

CLIPPINGS FOR TODAY, APRIL 08, 2024

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THE PHILIPPINE STAR

DA expects record-high palay harvest this year despite El Niño

MANILA BULLETIN

Inflation hits poorest households; rising rice, food prices must be checked

BUSINESS WORLD

Rice imports top 1 million MT in late March

BUSINESS MIRROR

DA: Deep piers for large ships will cut cost of logistics, inputs

ABANTE

Pensiyon para sa ating mga magsasaka, mangingisda

PEOPLE'S JOURNAL

DA sees stable fish supply

B. DA FAMILY

PHILIPPINE DAILY INQUIRER

Bacolod finds ways to ease water shortage amid El Niño

THE PHILIPPINE STAR

DA: P20/Kilo rice remains a gov't aspiration

MANILA BULLETIN

NIA gets bulk of gov't subsidies in Feb.

More mango exports to Australia

THE MANILA TIMES

El Niño crop damage shoots up to P2.63B

MALAYA BUSINESS INSIGHT

Subsidies to GOCCs up 21%

BUSINESS WORLD

PhilRice eyes inbred rice yields of MT/ha

PEOPLE'S JOURNAL

DA pushing to lower cost of producing rice

Gov't not planning price cap on rice

Farming could be more fallback for retirees

C. AGRI-RELATED STORY

MANILA STANDARD

Photo: Sustainable fibers

DBM releases P4.5B to cover crop insurance

Gov't watches impact of El Niño, La Niña on prices

PH dispatches second batch of mangoes to Australia

Photo: Salt Industry

THE PHILIPPINE STAR
DBM releases P900-M crop insurance funding

MANILA BULLETEREN
Photo: Supplemental Harvest

THE MANILA TIMES
70 hog raisers affected by ASF given assistance
Negros Occidental wants to host 2027 Organic World Congress
PH makes second mango shipment to Australia
Editorial: Providing the momentum for salt industry's comeback

MALAYA BUSINESS INSIGHT
DBM releases Q1 crop insurance fund

BUSINESS WORLD
Second mango shipment due for delivery to Australia this month
Funding approved for first quarter crop insurance

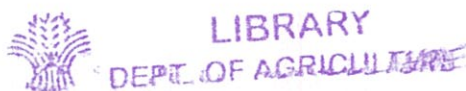
BUSINESS MIRROR
PHL poised to export more mangoes to Australia – DTI
Local planters sell produce via Walter Mart program
Brace for EU deforestation law, exporters told

PEOPLE'S JOURNAL
Avocados help lower risk of CVD

D. FOREIGN STORY

MALAYA BUSINESS INSIGHT
Soy grains, corn falls
EU wheat rises as Black Sea risks spur short-covering

BUSINESS MIRROR
World Food prices higher in March- FAO report



DA expects record-high palay harvest this year despite El Niño

By JASPER EMMANUEL ARCALAS

The Philippines may produce a record-high volume of palay or unmilled rice this year of almost 21 million metric tons (MT) despite threats of El Niño on local farms, estimates from the Department of Agriculture showed.

The DA projected that palay output could reach 20.881 million MT this year, four percent more than the 20.059 million MT last year, based on its outlook as of March 21.

The DA's latest outlook showed that palay output could reach 7.667 million MT in the first half and 7.976 million MT in the second half.

The estimated increase in overall palay production this year is about 880,000 MT, which translates to almost 540,000 MT additional rice stocks for the country.

In rice terms, the full-year palay production target of the government is equivalent to 13.656 million MT, according to documents obtained by **The STAR**.

The DA has been banking on the expanded use of high-quality rice seeds, better application of fertilizers and lower post-harvest losses in boosting domestic rice production.

Based on its estimates, the DA is looking at a total rice supply this year of about 16.745 million MT, of which 2.027 million MT were carry-over stocks from last year.

The projected total rice supply by the DA only includes an actual import volume of around 1.061 million MT so far.

But based on its estimates, the total rice supply is sufficient to meet the country's total requirement even if the country will not import rice in the remaining quarters.

The DA puts the country's total rice requirement at 15.643 million MT, with 13.973 million MT for human consumption.

Given this situation, the country is expected to end the year with 1.101 million

MT rice stocks, good to last for at least 29 days, based on the DA's computations.

The DA earlier disclosed that the country has to keep a 50-day buffer stock or about 1.85 million MT of rice to ensure food security and stable grain prices.

