, and the program roll-out,” he said during a press briefing at Philrice in Nueva Ecija. “We need ▶ 8

PH needs ₱110 M for rabies vaccines ◀

to inoculate 22 million dogs and cats to eradicate rabies.”

One rabies vaccine, according to Laurel, costs at least ₱500.

“So, we need at least ₱110 million because one rabies vaccine costs ₱500. That’s what we will ask from the Congress [House of Representatives] and the Senate, and once approved, we will implement it,” he said.

Another area with rabies outbreak

Other than Marinduque, Laurel

said another area, which he did not disclose, was monitored to have rabies outbreak.

“Mayroon pa pero mahirap sabihin baka magkaroon ng panic (There is another one, but I do not want to disclose the area because it might cause panic),” he told the media.

Asked if it is near Marinduque, he said: “Hindi, malayo (No, it’s far).”

Agriculture spokesperson Assistant Secretary Arnel De Mesa confirmed this but, like Laurel, he declined to reveal the specific area.

Only vaccine can prevent rabies

In an earlier interview, DA Assistant Secretary for Livestock Dr. Constante Palabrica said vaccination is the only way to prevent rabies.

“Like with anthrax, rabies can only be prevented through vaccination,” he said.

He has urged the public to have their pets inoculated against rabies to avoid transmission of the viral fatal disease.

If a person is bitten by an animal,

Palabrica said the bitten area must be cleaned immediately

“Ang precautionary measure [is] you have to clean immediately ang pinagkagatan, sabon at tubig. And you have to go to a rabies hospital to be vaccinated (The precautionary measure is to immediately clean the bitten area with soap and water. And you have to go to a rabies hospital to be vaccinated,” he said.

Palabrica said that a person must still get an anti-rabies shot even if the animal that bit or scratched him/her was vaccinated against rabies

“Magpapabakuna ka na just to be sure. Baka iyong pinabakuna ay

expired o hindi umakasyon ang immunity ng hayop (Get vaccinated just to be sure. There are scenarios wherein the vaccine given to the animal is expired or in some cases the immunity of the animal did not react),” the DA official said, stressing that this is his personal opinion.

According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC) website, rabies, a fatal but preventable viral disease, can spread to people and pets if they are bitten or scratched by a rabid animal.

Most rabies deaths in people around the world are caused by dog bites, it noted.



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Rice prices to remain high until midyear — DA

By Luisa Maria Jacinta C. Jocson
and Adrian H. Halili Reporters

THE DEPARTMENT of Agriculture (DA) said on Wednesday that rice prices are expected to remain high until midyear, as the agriculture sector reels from the impact of the El Niño weather event.

At the same time, analysts warned elevated prices of the staple may add to inflationary pressures.

"Hopefully, prices go down during the second half of the year. But as of the moment, since there are still the lingering effects of El Niño, I don't think it will go down," Agriculture Secretary Francisco P. Tiu Laurel, Jr. told reporters.

Agricultural damage caused by the El Niño has risen to P2.63 billion, affecting

54,203 farmers and 53,879 hectares of farmland, according to the DA.

"We expect that (agricultural damage) would increase. We are at the height of El Niño now. Hopefully, by the end of May, it will decrease," Mr. Tiu Laurel said.

Rice was the most affected crop with 72,733 metric tons (MT) of damage, equivalent to P1.7 billion or about 65% of total agricultural losses.

"Rice is heavily water and rainfall dependent, so if the rice areas are affected (by El Niño) then it is a major issue. Also, if the drought hits at stages in the crop's life when it most needs water then that worsens the issue," Monetary Board member V. Bruce J. Tolentino said in a Viber message.

Federation of Free Farmers National Manager Raul Q. Montemayor said that agricultural damage from the El Niño may rise further.

"Some crops that are still on the ground have already been affected by the lack of water and this will result in lower output and yields when these crops are harvested (assuming they survive)," he said in a Viber message.

The El Niño across the tropical Pacific Ocean is showing signs of weakening and is expected to persist until May, according to the Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration (PAGASA).

"Based on reports from PAGASA, the El Niño decay started in March. We are expecting that by May, it will be gone. We can expect additional agricultural damage but not by a lot," DA spokesperson Arnel V. de Mesa said in mixed English and Filipino in a phone call on Wednesday.

Rice, S1/9

Rice, from S1/1

Latest PAGASA data showed that 24 provinces from Luzon and one in Visayas are experiencing meteorological drought; 16 provinces are under dry spells; and 10 reported dry conditions.

Provinces that are in a drought include Cagayan, Nueva Ecija, Isabela, Pangasinan, and Negros Occidental, which are among the top rice-producing provinces in the country.

"Farmers will be able to replant only when the rains come, and the lingering effects of El Niño may delay the onset of rains by about a month (from its usual onset in May)," Mr. Montemayor said.

"Dam levels may also be too low to sustain irrigation to crops even if El Niño subsides. Lower output means less supply and could lead to higher food prices," he added.

SCARCE WATER SUPPLY

Former Agriculture Undersecretary Fermin D. Adriano also noted the effect of scarce water supply on agriculture.

"Because of inadequate supply of water, local supply will not be enough and hence food prices might increase," he said in a Viber message.

Rice inflation surged to 23.7% in February, its fastest pace since the 24.6% seen in February 2009.

Mr. Tolentino said it is difficult to forecast the full impact of the dry weather event on agriculture and food prices.

"The impact depends on exactly where the drought hits — whether or not the areas affected are heavily agricultural or not, and at what growing stage the crop is," he added.

However, he noted that rice prices in general have been elevated for some time now due to rising fertilizer prices, supply chain disruptions and India's ban on exports.

As of April 2, the average retail price of local well-milled rice ranged from P48 to P55 per kilogram from P39 to P46 per kilogram a year ago. Regular milled rice also rose to P50 per kilogram from the P34 to P40 range a year earlier.

The Philippine Statistics Authority data showed the national average price for well milled rice was P56.95 per kilogram as of mid-March.

The highest retail price during the period was reported in the Central Visayas, with the average at P59.27 per kilogram.

The Ilocos Region, on the other hand, reported the lowest price for well milled rice at P52.89 per kilogram.

MORE IMPORTS?

Meanwhile, Mr. Tiu Laurel said stocks may remain sufficient for the country's rice requirements, due to the ongoing harvest season and continued purchase of palay or unmilled rice by the National Food Authority (NFA).

"Well, the NFA has already bought a certain amount... it's harvest season, as we all know, (which) will continue until May. So, there's enough stock," he added.

Mr. Tiu Laurel said that rice imports have also been regularly arriving to bolster local supply.

Rice imports have reached 995,841 MT as of March 21, according to the Bureau of Plant Industry.

To help ease price pressures in the short term, the government should consider allowing more imports.

"In the medium term, pressure can ease if trade policies are stabilized, and tariff reductions made permanent. Long term, the sustainable solution is improved domestic productivity through research and development," Mr. Tolentino said.



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Imported fish diverted from canneries seen at 100,000 MT

THE Department of Agriculture (DA) said about 90,000 to 100,000 metric tons (MT) of imported frozen fish meant for canning and processing are being diverted to wet markets each year.

Agriculture Secretary Francisco P. Tiu Laurel, Jr. said Fisheries Administrative Order (FAO) No. 195 of 1999 authorizes institutional importers to bring in fish, which may not be sold to the public.

Mr. Laurel was speaking to reporters on the sidelines of a food security forum on Wednesday.

The DA has suspended the issuance of sanitary and phytosanitary import clearances for fish species intended for institutional buyers, pending an investigation into the diverted shipments.

The DA had received reports of imported round scad (*galunggong*), mackerel, and bonito surfacing in wet markets.

"These are being diverted in huge quantities... both fisherfolk and commercial (fishing companies) are being affected," Mr. Tiu Laurel said.

FAO 195 allowed institutional buyers to ship in frozen, chilled, or fresh fish to reduce competition for those selling their domestic catch in public markets.

He added that prices should remain stable due to the open fishing season for commercial and municipal fisherfolk.

He added that the DA will create an enforcement team to regulate the diversion of fish to other markets.

"We are rebuilding the enforcement team. At the moment, there are still quite a few without official appointments. So, we can't move effectively," he said.

He added that the DA will target registered importers diverting fish from institutional buyers.

"Those at fault are the ones who imported and diverted (the fish), while those in the markets (are) just doing their job... they just need income. I don't think the crackdown will be on the (public market) level," he said. — **Adrian H. Halili**



Marcos to DA: Release El Niño aid promptly

BY SAMUEL P. MEDENILLA
X@sam_medenilla

PRESIDENT Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. has ordered the Department of Agriculture (DA) and the Philippine Crop Insurance Corp. (PCIC) to streamline the process for releasing financial aid to farmers who incurred losses due to El Niño.

The chief executive gave the instruction to the DA during the 4th Task Force El Niño (TFE) meeting last month to review "regulation barriers imposed by the insurance commission."

He said he wants the concerned agencies to provide prompt financial aid to the affected farmers.

The National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council (NDRRMC) reported that some P487.1 million worth of assistance was extended to El Niño-affected regions of Mimaropa, Western Visayas and the Zamboanga Peninsula.

The aid includes food packs, fuel and cash aid among others.

During the TFE meeting, Marcos also ordered the Department

of Environment and Natural Resources-National Water Resources Board (DENR-NWRB) to keep track of water oversupply and undersupply situations.

"They are also ordered to engage in collaborative efforts to devise engineering solutions that alleviate the need for extreme water conservation measures and raise public awareness on the importance of constructing additional dams in mitigating the challenges posed by the El Niño," the Presidential Communications Office (PCO) said in a statement last Wednesday.

The Bureau of Fire Protection and the Department of Health were mandated to ensure public



PHOTO FROM WWW.DA.GOV.PH

safety, while Office of Civil Defense and the Department of Tourism will address the impact of El Niño in tourist spots.

Voucher system

MEANWHILE, Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. announced last Tuesday that the voucher system under the National Rice Program is currently under review and set for major changes in the coming months.

Laurel said there is a need to fix the voucher system introduced by the program to ensure government



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funds are fully utilized, farmers get full benefits, and rice production is substantially increased.

Under the program, the DA distributes vouchers to farmer beneficiaries that could be exchanged for farm inputs, including fertilizers and rice seeds at DA-accredited merchants.

The DA chief said many merchants refuse to honor vouchers because they haven't been paid, with total payables reaching P892 million—some dating as far back as 2021.

The bulk of the arrears

amounting to P849 million are payables from the recently concluded 2023-2024 Dry Season implementation. Payment delays are often due to incomplete documentary requirements.

The DA, in partnership with the Development Bank of the Philippines (DBP), is pushing for new processes for settling accounts with accredited merchants. Improved rice seeds and the right amount of fertilizers, along with sufficient irrigation, contribute significantly to raising rice yields.

It also issued Memorandum Order 8, Series of 2024 to provide clearer guidelines in the implementation of programs and projects as indicated in the Special Provisions under the 2024 General Appropriations Act.

Laurel noted that the current voucher system has not addressed certain issues at the level of priority sectors and end users.

It is a major channel for DA'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.

Other modes allowed under the General Appropriations Act this year includes 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.

The agriculture chief said changes to the voucher system, which may include secure physical vouchers that may not be duplicated and soon pilot-tested to ensure farmers get the inputs needed to maximize rice yield, increase grain supply towards self-sufficiency levels, and consequently, increase farmers' income.

Determining which rice seeds are best for certain areas will be done through an exhaustive process of holding Hybrid Rice Derbies participated in by seed companies and agriculturists, the agriculture chief said.

"By doing this, we will not only 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."



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PH has enough rice stocks – DA chief

BY JANINE ALEXIS P. MIGUEL

THE country has enough stocks of rice despite the temporary closure of several warehouses of the National Food Authority (NFA), Agriculture Secretary **Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr.** said on Wednesday.

"There are stocks available. It's harvest season, and it will continue until May, so there are enough stocks," he told reporters.

Tiu Laurel added that 97 NFA

warehouses were closed temporarily to give way to an investigation into the alleged improper sale of rice.

Tiu Laurel said that the price of

imported rice remains stable at \$700 per ton.

"So, we expect that hopefully it will lower by the second half of this year. Since the lingering effects of El Niño are still there, I don't think [prices] will decline as of the moment," he said.

Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) data showed that NFA stocks decreased annually by 55.3 percent to 46,890 metric tons (MT) as of February 2024, in comparison to 104,790 MT recorded in 2023.

On a monthly basis, the volume

of rice stocks has declined by 3.7 percent in comparison to January's 48,680 MT.

The country's overall rice stocks were estimated at 1.51 million MT, representing an annual decrease of 0.8 percent from the 1.52 million MT inventory in the same period of the previous year.

The Agriculture department's monitoring report for April 2 said prices of imported well-milled rice range between P50 and P54 per kilo, while local milled rice is sold from P48 to P55 per kilo.



DA forms teams to hike rice and corn production

THE Department of Agriculture has created teams whose task is to prepare and finalize the feasibility studies of priority infrastructure projects that will boost food production especially rice and corn.

According to Agriculture Secretary Francisco Laurel Jr., the three teams he formed would also be looking on programs of the government that will minimize post-harvest losses.

The agri chief designated Undersecretary for Special Concerns and for Official Development Assistance Jerome Oliveros as chairperson across all three project-preparation teams which would draft the framework and plans for the proposed post-harvest program for rice and corn, the solar-powered cold storages, and proposed solar-powered

irrigation systems.

Undersecretary for Operations Roger Navarro will be Oliveros' co-chairman for the team that will prepare the feasibility study on the post-harvest program for rice and corn while Undersecretary for High Value Crops Cheryl Marie Natividad-Caballero will be the co-chairperson of the team in-charge of the proposed solar-powered irrigation system project.

Meanwhile, the Department's spokesperson and Assistant Secretary Arnel de Mesa will be the vice chairman of the team that will prepare the solar-powered cold storage project.

These teams Secretary Laurel added, will have to ensure the project documents are compliant with the requirements of the DA-wide

project clearing house system and the National Economic and Development Authority-Investment Coordination Committee.

As a special instruction to the team preparing the solar-powered irrigation system project, the agri chief stressed that they should ensure consistency on the proposed sites in the database of the National Irrigation Administration and with Bureau of Soil and Water Management irrigation masterplan.

Earlier this year, Tiu Laurel estimated that the government will have to shell out around P93 billion in the next couple of years to build post-harvest facilities for rice and corn to minimize losses while P1 billion is needed to build cold storage facilities to extend the shelf life of vegetables.

Joel dela Torre



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Rice prices go up slightly over past two months—PSA

By Othel V. Campos

THE Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) has reported a slight uptick in the price of well-milled rice over the last two and one-half months.

Based on the latest statistics, well-milled rice sells at an average of P56.95 per kilogram (kg) during the second half of March, up from P56.29 in February.

Rice retailers said the increase in the buying price of palay by the government has also spurred local traders heighten their palay buying by topping off a few more pesos on what the government offered to the farmers.

Adding to this is the additional premium given by the local government units (LGUs) to the government's buying price.

With the government and traders competing for local harvest, the price of wet paddy rice effectively increased from P23 to P24/kg., while dry palay fetches P29.50 to P30/kg.

Based on the **DA Rice Outlook**, total national supply was at 6.23 million metric tons (MT), while total demand was at 3.83 million MT.

While there was a slight increase in local rice prices, traders noted a softening of rice prices in the world market by about \$50 to \$70/MT in the last few months, but rebounded by \$20/MT in April.