The country's rice production "seems to be OK" despite the presence of El Niño this year, Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. recently said.

Turn to B4

DA expects From B1

Agriculture officials have noted that the department's timely water management interventions mitigated the ill effects of El Niño on rice farms.

Furthermore, the DA said El Niño happened when farmers were already harvesting, sparing them from incurring losses due to the drier weather.

Since local rice production could increase this year, Tiu Laurel pointed out that the country's total rice imports this year may not hit the 4.1 million MT projection by the United States Department of

Agriculture (USDA).

Tiu Laurel said that USDA's rice import projection for the Philippines is a "worst-case scenario."

He noted that El Niño may continue to impact local rice production in the second quarter but expected that harvest would be "okay" after the dry season.

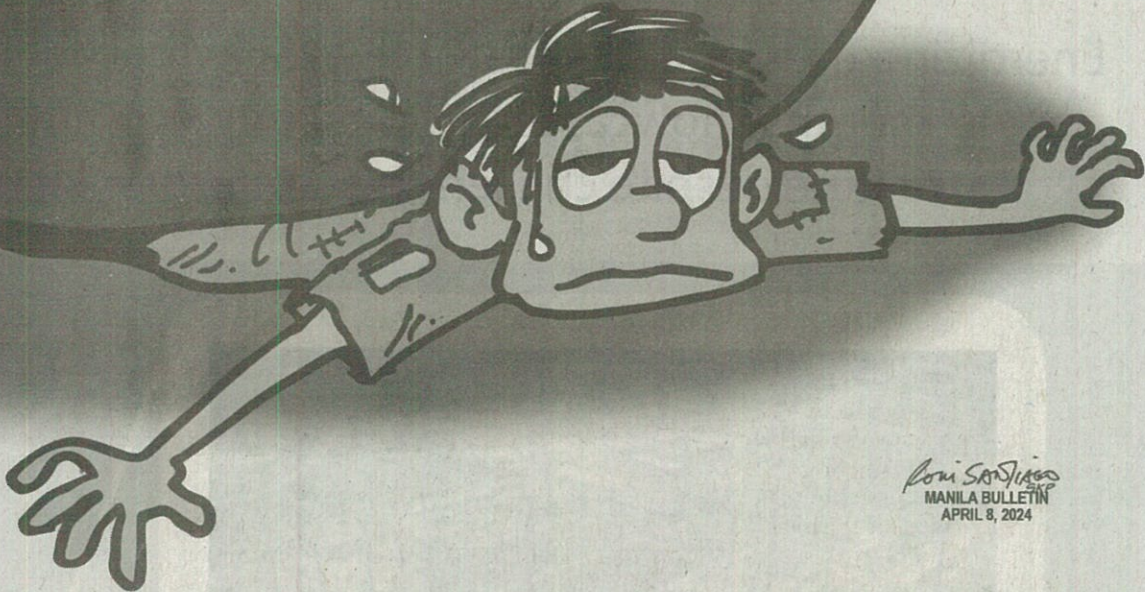
"We are hoping (that) there is an increase in production of rice from the previous year this 2024," Tiu Laurel said.

Last month, the Philippine Statistics Authority projected that the country's first quarter palay output would grow slightly to 4.83 million MT from 4.78 million MT last year.





INFLATION



Loni Sardiñas
MANILA BULLETIN
APRIL 8, 2024

Inflation hits poorest households; rising rice, food prices must be checked

Inflation in March increased by 3.7 percent last week, up from 3.3 percent in February, the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) reported last April 5. According to a summary table prepared by the Presidential Communications Office, rice accounts for 2.2 percent or 59 percent of this increase.

Inflation reduces purchasing power, a reality that hits poorer households harder than it affects those in higher-income brackets.

Here's a more detailed analysis from the PSA on the impact of inflation on the bottom 30 percent of all households: "The uptrend in the food inflation was mainly due to the slower annual decrease in vegetables, tubers, plantains, cooking bananas and pulses at 5.4 percent during the month from 11.7 percent annual decrease in the February 2024. In addition, faster year-on-year increases were observed in the indices of cereals and cereal products, which includes rice, corn, flour, bread and other bakery products, pasta products, and other cereals, at 19.8 percent in March 2024 from 18.9 percent in the previous month, and meat and other parts of slaughtered land animals at 1.9 percent from 0.9 percent."