The Philippines sources majority of its rice imports from Vietnam, although Indonesia was the biggest rice importer at present.

As of last March, Philippine rice imports that arrive through 14 ports of entry totalled to 1.06 million MT based on data from the Bureau of Customs (BOC).



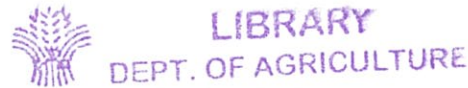
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Ensure public safety amid El Niño, Marcos orders

By ARGYLL CYRUS GEDUCOS

President Marcos has ordered a whole-of-nation approach to ensure public safety and assistance to those affected by the El Niño and the coming La Niña, Malacañang said.

Malacañang's announcement came after the Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical, and Astronomical Services Administration (PAGASA) reported that several areas in the country might experience dangerous heat index of 42°C ► **8**



Ensure public safety amid El Niño, Marcos orders ◀

this week.

In a statement, the Palace said Marcos directed the Bureau of Fire Protection (BFP) on March 19 to coordinate with the Department of Health (DOH) to assess and implement requisite measures to ensure the safety of health facilities or hospitals from the threat of fire hazards.

He ordered the Office of the Civil Defense (OCD) to work closely with the Department of Tourism (DOT) regarding the impact of the El Niño phenomenon on tourist areas, specifically addressing issues related to water availability, energy resources, public health, and safety concerns.

The President told the **Department of Agriculture (DA)** to coordinate with the Philippine Crop Insurance Corp. (PCIC) to assess any regulation barriers imposed by the insurance commission to ensure that prompt financial aid reaches affected farmers.

The Department of Environment

and Natural Resources–National Water Resources Board (NWRB) was tasked to collaborate with the OCD to gather data on both water oversupply and undersupply situations.

They are also ordered to devise engineering solutions that alleviate the need for extreme water conservation measures and raise public awareness of the importance of constructing additional dams in mitigating the challenges posed by El Niño.

In March, the Task Force El Niño assured the public that mitigation efforts to cushion the impact of La Niña will be put in place as the country is still dealing with the effects of the ongoing dry spell.

Damage to agri soars to ₱2.76 B

Heavily impacted by the El Niño is the agriculture sector.

Latest report from the Department of Agriculture (DA) showed that the

agricultural damage has skyrocketed to ₱2.76 billion, affecting 54,203 farmers nationwide.

Assistant Secretary Arnel De Mesa, DA spokesperson, said on Wednesday, April 3, that 10 out of the 16 regions in the country have been affected by the El Niño.

“Ten out of the 16 regions have been affected. So far, these are CAR [Cordillera Administrative Region], Region 1, Region 2, Region 3, Calabarzon, Mimaropa, Region 5, Region 6, Region 9, Region 12,” De Mesa said on the sidelines of the Food Security Cluster Communications Workshop in Nueva Ecija.

Citing the latest data of the agency, De Mesa said the Mimaropa region has incurred the most damage at ₱770 million.

“[It] was followed closely by Region VI at ₱739 million worth of damage,” he added.

The spokesperson said damage to rice is now ₱1.7 billion, followed by corn at ₱591 million.

Meanwhile, he said livestock only sustained ₱59.6 million in damage

Damaged rice fields

According to De Mesa, 34,264 hect-

ares of rice fields have been damaged by the phenomenon.

He noted that based on the monitoring of the agriculture department, only about 10,000 hectares are totally damaged or about 10 percent of the nearly one million hectares of farmland planted with rice.

“Iyong partially damaged that can recover, iyan ang medyo malaki pa, 25,000 hectares (Those partially damaged that can still recover is quite large at 25,000 hectares),” he said.

He noted that El Niño is still expected to intensify as it will peak this month, based on the state weather bureau’s forecast.

The phenomenon is expected to subside gradually by May, he added.

Aid to farmers

Around ₱1.08 billion of assistance has been extended to farmers affected by the El Niño, said De Mesa.

“Karamihan niyan ay ‘yung ating financial assistance, insurance claims, ‘yung pautang ng ACPC [Agricultural Credit Policy Council]. Ganoon na rin ‘yung mga pamahagi natin sa areas na naapektuhan na ready na rin

magtanim, namahagi na rin tayo ng seedlings at seeds and fertilizers (Most of that is our financial assistance, insurance claims, loans from the Agricultural Credit Policy Council. We have also distributed seedlings, seeds, and fertilizers in areas affected by El Niño and those ready for planting),” he said.

He said the DA has been coordinating with the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), and the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) to help El Niño-affected farmers.

The DSWD has started distributing food packs to affected farmers in Mindoro, the official said.

On the other hand, he said the farmers were also included in DOLE’s Tulong Panghanapbuhay sa Ating Disadvantaged/Displaced Workers (TUPAD), a community-based emergency employment program that provides short-term jobs to displaced, underemployed, and seasonal workers. Farmer beneficiaries reportedly earn ₱4,350 for 10 days of work.

Recently, Task Force El Niño spokesperson Assistant Secretary Joey Villarama said El Niño may impact 80 provinces by the end of April.



Banned contractor almost got P8M worth of irrigation projects

BY PETER TABINGO

THE Commission on Audit (COA) has cautioned the provincial government of Mountain Province to improve its post-qualification procedures for public works contracts following the award of two infrastructure projects to a blacklisted contractor in 2023 that had to be canceled and later re-bid.

In their 2023 report on the province, a team of government auditors noted that the P4.95 million Mayasen Diversion Dam construction and the P3.366 million Sumangan Irrigation Canal construction was initially awarded to ADL General Construction on March 1, 2023 with target completion dates set to September 2023 and October 2023, respectively.

However, the contract was subsequently terminated after the provincial government learned that the Government Procurement Policy Board (GPPB) has included the ADL General Construction in its list of blacklisted contractors from February 28, 2023 to February 28, 2024.

The Bids and Awards Committee explained that it only learned of the blacklisting when the GPPB system declined to accept the name of the same contractor on the award of a different contract.

After the termination of the contracts, Mt. Province held a rebidding and the two projects were awarded to Tawid Builders

Corp. which managed to complete both within the target dates of completion.

Both contracts were financed by the P10.16 million funding released by the Department of Agriculture-Cordillera Administrative Region (DA-CAR) on February 15, 2023 which was also the source of the P2.97 million Demang Diversion Dam rehabilitation project awarded to DJJD Marcelino Construction.

Verification by the auditors showed ADL General Construction was blacklisted by the GPPB for non-compliance with contractual obligations without a valid cause, poor performance and unsatisfactory quality of workmanship that did not meet specifications, and abandonment or non-completion of project/contract without justification.

The audit team reminded the provincial government that awarding public works projects to blacklisted contractors could cause delays in implementation and deprive more qualified bidders of opportunities to work on government contracts.

The local government's BAC and its Technical Working Group told the COA that they will double-check with the GPPB during post-qualification and before issuing a notice of award to prevent unqualified contractors from winning government contracts.



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El Niño damage reaches P1.2B

AGRICULTURAL damage due to El Niño surged to P1.236 billion, the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council (NDRRMC) said Wednesday.

As of April 3, 2024, the dry phenomenon has affected 29,409 farmers and fishermen and 26,731 hectares of crops, with a corresponding production loss of 44,845 metric tons.

President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. ordered a whole-of-government approach to ensure public safety and assist farmers affected by the El Niño and the La Niña phenomena, Malacañang said Wednesday.

In a statement, Presidential Communications Secretary Cheloy Garafil said the President issued the directives during the 4th Task Force El Niño meeting in Malacañang.

"The Department of Agriculture was ordered to closely coordinate with the Philippine Crop Insurance Corp. to assess any regulation barriers imposed by the insurance commission to ensure that prompt financial aid reaches affected farmers," Garafil said.

She said the Department of Environment and Natural Resources-National Water Resources Board was mandated to collaborate with the Office of the Civil Defense to gather data on both water conditions.

"They are also ordered to engage in collaborative efforts to devise engineering solutions that alleviate the need for extreme water conservation measures and raise public awareness on the importance of constructing additional dams in mitigating the challenges posed by the El Niño," Garafil said.

In its latest report, the NDRRMC said losses were incurred in the Ilocos Region, Cagayan Valley, Calabarzon, Mimaropa, Western Visayas and Zamboanga Peninsula.

► **DamageA2**



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■ DAMAGE FROM A1

El Niño damage reaches P1.2B

Western Visayas recorded the largest farming area affected by the weather pattern at 13,363 hectares, equivalent to P678.7 million. Mimaropa followed with 3,116 hectares with a corresponding worth of P319.7 million.

Cagayan Valley, meanwhile, recorded agricultural losses amounting to P180.47 million; the Ilocos Region lost P54.4

million; Calabarzon, P2.7 million; and Zamboanga Peninsula, P717,527.

To date, 17 municipalities in Mimaropa, Zamboanga Peninsula and the Cordillera Administrative Region have declared a state of calamity due to the effects of El Niño on their farming sector.

The NDRRMC said the govern-

ment had provided P487.15 million worth of assistance, which includes food packs, financial assistance, fuel, generators and hygiene kits.

Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. said the department is also ready to provide planting materials and fertilizers to farmers when they replant.

"We are at the height of El

Niño now. [We hope] by the end of May, it will end and weaken," Tiu Laurel told reporters in Nueva Ecija on Wednesday.

"What we can do is give whatever seeds and fertilizers we can give and even other types of crops for them to plant that will not require a lot of water," he added.

On Tuesday, Science and Technology Secretary Renato Solidum urged the public to brace for a longer duration of the dry spell and continue their water-conservation measures as El Niño weather shifts to La Niña in the

coming months.

La Niña is a weather phenomenon with the opposite effect of El Niño, in which trade winds are more potent than usual, pushing more warm water and increased rainfall, thus raising the risks of floods and landslides in vulnerable areas.

Solidum said about 48 provinces will likely be affected by drought by April, and this will increase to 54 by May.

The number of drought-affected areas will decrease to 25 and 23 by June and July, respec-

tively, he said.

The weather bureau, meanwhile, said that Metro Manila was unlikely to suffer a water shortage since the Angat Dam will reach its low-water level only by July when the rainy season starts.

The dam, located in Norzagaray, Bulacan, is the main source of potable water supply for Metro Manila as well as for the irrigation needs of its adjoining provinces, including Cavite.

**JANINE ALEXIS MIGUEL,
CATHERINE S. VALENTE
AND ARLIE O. CALALO**



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Coop launches processing facility

A FOOD processing facility of a cooperative in Nueva Vizcaya will help meet the demand for packaged vegetables for cooking "pinakbet" in Region 2 (Cagayan Valley) and beyond.

THE Pak Gulay Food Processing Facility of the Kaagapay ng mga Magsasaka Mangangalakal at Eksperto sa Pagpoproseso of Nueva Vizcaya Producers Cooperative (KMMEPNV) was recently inaugurated by the Cagayan Valley Research Center (CVRC) of the Department of Agriculture Region 2 office and the local government unit (LGU) of Aritao in the province.

According to CVRC, the initiative was made possible through the support of the DA-Bureau of Agricultural Research (BAR), which provided funding for the research for development project titled "Market Assessment and Refinement of PakGulay Food Products toward Market Expansion."

It said this project facilitated the

overall improvement and refinement of Pak Gulay, referring to vegetables used for cooking pinakbet, into market-ready food products, including the provision of the vacuum-frier machine required for the production of the food products.

The two Pak Gulay food products are the Vacuum Fried Veggie Crunch, a healthy alternative to junk foods developed to make vegetables more appealing for children, and the Ready to Cook Pinakbet for the urban population looking for a quick and healthy vegetable meal.

KMMEPNV President Rheina de Guzman was an incubatee of the DA-BAR-funded CVRC AgriBusiness and Developed Processed Products Technology Business Incubator (Adept-TBI) Program.

The CVRC said it was through Adept-TBI that de Guzman developed an interest in adopting the processing of vegetables.

LEANDER C. DOMINGO



P2-B agri equipment distributed in Q1

BY LEANDER C. DOMINGO

THE Philippine Center for Postharvest Development and Mechanization (PHilMech) has distributed P1.998 billion worth of agricultural equipment in the first quarter (Q1) this year.

PHilMech Director and Scientist IV Dionisio Alvindia said that collectively, more than 500 farmers cooperatives and associations (FCAs) benefited from the distribution of the various agricultural equipment, ranging from four-wheel tractors to milling and drying facilities.

Alvindia added that PHilMech also conducted the training necessary to capacitate the FCAs on the operation and maintenance of the agricultural equipment they got at no cost under the Rice Competitiveness Enhancement Fund (RCEF) Mechanization Program.

He said the P1.998 billion worth of agricultural equipment distributed in the first quarter of this year is part of the P24.9 billion that PHilMech has obligated under the RCEF-Mechanization Program.

"We at PHilMech intend to complete the distribution of farm machines worth P30 billion as stipulated under the Republic Act (RA) 11203 or the Rice Tariffica-

tion Law," Alvindia said.

According to PHilMech, among the distribution activities that had the largest amount of agricultural equipment distributed in the said period were: Palawan on February 6 with P280 million worth of agricultural equipment distributed to 50 FCAs; South Cotabato on February 10 with P225 million worth of farm machines distributed to 26 FCAs; Pampanga on January 11 with P126 million worth of agricultural equipment benefiting 54 FCAs; Sorsogon on February 16 with P92 million worth of agricultural equipment distributed to 22 FCAs; and Surigao del Sur on March 1 with P89 million worth of agricultural equipment distributed to 45 FCAs.

Alvindia thanked the concerned local officials and congressional representatives for helping facilitate the distribution of the agricultural equipment in their areas of jurisdiction.

"Without the valuable contributions of the concerned local



■ Beneficiaries from farmers' cooperatives and associations stand with the agricultural equipment distributed to them in Palawan on Feb. 7, 2024.

CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

officials and the Congressional representatives in the areas where PHilMech distributed the agricultural equipment, we at PHilMech would have faced numerous difficulties and challenges," he said.

Alvindia noted that with their

valuable contributions, PHilMech has made great strides in the distribution of agricultural equipment nationwide under the RCEF-Mechanization Program.

Under RA 11203, PHilMech gets P5 billion annually from 2019 to

2024 to distribute various agricultural equipment to qualified FCAs and local government units.

PHilMech said the P5 billion is sourced from tariffs applied on rice imports and is channeled to a fund called the Rice Competitiveness

Enhancement Fund.

All the agricultural equipment distributed by PHilMech under the RCEF-Mechanization Program are in-kind or grants, or are at no cost to qualified beneficiaries nationwide, it added.



PBBM orders total gov't response to El Niño, La Niña phenomena

PRESIDENT Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. has ordered a whole-of-government approach to ensure public safety and assist farmers affected by the El Niño and the La Niña phenomena in the country.

In the 4th Task Force El Niño meeting on March 19, the **Department of Agriculture (DA)** was ordered to closely coordinate with the Philippine Crop Insurance Corp. (PCIC) to assess any regulation barriers imposed by the insurance commission to ensure that prompt financial aid reaches affected farmers.

The Department of Environment and Natural Resources-National Water Resources Board

(NWRB) is mandated to collaborate with the Office of the Civil Defense (OCD) to gather data on both water oversupply and undersupply situations.

They are also ordered to engage in collaborative efforts to devise engineering solutions that alleviate the need for extreme water conservation measures and raise public awareness on the importance of constructing additional dams in mitigating the challenges posed by the El Niño.