The year-on-year price of rice has increased by 24.4 percent, the fastest rate of increase since 2009, a period covering the Aquino III, Duterte and Marcos, Jr. administrations. The PSA has flagged that "since (the) price base for rice between January and July last year was lower, any increase in the price of the national staple could be magnified in the inflation print."

Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel

expects that "prices may stay elevated through September this year, due to concerns over El Niño's impact on global rice supply and heightened demand for the grain that, consequently, is keeping international prices high."

He has assured, however, that the country's rice supply is sufficient, such that relative price stability is realistically attainable. He cited the recent signing of a five-year rice supply agreement with Vietnam and the possibility of forging a similar arrangement with India. Nevertheless, he has warned against profiteers who might take advantage of the El Niño situation to hoard rice supply and create artificial price increases.

According to the PSA: "Rice has a weight of 8.87 percent in the consumer basket used to determine headline inflation and an even higher at 17.87 percent share in the spending of the bottom 30 percent of income households."

Pulse Asia's March 2024 survey reports that inflation is the Filipinos' top and most urgent concern, according to 70 percent of all respondents. This has been the prevailing sentiment since a similar survey was conducted last December 2023. Clearly, this has been brought on by the continuing increases in the prices of rice and other staple food items, that reduces the overall purchasing power of those who are struggling in the bottom rung of the economic pyramid.

Government is expected to provide them with social safety nets, and to enable them to live more comfortably — assured of sufficiency in their basic, day-to-day needs.



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Rice imports top 1 million MT in late March

PHILIPPINE rice imports have amounted to 1.07 million metric tons (MT) as of late March, according to the Bureau of Plant Industry (BPI).

Rice shipments during the period were up 33% from 2023's first quarter total.

Shipments between March 1 and 27 amounted to 304,407.18 MT.

The US Department of Agriculture (USDA) has estimated that Philippine rice imports would increase to 4 million

MT this year. The estimate, if borne out, would be 11.7% higher than the 3.58 million MT imported in 2023.

However, the Department of Agriculture (DA) said that the imports are unlikely to hit USDA forecast levels due to better-than-expected domestic production. The DA is targeting a palay (unmilled rice) harvest at above 20 million MT.

Agriculture Secretary Francisco P. Tiu Laurel, Jr. said that the estimated import

number was a "worst-case scenario" in the event that domestic rice output proves to be severely affected by El Niño.

The BPI reported that Vietnam remained the country's top supplier of rice as of late March, accounting for 59.6% of all imports or 638,989.35 MT.

In January, the Philippine and Vietnam signed a memorandum of understanding giving the Philippines a quota of 1.5 million to 2 million MT of rice annually for five years.

Thailand supplied 248,618.43 MT during the period, or 23.2% of the total, followed by Pakistan with 119,278.5 MT or 11.1% of the total.

Other top sources of rice were Myanmar and China which shipped 58,060 and 3,900 MT of rice imports, respectively.

The government has also expressed interest in coming to a similar supply arrangement with Cambodia.

Rice shipments from Cambodia amounted to 1,620 MT in the year to date.

President Ferdinand R. Marcos, Jr. has said that such deals would improve supply at a time when the domestic crop is threatened by droughts and dry spells brought on by El Niño.

Agricultural damage and losses topped P2.63 billion with rice and corn as the most affected crops, the DA reported.

— **Adrian H. Halili**



DA: Deep piers for large ships will cut cost of logistics, inputs

By JOVEE MARIE N. DELA CRUZ
X@joveemarie

THE Department of Agriculture (DA) is pushing for the construction of deep piers designed for large ships to reduce the cost of transporting farm inputs like fertilizers.

The agency said this could lead to a reduction in rice production cost and help planters boost their output.

"Our primary focus remains on elevating production levels and lowering production costs in rice cultivation, primarily through mechanization and reducing postharvest losses, as emphasized by Secretary [Francisco] Tiu Laurel," Agriculture Assistant Secretary Arnel De Mesa said in a Palace statement following a news forum last Saturday.

De Mesa said streamlining the logistics of farm inputs will enhance the competitiveness of the

country's rice production.

Highlighting logistical challenges, De Mesa noted the cost implications of transporting fertilizers from Bataan to Mindoro via multiple transfers.

He said the establishment of deep piers capable of accommodating larger vessels could significantly reduce transportation costs by enabling direct shipment, potentially lowering input prices by P15 to P20 per unit.