For its part, the OCD is tasked to closely work with Department of Tourism (DOT) regarding the impact of the El Niño phenomenon on tourists areas, specifically addressing issues

related to water availability, energy resources, public health and safety concerns. **PCO**



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No rushing the lechon

Hog grower takes his time amid ASF threat

By JUNEPC OCAMPO

Mario Ledesma (not his real name) is a businessman from Pampanga. Before the pandemic, he managed a farm with wild boars roaming freely on his 10-hectare property, feeding primarily on vegetables and fruits. Although not officially certified as organic, his pigs fetched premium prices due to the superior taste of their meat compared to commercial breeds.

However, the Covid-19 pandemic forced Ledesma to scale down production. To his dismay, the African Swine Fever (ASF) subsequently decimated his entire herd.

Recently, Ledesma watched a news report showcasing the National Federation of Hog Farmers Inc. (NatFed) setting a new world record for serving the highest number of pork dishes at an event. The sight reignited his longing for the unique taste of wild boar meat. Yet, Ledesma expressed

his inability to take risks while the ASF threat persists.

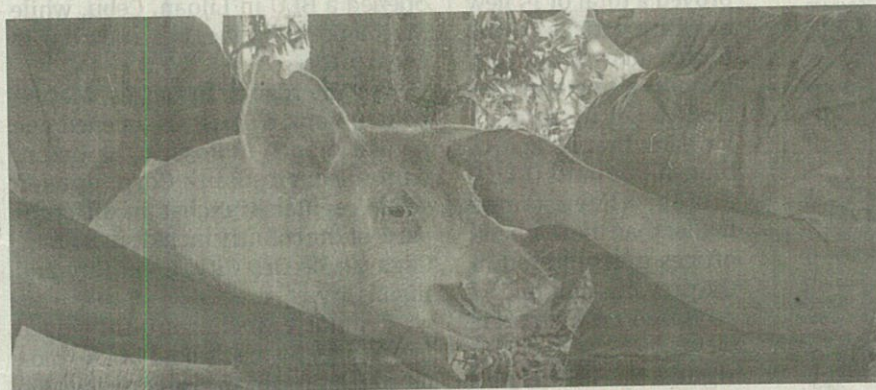
"It's frightening to restart farming. They could fall ill and die at any moment," he lamented. "The pigs could easily be wiped out again. It's a waste of money."

Plight of small-scale growers

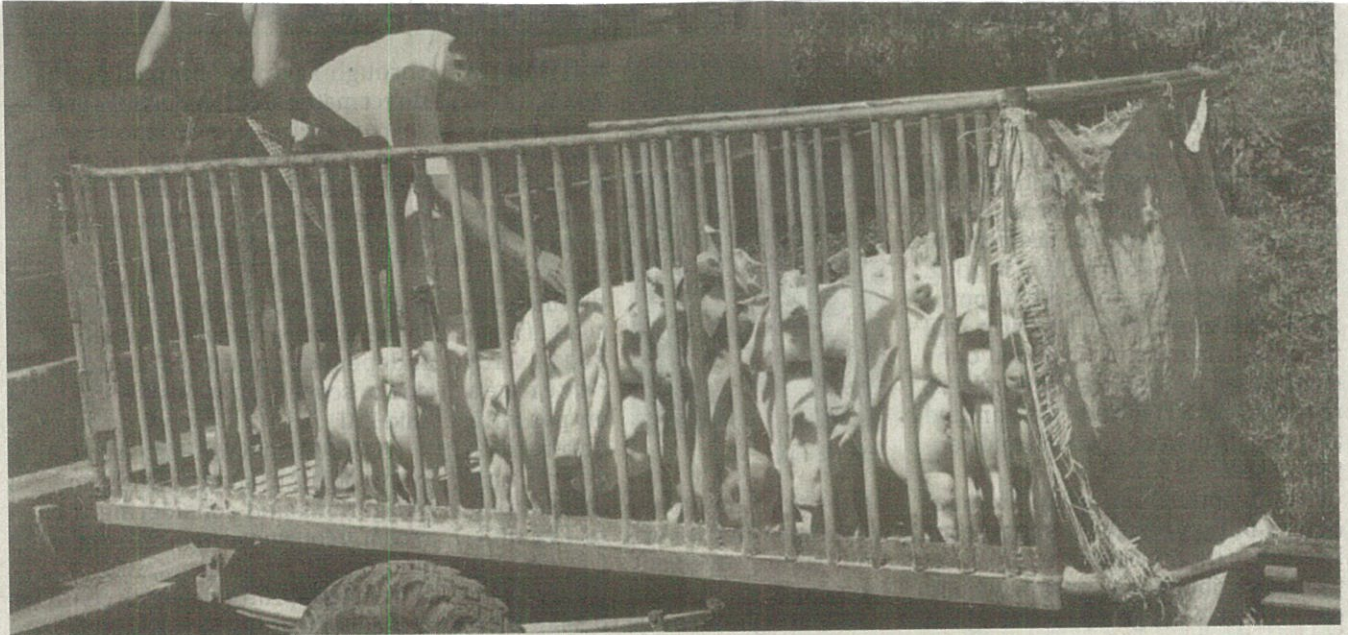
Ledesma's ordeal mirrors that of small-scale hog growers in the country whose backyard farms have been devastated by ASF.

According to Rolando Tambago, president of the Pork Producers Federation of the Philippines, private sector estimates indicate that ASF has claimed the lives of four million hogs since its detection in the country in July 2019. With an average of four pigs per backyard farm, this translates to a million Filipino hog farmers losing their livelihoods.

As of March 2024, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) under the United Nations has reported ASF cases in 73 out of 82 provinces. As of March 8,



Sentinel Pigs need to have a blood test for infection after 40 days.



Farm workers watch over several Sentinel Pigs.

2024, there are still 127 barangays in 24 municipalities across 11 provinces with active ASF cases.

Though these figures are far from ideal, the FAO considers them an improvement from the previous year.

As an example, the FAO highlighted the Bicol region, where 52 out of 72 towns previously affected by ASF have been reclassified as "buffer zones" – areas with no active ASF cases but adjacent to those with active infections.

Biosecurity is key

Experts worldwide advocate for biosecurity as a crucial measure in preventing the spread of diseases among pigs.

Similar to the protocols enforced during the Covid-19 pandemic, biosecurity measures include perimeter fencing, restricted access to farms, installation of foot baths, biosecurity training for farm workers, visual examination, and basic diagnosis of pig health. Since small-scale farms lack veterinarians, farm workers are tasked with monitoring potential infections and promptly isolating sick pigs.

The FAO emphasizes that ASF is not airborne but transmitted through direct contact with infected pigs, feces, or body fluids. It can also spread through equipment, vehicles, or people working with pigs between farms with inadequate biosecurity. Additionally, the virus can be carried by ticks.

"Biosecurity is non-negotiable in

combating the spread of ASF," stated the FAO.

Sentinel pigs

The Department of Agriculture has promoted the deployment of "Sentinel pigs" to farms as a preemptive measure before repopulation.

Similar to security guards, Sentinel pigs serve as the first line of defense for farms. Deployed to areas without active ASF cases for at least 90 days, these pigs are regularly monitored for signs of infection. Local veterinarians collaborate with farm owners to raise and monitor Sentinel pigs while evaluating the farm's biosecurity measures.

Forty days after deployment, Sentinel pigs undergo blood testing to confirm their health status. Only when they are cleared will the farm be declared ASF-free and repopulation would commence.

Financial support

While essential, these biosecurity measures pose financial burdens on hog raisers.

"It's costly to run a farm with uncertain profits. Investing in biosecurity adds to the expenses," noted businessman Ledesma from Pampanga.

To address this concern, the Landbank of the Philippines offers loans for hog growers, allocating P8 billion for this purpose. However, these loans are available to cooperatives, farmer's associations, and small-to-medium businesses,

not individual farmers. Borrowers may receive up to 80 percent of the project cost with repayment periods ranging from one to five years.

Some borrowers have used Landbank loans to construct biosecurity-equipped buildings, support facilities, manure lagoons, waste water treatment facilities, and to purchase young female hogs for breeding.

Awaiting vaccines

Despite these efforts, however, farmers like Ledesma remain skeptical. He prefers to wait for a vaccine before reinvesting.

"The government says there will be a vaccine by the end of the year. I'll wait," said Ledesma.

The Department of Agriculture has announced that two companies – one Vietnamese and one American – are seeking regulatory approval for their vaccines from the Food and Drug Administration. Two other firms from Vietnam and Thailand have expressed intentions to apply for authorization.

Once vaccines have been proven effective, Ledesma says it is better time for the Philippine to set another record for more pork dishes.

"We Filipinos love pork. I, for one, miss eating lechon baboy damo. But I think that with the threat of ASF still here, we have to be extra careful," he said.

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Fashion shows to train spotlight on fabric from bamboo, banana

By MANUEL T. CAYON
X@awimailbox

DAVAO City—Fabric from banana and bamboo is the star of the promotional fashion shows being organized by Mindanao design artists and the Department of Science and Technology to promote artisanal weaving for the fashion industry.

The Department of Science and Technology-Philippine Textile Research Institute (DOST-PTRI) said the spotlight must be trained on the rich tapestry of local fabrics to promote sustainable fashion.

The agency announced that it joined forces with the Davao Fashion Design Council Foundation Inc. (DFDCFI) to mount a charity fashion event in September. DOST said smaller shows will be held every now and then as precursor to the main event.

The DOST-PTRI said the charity fashion show is dubbed the

Stellar Fashion Gala, which will “celebrate the craftsmanship of Filipino weavers while supporting marginalized communities.”

“One of the main highlights of the gala will be showcasing fabrics made from bamboo and banana fibers, underscoring Davao’s potential as a major producer in this aspect.”

As part of efforts to drum up interest in the September event, a mini fashion show was stage at Discovery Samal, an upscale resort.

Organizers presented pieces in the fashion show made from pineapple-blended fabric and designed by members of the DFDCFI. “This partnership promotes homegrown sustainable fashion and lifestyle choices, emphasizing indigenous weaves and Philippine textile fibers.”

Emi Englis, president of DFDCFI, expressed enthusiasm about the collaboration and said there will be a special segment in the gala that will

be dedicated to the bamboo fabric which will be one of the main highlights of the entire gala. This is also a part of the initiatives under the bloom or Beyond the Loom project, which aims to revitalize artisanal weaving traditions while providing opportunities for local artisans and designers.

Dr. Julius Leaño Jr., PTRI director, said the collaboration between industry and government brings innovation to a holistic approach “that integrates farmers, weavers, designers, and consumers into the textile value chain.”

“As the fashion industry increasingly embraces eco-conscious practices, events like the Stellar Fashion Gala will showcase the potential of Philippine textiles in shaping a more sustainable future.”

Halal certification

MEANWHILE, the DOST-11 disclosed that it recently partnered

with Blue Lotus Hotel in Davao City to pursue halal certification of the hotel in a Memorandum of Understanding.

The MOU would include cooperation between DOST-11 and Lotus Hotel in developing a Halal Assurance System manual, organizing halal-related activities such as training, seminars, and workshops, conducting halal verification laboratory testing, facilitating the application process for halal certification, promoting collaboration, and exploring other avenues of cooperation as mutually agreed upon by both parties.

“This collaboration is one of the many steps we are taking towards enhancing the Halal industry in the Philippines. By working together to attain Halal certification, we aim to not only meet international standards but also tap into the economic opportunities presented by the global Halal market,” said DOST-11 Regional Director Anthony Sales.

He said DOST-11 would implement the Halal Research Ecosystem for Development and Innovation Program in Support of the Philippine Tourism Industry.



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CZECH-PHL AGRIBIZ FORUM. The Czech Chamber of Commerce and the Philippine Chamber of Commerce and Industry (PCCI), in partnership with the Czech Embassy in Manila and the Czech Republic Ministry of Agriculture recently held the Czech-Philippine Agribusiness Forum at Fairmont Hotel in Makati City on Thursday, March 21, 2024. Czech Minister of Agriculture Marek Výbrorný, accompanied by a business delegation composed of 40 representatives, emphasized his commitment to enhance mutual trade and economic relations in the agriculture and food industry sectors and foster stronger partnership between the universities and research institutions in the Czech Republic and the Philippines. Photo shows Czech Republic Ambassador to the Philippines Karel Hejč (left), Czech Chamber of Commerce vice president Jana Havrdova (2nd from left), and Czech Minister of Agriculture Marek Výbrorný (center) with PCCI honorary chair and treasurer/ senior adviser Sergio Ortiz Luis Jr. (right), who's also president of Philexport and ECOP, and PCCI VP for regional affairs and membership Ma. Alegria Sibal Limjoco (2nd from right).

IRRI, Singapore firm forge partnership



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NUEVA ECIJA: A groundbreaking partnership between a Singaporean-based renewable energy company and the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) has been forged.

The collaboration aims to undertake research to understand and quantify medium- to long-term effects of biochar on soil organic carbon and greenhouse gas emissions in rice systems.

In a bid to transform the rural landscape toward sustainability and low carbon footprint, Nueva Ecija Gov. Aurelio Umali has tapped Alcom Carbon Markets Philippines, a subsidiary of Alcom Pte Ltd., to initiate Project NuevaChar.

The project will focus on biochar production using rice husks, or "ipa," which are often disposed of through harmful burning practices or left to decompose, contributing to environmental degradation.

Biochar, a solid material derived from biomass conversion in oxygen-limited conditions, is recognized as an environmentally friendly soil amendment.

"During the burning process, we can expect that elemental components of the rice husks are converted into gases that enter the atmosphere," said Claro Torres, chief agriculturist of Alcom Carbon Markets Philippines.

"With complete burning, you release carbon dioxide, one of the greenhouse gases that contributes to heating of the atmosphere leading to climate change."

In a recent development, Umali led the 27 municipalities and five cities of Nueva Ecija as pilot areas for biochar application, with farmers observing significant improvements in crop yield and soil health.

Alcom Carbon Markets Philippines advocates for the utilization of biochar not only in rice cultivation but also in high-value crops such as onions, sugarcane and calamansi (Philippine lime). Biochar has demonstrated effectiveness in mitigating heavy metal toxicity, enhancing water retention, and improving soil permeability and aeration.

— the world's leading crediting platform for engineered carbon removal — the biochar processing plant, situated in Barangay Singalat, Palayan City, Nueva Ecija, stands as a testament to the commitment to sustainable agricultural practices. This is a first in the Philippines and Southeast Asia.

Rodeo Nuñez Jr., managing director of Alcom Carbon Markets Philippines, emphasized the partnership's focus on the study and research of biochar as an amendment improving rice production for soil health and outcomes toward low carbon systems.

Nuñez added that the whole world will gain valuable insights from different research projects of IRRI in the use of biochar for sustainable agricultural systems.

Alcom Carbon Markets Philippines has solidified its collaboration with IRRI through a memorandum of understanding (MoU) signed on Feb. 27, 2024.

This partnership, facilitated by Prateek Tiwari, Alcom's founder and president, and Bas Bouman, IRRI's research director on sustainable impact, underscores a shared commitment to Sustainable Agricultural Innovation and Community Engagement (Saice).

Ando Radanielson, senior scientist at IRRI, highlighted the significance of the MoU that aligns with Alcom's business model of developing more biochar production plants in the Philippines.

Virender Kuman, Saice deputy head, also cited the public-private partnership in addressing climate change issues and improving the lives of the Filipino farmer.

Tiwari, meanwhile, expressed gratitude to Umali for the joint venture partnership that paved the way for the biochar production facility in Nueva Ecija, which allowed the collaboration with IRRI.