In March, the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) reported that rice inflation accelerated to 24.4 percent, which compares with the 24.6 percent posted in February 2009. The highest rice price increase was recorded in July 2008 when it rose by 36.4 percent.

De Mesa said Vietnam produces rice at around P6 per kilo, compared with the P12 to P14 per kilo production cost in the Philippines.

"Labor is the major cost component in producing rice, and labor costs are at a premium in the Philippines," the DA official said.

He said the Rice Tariffication Law was passed to reduce the labor cost component of producing rice.

The law allocates P10 billion annually for the Rice Competitiveness Enhancement Fund (RCEF). Half of this or P5 billion is earmarked for farm mechanization.

Aside from improving logistics, the DA is also focusing on enhancing the distribution system, as well as post-harvest facilities to make the country's agriculture sector more competitive.

According to De Mesa, the agency is targeting to raise rice productivity, noting that currently, the national average is only 4.1 metric tons per hectare.

Nueva Ecija, the country's

rice granary, produces 6 to 8 metric tons per hectare. He said there are many areas in the country that are producing 3 to 4 metric tons per hectare because of the limited use of high-yielding varieties, irrigation, and fertilizer due to high input costs.

De Mesa said the DA is exerting "extra effort" to enhance rice production in the Philippines while reducing costs to alleviate the impact of global inflation on both food and non-food items, particularly rice.

He acknowledged that current post-harvest losses of around 15 to 20 percent, particularly during the drying and milling stages, attributed to the diverse varieties of rice being cultivated.

There are more than 18 existing varieties of rice per region, which the DA plans to cut down to just 2 or 3 for every region to ensure higher milling recovery.



LRAY VILLAFUERTE

Pensiyon para sa ating mga magsasaka, mangingisda

Sa panahon ngayon na nagsisitaasan ang presyo ng mga bilihin lalo na ang presyo ng bigas, ay talaga namang napakahirap mag-budget lalo't kakarampot lamang ang kita.

Gaya halimbawa sa mga kapatid nating magsasaka, na kahit pa man mataas ang presyo ng bigas sa merkado eh hindi naman sila ang talagang kumikita nang malaki kundi ang mga traders o mga mamumuhunan.

Ito'y halintulad ng naging problema noon sa Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program o CARP kung saan dahil maliit ang tinataniman ng ating mga magsasaka, nasa 1-2 hectares lamang, eh tila 'di ito sapat kumita para sa maliit na magsasaka.

Alam naman natin at kahit hindi aminin, na para kumita nang malaki sa pagtatanim at pagpapalakas ng ani ng palay ay kinakailangan 'yung tinatawag na 'corporate farming.'

Kapag corporate farming kasi ay mas makakabili ng mga pataba at iba pang mga kailangan sa pagsasaka sa mas murang halaga dahil nga maramihan o bulto-bulto ang pagbili rito. Kahit naman sa anong bilihin ay higit na mas mura kapag maramihan ang binibili.

Bukod dito, nagiging mas madali at mabilis din ang proseso ng pagtatanim dahil may mga makinaryang magagamit gaya ng traktora at iba pa.

Sa ganitong sitwasyon nakakapag-alala na mahina pa rin ang kita ng mga magsasaka sa panahon na malalakas pa ang kanilang pangangatawan. Mahina ang kanilang produksyon. Kaya papano pa kaya ang sitwasyon ng ating mga magsasaka sa kanilang pagtanda kung saan ay hirap na sila at hindi na kaya na makapagtanim. Papaano na?

Kaya naman naniniwala kaming napapanahon na para magkaroon na rin ng pensyon ang ating mga magsasaka.

Dahil na rin sa nakakabalising

senaryong ito, ang inyong lingkod ay may inihang panukala na bigyan ng pensyon ang mga magsasaka at pati mga mangingisda. Ito ay sa pamamagitan ng aming inihang House Bill (HB) No. 7963 na magmamandato sa Philippine Crop Insurance Corp. (PCIC) na bumalangkas ng kauna-unahang Agricultural Pension Fund (APF) para mabigyan ng mga benepisyo ang mga magsasaka at mangingisda sa sandaling sila'y magretiro.

Tayo nga ay nanawagan sa Kongreso na ipasa sa Second Regular Session ang ating HB 7963.

Sa ngayon po kasi ang ating mga agricultural workers tulad ng magsasaka at mangingisda ay hindi saklaw ng Social Security System (SSS) at anumang pension program ng gobyerno kaya tinatarget ng HB 7963 na makapagtatag ng tinatawag na Agricultural Pension Fund. Sa pamamagitan nito, ang mga agricultural worker ay bibigyan ng pension benefits pagsapit nila sa edad ng pagreretiro.

Dito po sa HB 7963 ay kasama natin sa may-akda si Bicol Saro Rep. Brian Raymund Yamsuan.

Ito pong HB 7963 ay kumikilala sa kahalagahan ng pagkakaroon ng komprehensibong social protection systems bilang mahalagang kalasag para maiwasan at maibsan ang kahirapan at hindi pagkapantay-pantay.

Ang HB 7963 ay ini-refer ng liderato ng Kamara sa Committee on government enterprises and privatization para mas mapag-aralan.

Ako po ay naniniwala na ang atin pong mga magsasaka at mangingisda ay mahalagang bahagi ng paglago ng ating bansa kaya naman nararapat sila na mapahalagahan ang kanilang kontribusyon sa lipunan sa pamamagitan ng pagbibigay sa kanila ng pensyon na magagamit nila para matugunan ang kanilang mga pangangailangan pagsapit ng kanilang retirement age.

Aatasan din ng panukalang batas na ito ang PCIC, na siyang state-run firm na konektado sa

Department of Agriculture (DA), upang tumayong implementing agency sa pagpapatupad ng mga probisyong nilalaman ng panukala.

Kabilang sa magiging trabaho ng PCIC ang pagbalangkas ng pension plan para sa agricultural pensioners; mangangasiwa at magi-invest ng APF para matiyak na masusustena ang pondo. Ito rin ang magdedetermina ng pamantayan sa pagiging karapat-dapat sa tulong ng mga kinaauukulang ahensya.

Sa loob ng 90 araw kapag ito'y naging batas, ang PCIC Board of Directors, sa pakikipagkoordinasyon sa DA Secretary at mga kinatawan ng grupo ng mga magsasaka at mangingisda ang bubuo ng kinakailangang implementing rules and regulations (IRR).

Nakasaad din sa panukalang aming inakda na anumang halaga ang kailanganin sa implementasyon ng mga probisyon ng batas ay magmumula sa pondo ng DA.

Baray sa datos ng Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA), merong 9.7 milyong agricultural workers noong 2019. Ang bilang na ito ay walang inaasahang pensyon sa kanilang pagtanda.

Hangad po ng inyong lingkod ang mabilisang pag-apruba ng Kongreso sa HB 7963 lalo na't mismong si Speaker Martin ang nagsabi matapos ratipikahan ng Kamara ang panukalang nagpapatawad sa P57.557 bilyong halaga ng utang ng may 610,054 magsasaka na kailangang suportahan ang ating mga masasaka upang mas maging produktibo sila at makamit ng bansa ang hinahangad na food security.

Sinabi rin po ni Speaker Martin na patuloy na maghahanap ang Kamara ng mga paraan upang mas pasiglahin ang ating sektor ng agrikultura.

Dahil dito, umaasa kaming hindi ipagkakait ng mga kasamahan naming mambabatas ang pagbibigay pensyon sa mga magsasaka at mangingisda. Hindi nila haaharain ang pagkakaroon ng pensyon ng mga kababayan nating matagal nang napabayaang pamahalaan.



DA sees stable fish supply

THE Department of Agriculture (DA) said it is projecting stable fish supply in the coming months following the department's implementation of necessary regulations to address overfishing and ensure the protection of the country's fish stocks.

"Maganda iyong projection natin, dahil ngayon March hanggang June ito ay open fishing season. Tinaon talaga ni Secretary Tui Laurel, iyong paglabas noong Memorandum Order No. 14 dito sa open fishing season para hindi maapektuhan iyong supply noong local," Agriculture Assistant Secretary Arnel de Mesa said in a news forum in Quezon City on Saturday.

"Iyong ipinagbawal sa MO 14 iyong Round scad o galunggong iyong bonito o tulingan at saka iyong mackerel o alumahan. Pero, may exemption doon. Exempted iyong mackerel doon sa pagbabawal, basta iyong darating o iyong i-import nila ay papabase doon sa sales nanaganap noong last year," he pointed out.

It was decided to have 10-percent additional volume to

ensure supply flexibility for fish intended for cannery or for mackerel processing, De Mesa said.