"Project NuevaChar has a mission of protecting the environment from global warming and climate change," Nuñez said.



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Farmers urged to be innovative entrepreneurs

THE Philippine government-hosted Southeast Asian Regional Center for Graduate Study and Research in Agriculture (Searca) urged Filipino farmers to become innovative agricultural entrepreneurs.

Searca Director Glenn Gregorio said that based on the dynamics of agriculture in Southeast Asia, he is advocating for a shift from traditional practices to systemic and integrated innovations, and "urging Filipino farmers to become more innovative agricultural entrepreneurs."

He also noted how the ever-changing agricultural landscape caused by the Fourth Industrial Revolution led to a paradigm shift in agricultural education.

"In the future, there will be

a greater emphasis on training students in using advanced technologies, such as precision agriculture systems, drones, robotics and data analytics focusing on optimizing crop yields, predicting weather patterns, and managing pests and diseases," Gregorio explained.

He added that these technologies can help farmers increase crop yields, reduce waste and labor, and improve profitability.

Gregorio said students must be adept in applying sustainable farming practices and be aware of consumer trends.

"They must understand environmental issues like climate change, soil erosion and water usage, and learn how to implement solutions to combat these problems," he said.

Gregorio emphasized those pointers in his keynote address during the 1st International Conference on Agricultural Sciences and Technology (Icast) 2024 held from March 13-15, 2024 at the Royce Hotel in Clark, Angeles City.

Icast 2024 was spearheaded by the Philippine Association of Agriculturists in Region 3-Tamarind Chapter and the Pampanga Agricultural State University under the guidance of their presidents, Hermogenes Paguia and Anita David, respectively.

Anchored on the theme "Digitally Sustaining Our Future: Exploring the Application of Emerging Technologies for Food Security and Sustainability," Searca, along with the

Asian Association of Agricultural Colleges and Universities and the Sustainable Agriculture Food and Energy or Safe Network, served as conference co-organizers.

The conference showcased productive discussions and exchanges on the benefits of smart farming technologies and innovations, circular economy, agribusiness, and agricultural extension and development.

During the event, Gregorio introduced Searca's initiatives to promote technology adoption, including the Innovation Olympics 2.0, an agri hackathon, where young innovators developed solutions to the challenges faced by urban and rural smallholder vegetable farmers.

LEANDER C. DOMINGO



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Bill seeks to boost local corn industry

A BILL filed at the Senate can enhance the competitiveness and facilitate the expansion of the local corn industry.

Sen. Cynthia Villar, who authored Senate Bill (SB) 2625, said that it is imperative for the government to also bolster the corn industry since it plays a pivotal role in sustaining the livestock and poultry industries.

Livestock feed depends on inputs like corn, wheat and soya, Villar said in her sponsorship of the bill under Committee Report 246, or "An Act to Develop the Philippine Corn Industry."

"About 40 percent to 60 percent of animal feed consists of yellow corn," she added.

The Philippines has a deficit of 3 to 5 million metric tons of corn annually.

In 2023, the combined corn-livestock-poultry 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.

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

Villar said SB 2625 provides for the creation of the Corn Competitiveness Enhancement Fund, 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.

"We propose that 80 percent of the Corn Fund shall be utilized for yellow corn, and 20 percent of the fund to white corn development and other Indigenous corn varieties," she said.

Villar said the Philippines is still lagging in yellow corn production, ranking eighth among its neighbors in Asia.

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OUTSTANDING WOMAN Sheila Maglines, a farmer from Barangay Nong-nong, Butuan City, has been named Caraga's 2023 Most Outstanding Rural Woman. She was awarded by the Regional Gender and Development Committee of Caraga as part of this year's celebration of National Women's Month. She is the owner of the Guia Integrated Farm and chairman of the Nongnong Farmers Association that has 50 active members, of which 38 are women. PIA PHOTO



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Iloilo to disperse swine to help farmers cope with El Niño

ILOILO City--The provincial government has allocated P9 million for swine dispersal as a response to El Niño, initially targeting 15 municipalities situated in areas not affected by the African swine fever (ASF).

"We want to have a program that is El Niño-oriented. The assistance, instead of farm inputs, we will disperse animals that are not too dependent on the rain and the like," Iloilo Governor Arthur Defensor Jr.

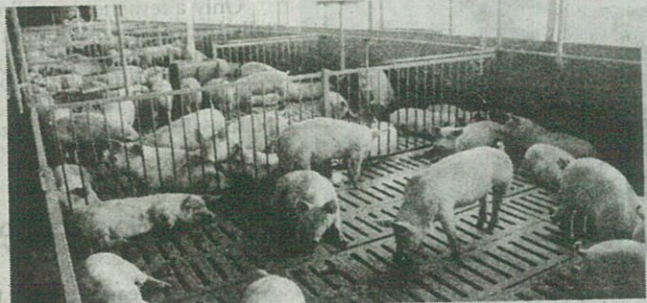
said in a press conference on Tuesday.

Defensor said it is another adjustment of the provincial government, aside from the existing program in agriculture.

"The swine approach is an adjustment. We turn to the animal industry," he added.

The scheme is also one way of helping the swine industry increase its inventory amid the ASF.

The P9-million budget cov-



ers the P6.93 million for the purchase of swine and P2.07 million for feeds.

"Our projection is until May. We will continue to implement

our measures and extend as much as we can," he added.

PNA

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Wheat futures fall

CANBERRA- Chicago Board of Trade (CBOT) wheat futures fell on Wednesday, as high crop ratings and favorable weather boosted hopes for US yields and plentiful Russian supply diminished demand for US exports.

Soybeans were little changed and corn rose slightly.

The most-active wheat contract on the Chicago Board of Trade (CBOT) was down 0.6 percent at \$5.42 a bushel.

CBOT soybeans were flat at

\$11.73-1/2 a bushel and corn climbed 0.3 percent to \$4.27-3/4 a bushel.

All three contracts hit their lowest levels since 2020 in recent months amid ample supply, and speculators are betting prices will fall further.

"It's hard to see a bullish picture for wheat," said Commonwealth Bank analyst Dennis Voznesenski.

"Farmers all around the world have a lot of grain on farm and we're not even at mid-year harvest." - *Reuters*



How tech is tackling crop pollination

TWO WELLS, Australia/MERU NATIONAL PARK, Kenya — In towering glasshouses at a tomato farm in South Australia, everything from the temperature to the ultraviolet radiation levels is tightly controlled. But despite the farm's scientific approach, pollinating the crops can still be hit or miss.

The Perfection Fresh farm in Two Wells currently relies on workers who zip between the rows of vines on trolleys, tapping strings tied to the frames to gently shake the plants so pollen drops onto the stigmas to ensure pollination — or so they hope.

"It is largely a manual process, and this is a challenge," said Troy Topp, general manager at Perfection Two Wells. "Eight years into this job, I'm still trying to find the most effective way to pollinate."

With about 190 million tons produced annually, tomatoes are among the world's most valuable crops, and are increasingly grown in protected environments as farmers face more extreme weather linked to climate change, pests and land shortages.

But pollination is a big challenge in covered environments such as glasshouses, where bees are not as effective, and mechanical methods such as tapping, brushing by hand, or using blowers and vibrating devices are labor-intensive and unreliable, growers say.

So Perfection Fresh, one of Australia's largest tomato producers, is trying out a new technology — drones.

Turbulence from the drones' propellers helps to maximise the vibration of the flower's reproductive parts and disperse the pollen — leading to higher crop yields.

"Drones can solve challenges with labor availability, and be quicker and more consistent. Together with pollination, the drones can also be used for crop forecasting and disease monitoring," Mr. Topp told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

ALTERNATIVE TO NATURE?

As nature losses grow and many species decline globally, some researchers are investigating whether tech solutions like drones could help fill the gap, and protect global food systems.