The agriculture official also said the stable fish supply in the past months was the result of good fish catch after allowing some period of stock replenishment.

"Siguro epekto na rin noong maganda iyong huli natin dahil iyong... mas importante kasi na nakakapahinga iyong dagateh," De Mesa explained as he commended the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) for its policies protecting fish stocks. Kasi iyong isang isda nangingitlog iyan ng marami eh, kahit 10 to 15 percent lang o 1 to 5 percent lang iyong mabuhay doon sa mga itlog na iyon, malaking bagay kasi milyon iyong iniitlog nila eh, so malaking bagay iyon para makarecover iyong ating fishery," he noted.

Among the major fish sources in the Philippines include the country's municipal waters, Sulu and Celebes Seas, and Visayan Sea, the DA official said. PCO



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Date: APR 08, 2024 Page: A8

Bacolod finds ways to ease water shortage amid El Niño

'Access to water is a basic right,' says Mayor Alfredo Abelardo Benitez as the city begins sending out supply tankers to parched communities

By **Carla Gomez**
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BACOLOD CITY—The city government here has decided to deliver potable water to communities and to engage in controlled burning, grass cutting, and cleanup activities to address the increasing grass fires and drying up of wells caused by the drought spawned by the El Niño phenomenon.

The mitigating measures were decided during a multi-agency coordination meeting on El Niño and La Niña weather phenomena convened by Bacolod Mayor Alfredo Abelardo Benitez at his office at the Bacolod City Government Center on Wednesday.

On April 2, at least 13 fires hit Bacolod, 10 of which were grass fires. There were also 205 fires reported in March, 130 of which were grass fires, the local fire department said.

Water shortages and grass fires were expected to continue to be experienced in this city with the El Niño phenomenon projected to persist until May, the participants were told.

And when the dry spell ends, the city will now have to brace for the onslaught of heavy rains with the growing probability of La Niña developing in June up to August, officials said.

Water tankers

Officials who attended the meeting agreed that at this

time, it was more important to address the drought-related issues, such as the mobilization of water tankers for household water supply and providing free water vouchers to residents faced with shortages.

The Department of Agriculture would also distribute drought-tolerant seeds to address food production concerns of local farmers.

"Bacolod City is fortifying its resilience against the challenges posed by El Niño," Benitez said during the meeting.

"To ensure every household has access, I pledge to mobilize 10 water tankers. Access to water is a basic right, and I will work tirelessly to ensure it is fulfilled for all our residents," he added.

Among the La Niña preparations discussed were drainage system maintenance, dredging, and cleanup drives to prevent flooding.

Preparedness plans have also been put in place to address potential health issues.

Consider cloud seeding anew

Negros Occidental officials, meanwhile, have asked asking the Bureau of Soils and Water Management (BSWM) to reconsider its decision not to hold cloud seeding operations in the province where at least P97 million worth of crops have been damaged due to prolonged dry spell.

Bacolod City, the economic capital but politically indepen-

dent from Negros Occidental, was not among those that sustained crop damage since it has no major agricultural fields.

"Cloud seeding would somehow help the drought hit crops in the province," said Gov. Eugenio Jose Lacson.

The BSWM has decided against cloud seeding due to lack of viable clouds and moisture in the province. Induced rains could also affect the 20,659 mango trees in fruit development in San Carlos City, Negros Occidental, and 2,752 trees in Guimaras province.

Lacson said he spoke to Department of Agriculture-Western Visayas Regional Director Dennis Arpia to ask if the recommendation against cloud

seeding could be reconsidered.

"Arpia's response was that the experts have already said that there are no seedable clouds," Lacson said.

The governor was hoping even for a light rain that could provide respite to farmers whose farms had been badly affected by the drought caused by the El Niño.

The drought has affected 2,585 farmers in 20 out of 31 local government units in Negros Occidental where P97,788,037 worth of crops have been damaged as of April 2.

Damage to rice crops was pegged at P93,050,227 and P4,737,809 to corn, said Provincial Agriculturist Dina Genzola. INQ



DA: P20/kilo rice remains a gov't aspiration

By **BELLA CARIASO**

President Marcos' election campaign pitch of P20 per kilo of rice remains an aspiration of the government, a **Department of Agriculture (DA)** official said.

"The P20 per kilo of rice is still the aspiration and goal of the department (even if) at present it is difficult to achieve," Agriculture Assistant Secretary and spokesman Arnel de Mesa said over the weekend.

Marcos campaigned partly on a platform of cutting rice prices to P20

a kilo during the 2022 presidential race. He later clarified that it was merely an "aspiration."

"Our plans and activities are geared toward reducing the cost to produce and for us to be competitive in the future. If our neighboring countries can bring down the cost of production, we will also do it," De Mesa added.

Based on Philippine Statistics Authority data, he said the spike in the retail price of rice has contributed largely to the increase in inflation.

"When I examined the data of the

PSA, the retail price of rice, especially for regular and well-milled from January to June, July last year ranged between P39 and P40 per kilo only. It started to increase in July, August when it reached P43 (per kilo) and P49 in September," De Mesa noted.

This contributed to a 23 percent increase in the retail price of the staple or P10 per kilo, he said.

"Imagine from P39 (per kilo) of March last year, it is now P49.50 (per kilo) or P10 increase," he added.

Based on the DA's monitoring of Metro Manila markets, the retail price

of local regular milled rice ranged between P46 and P53 per kilo; local well-milled rice, around P48 per kilo; local premium rice, between P52 and P60 per kilo; and local special rice, between P54 and P68 per kilo.

Imported regular rice ranged between P49 and P51 per kilo; imported well-milled rice, P50 and P55 per kilo; imported premium rice, between P54 and P63 per kilo; and imported special rice, between P56 and P65 per kilo.

The DA has no plan to impose a suggested retail price or price cap on the grains despite the increase in

costs, De Mesa said.

"We have no plan to have a price cap or SRP amid its impact in the long run. The retail price of rice (already) went down from P52 (per kilo) last month to P50, P49 (per kilo)," he said.

He admitted that the DA does not expect rice retail prices to go down.

"In terms of prices, we don't expect much movement because of the external shocks. For example, the farmgate price of palay is still high despite the harvest season. It cannot drive the continuous decline in the retail price of rice despite a slight drop," he noted.



NIA gets bulk of gov't subsidies in Feb.

By XANDER DAVE CEBALLOS

The amount of subsidy the Marcos administration extended to government-owned and controlled corporations (GOCCs) was raised to 35 percent in February, as the bulk of it went to the **National Irrigation Administration (NIA)**.

Based on the Bureau of the Treasury data, financial support extended to state-owned companies increased to ₱12.7 billion in February this year, up from ₱9.4 billion in the same month in 2023.

The GOCC that received a huge portion of the subsidy was NIA, getting ₱7 billion, or more than half of the total during the month as part of the efforts to mitigate the dry spell due to El Niño phenomenon.

Of the ₱5.768-trillion national budget this year, the government had set aside ₱4.3 billion for NIA

to fund irrigation projects.

Other major recipient of subsidy was the National Food Administration with ₱2.25 billion.

Moreover, the Social Housing Finance Corporation received ₱667 million subsidy along with the Philippine Heart Center with ₱303 million, Sugar Regulatory Administration with ₱284 million, and Small Business Corporation with ₱250 million.

In addition, Philippine Children's Medical Center, National Kidney and Transplant Institute, and National Privacy Commission all received ₱228 million, ₱207 million and ₱181 million financial support from the national government.

The February subsidies were also the year-to-date figure as no national government assistance were provided for GOCCs in the month of January.

The higher subsidy to GOCCs in February comes as the Marcos administration's budget shortfall dropped.

The national government incurred a ₱164.7-billion fiscal gap in August, up 55 percent from ₱106.4 billion last year.

One factor that increased the government's budget deficit was the faster public spending during the month as government expenditures rose by 22 percent to ₱318.2 billion.

Last year, subsidies extended to GOCCs cost the national government some ₱165.53 billion. This amount declined from the previous year's ₱200.41 billion.

The GOCCs that received substantial portions of the subsidy were Philippine Health Insurance Corp. and NIA, getting ₱50.7 billion and ₱40.7 billion, respectively.



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More mango exports to Australia

By KHRISCIELLE YALAO

The Philippines will export a second shipment of mangoes to Australia this month, the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) announced on April 6.

The initial shipment of 1,500 kilograms of Carabao mangoes was exported to Sydney and Perth, Australia in early September last year for the first time since 2013, according to the **Department of Agriculture (DA)**.

The DTI said the mango shipment to Australia will also be operated by its initial shipping partner Sydney-based logistics firm FastboxPH.