Agriculture is among the top users of drones worldwide.

Their growing use in pollination — both in covered farming and in fields — is driven by declines in bee populations because of warmer temperatures, pesticide use, diminishing habitats and other human impacts.

Honeybees struggle in covered environments because they can become disorientated, and in Australia, which has no native bumblebees, the need for different types of pollinators is even more pressing, said Katja Hogendoorn, a research fellow at the University of Adelaide.

"We can do a lot with technology, and drones are a viable option for pollination," said Ms. Hogendoorn, who studies native bees and pollination.

"We can't solve for every risk with technology, but if drones can be used for mitigating risk in pollination, why not," she said, warning that widespread drone use might allow the global horticultural industry to resume insecticide use.

But technology is often a poor replacement for the diverse benefits of natural systems, others warn.

Honeybees in Kenya, for instance, provide not just pollination services but an additional income from honey harvesting for farmers who increasingly lose crops to more extreme weather.

And in a country where human settlements are encroaching on traditional wildlife habitats — pushing elephants to raid and destroy farms, bees are being harnessed as "living fences" to protect crops by keeping the animals at bay.

"Drones cannot perform all the duties that the bees are doing in the environment, they can't compete to that level," said Newton

Simiyu, a project manager at the Born Free Foundation, the conservation charity that first developed the beehive fences.

FARMERS TURN TO DRONES, AI

The trend towards data-based precision agriculture — such as the use of drones or other tools based on artificial intelligence (AI) — is driven by demographic changes, technological advances and climate change impacts on productivity, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) says.

For Siddharth Jadhav, an engineer who researched drones in Singapore, their use in aerodynamically controlled pollination — using the drone's downward draft to enable pollen dispersal — is a logical application.

They are particularly suited for self-pollinating crops such as strawberries and tomatoes, said Mr. Jadhav, who is founder and chief executive of Singapore-based tech firm Polybee, which uses off-the-shelf mini drones and its own software applications.

To be effective, the technology needs to be "robust and scalable, and easy enough for farm workers to use with minimal training," Siddharth Jadhav said.

After promising experiments in vertical farms in Singapore, Australia's Hort Innovation — a horticulture non-profit — funded a year-long trial of Polybee's drones to pollinate strawberries and tomatoes in covered farms.

The trial, which concluded last year, showed "drones' effectiveness in pollinating tomatoes in glasshouses, setting the stage for further exploration and investment," said Brett Fifield, Hort Innovation's CEO.

After the trial at Perfection Fresh, two of Polybee's drones — named Maverick and Goose after characters from the *Top Gun* film — now cover 10 rows of tomatoes. A single battery charge lasts about 40 minutes, enough to cover two rows.



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The drones, which measure about 38 cm (15 inches) diagonally, hover over the plants at a fixed speed, covering one side of the row first, and the other side on the return journey.

Their downward draft loosens the pollen more efficiently and consistently than blowers or tapping, Mr. Topp said. Reducing workers' interactions with the plants can also minimise the risk of disease, he added.

"We're not the first to try and solve pollination in glasshouses, but other methods have failed because they're challenging to use, or consume too much labor and time, and are not precise," said Mr. Jadhav, adding that the drones have also been tested to pollinate strawberries in Britain.

"Drones are an elegant way to solve the problem — you just program them, and it's a big risk off the table for growers who have so many other risks to deal with," he added.

NOT ACCESSIBLE TO ALL

More than a third of the world's food production depends on bees. Yet bees and other pollinators are declining worldwide in abundance and diversity, according to the FAO, with rising temperatures and other climate change impacts linked to the decline.

That has made alternative pollination methods all the more urgent.

Besides Polybee, others that are experimenting with drones and robots for pollination include California-based Dropcopter that dispenses pollen in almond, apple and cherry orchards, and Harvard University's robobees that mimic the action of bees.

At Perfection Fresh the aim is to move fully to drone pollination and to use the drones' high-resolution cameras to gather data for yield forecasting with AI.

"Solving pollination is not enough. Forecasting yield helps farmers get better prices, and

also ensure better food security because accurate data is crucial for developing more resilient varieties," Mr. Jadhav said.

Because of these benefits, the technology is also relevant in poorer countries, though cost is a barrier.

"The technology is not accessible to all, just to large companies and investors. Therein lies a threat," said Ms. Hogendoorn.

Meanwhile, from Azerbaijan to Venezuela, attempts are underway to encourage beekeeping to preserve local bees — whose benefits to farmers sometimes go far beyond pollination.

BENEFITS OF BEES

In the rural heartlands of central Kenya, farmers living on the edge of the Meru National Park are using honeybees to combat a decades-old problem — marauding elephants that wreak havoc on their crops, sometimes even causing villagers' deaths and prompting retaliations.

From 2000 to 2020, 1,160 elephants were killed with causes being attributed to either self-defense, or retaliatory killings, data from the ministry of tourism, wildlife and heritage shows.

But over the past year, a more harmonious solution appears to have emerged: rows of beehives are strung together on wires, forming a barrier around fields. When an elephant tries to breach the wire, it triggers the hives, sending the bees buzzing into action and prompting the elephants to flee.

"Now, the elephants keep their distance, and our crops are thriving," he said at his farm, located 320 km (200 miles) from the capital, Nairobi.

Conservationists from the Born Free Foundation, which began the initiative in January last year, say although the project is still in its initial stages, the results have been promising. — **Reuters**



Bird flu spooks meat, milk traders as virus hits dairy cows

A VIRUS that has killed millions of birds is spreading among US dairy cows, raising concerns that the outbreak may hurt demand for dairy and beef.

While the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) has said there's little safety risk, the outbreak is unsettling the industry, with cattle and milk prices taking a hit. There's concern some shoppers will balk at drinking milk or eating beef.

"Risks to consumer demand for dairy are prevalent in conversations," StoneX Group Inc. analyst Dave Kurzawski said in a note to clients. He added that while there are "big risks on the table," the impact of the illness on buyer behavior is unclear.

Bird flu has been confirmed in dairy cows across several states, with the USDA saying Monday it has been found in New Mexico and five additional herds in Texas. The virus has even infected a person in Texas, while the biggest US egg producer idled a plant after the virus was found in the facility.

The infection of cows by the same virus

strain that emerged in Europe in 2020—and has since caused an unprecedented number of deaths in wild birds and poultry globally—is also raising concerns on the supply side.

Infected Texas dairy cattle are experiencing decreased lactation and low appetite, with older cows more likely to be severely impacted. Some herds have reported pneumonia and clinical mastitis—an inflammatory disease—the Texas Animal Health Commission said by email. Most animals seem to recover in as many as two weeks with supported care, albeit with reduced milk production levels.

Some cows may never see their milk production recover to pre-infection levels, in which case they might be culled, according to a HighGround Dairy report Monday. "The longer-term impact on supply is not entirely clear, as farmers are trying to maintain herd inventories in a time of tight cattle supplies," it said.

For an individual farmer who has already been struggling with low prices and low margins, even a small amount of

lost production adds another challenge, according to Alan Bjerga, executive vice president of communications and industry relations at the National Milk Producers Federation. But he added that the overall impact to the industry should be mild.

"When you consider the tiny number of farms with confirmed illnesses, the limited number of cows affected, the limit of that sickness to only older animals, and the fact that cows that become ill eventually recover to produce milk again," the impact on the milk supply is minuscule, he said.

While no cases have been found in beef herds so far, cattle futures fell 2.7 percent on Monday following the confirmation of a person in Texas had been affected. The market trimmed some losses on Tuesday.

The person in Texas most likely contracted bird flu after being exposed to infected dairy cows, public health officials said. The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said the risk to the general population remains low.

"The market has made a huge leap here into the idea that beef demand is definitely going to be severely impacted by bird flu," Dennis Smith, an analyst at Archer Financial Services Inc., said in an interview.

Bloomberg News