"The overwhelmingly positive response to our initial shipment last year has paved the way for a triumphant return of Philippine mangoes to Australian tables this April. We are steadfast in our commitment to making Philippine mangoes a household staple in Australia," said FastboxPH Managing Director Miguel Ripoll, noting the "surge in demand" of the fruits in the Australian market.

Trade Secretary Alfredo Pascual,



Philippine mangoes (Pixabay)

in a statement, remarked that the "successful export of our mangoes exemplifies the significant strides we're making in facilitating agricultural trade, which is pivotal for our economic agenda."

DTI's data indicated that trade volume between the Philippines and Australia surged by 20 percent to \$4.1 billion in 2023 from \$3.4 billion in 2022, which underscores the "vast potential for our products in the Australian market," Pascual added.

DTI's overseas arm Philippine Trade and Investment Center in Sydney (PTIC-Sydney) oversaw the promotion of Philippine products, especially agriculture goods, in Australia.

Philippine Ambassador to Australia Ma. Hellen B. De La Vega added that, "the Philippines and Australia share a strong commitment to fostering trade ties, and the arrival of

our mangoes signifies a delightful milestone in our partnership, especially as we celebrate Filipino Food Month in April."

The agency is working towards strengthening trade and investment ties with Australia. Last Feb. 14, the Philippines signed the Second Protocol of the ASEAN-Australia-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement (AANZFTA).

Upon entry into force of AANZFTA, "tariffs will be progressively reduced and eliminated for at least 90 percent of all tariff lines within specified timelines," including liberalized trade processes, protection of covered investments, and facilitation of movement of goods and persons.

Aside from the Philippines, parties to the AANZFTA are Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Myanmar, Singapore, Thailand, and Viet Nam.



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El Niño crop damage shoots up to P2.63B

AGRICULTURAL damage caused by the El Niño phenomenon has surged to P2.63 billion, while the government has distributed P1.1 billion in assistance.

In its latest bulletin, the Department of Agriculture said the weather phenomenon had affected 53,879 hectares (ha) of farmland, equivalent to 116,792 metric tons (MT) of production volume.

Losses were incurred in 10 regions: the Cordillera Administrative Region, Ilocos Region, Cagayan Valley, Central Luzon, Calabarzon, Mimaropa, Bicol, Western Visayas, Zamboanga Peninsula and Soccsksargen.

The dry spell is estimated to have damaged 72,733 metric tons of paddy, 35,885 MT of corn, and 8,173 MT of high-value crops.

The National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council (NDRRMC) said 18 cities and municipalities have declared a state of calamity due to the effects of the El Niño on their agriculture.

This includes all the 11 municipalities in Occidental Mindoro; Bulalacao and Mansalay in Oriental Mindoro; San Vicente, Palawan; San Andres, Romblon; Mayoyao, Ifugao; Sibalom, Antique; and Zamboanga City.

Task Force El Niño spokesman and Presidential Communications Office Assistant Secretary Joey Villarama said that number might increase as some municipalities were looking into declaring a state of calamity.

"We have other provinces considering declaring a state of calamity, but they need to meet certain criteria," said Villarama, referring to Iloilo City.

Villarama said a municipality or city can declare a state a calamity if at least 15 percent of the population is affected, 30 percent of livelihoods are affected, and structures or vital installations are also affected.

"As much as we want LGUs to declare

► Damage A2



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DRY A farmer in Mabinay, Negros Oriental, surveys her drought-damaged field in this photo taken in March 2024. PNA PHOTO

■ DAMAGE FROM A1

El Niño crop damage shoots up to P2.63B

a state of calamity to access the local calamity fund and assistance from the national government, it is necessary to adhere to the guidelines to ensure a smooth process," the official said.

Moreover, the Agriculture Department said that the National Irrigation Administration has installed 570 water augmentation pumps in Ilocos, Cagayan Valley, Central Luzon, Mimaropa and Western Visayas regions to ensure water in these areas.

Concreting of irrigation canals is also ongoing, which improved 847.82 kilometers of irrigation canals, benefiting 40,621 farmers nationwide. Irrigation canals are also being cleared of silt, improv-

ing the water flow of 3,167.95 kilometers of irrigation canals nationwide.

Crop insurance

Meanwhile, the Department of Budget and Management (DBM) has allocated some P4.5 billion to cover the crop insurance premiums of subsistence farmers and fishers.

Around 2.3 million local farmers are expected to benefit from the full coverage of crop insurance premiums funded by the allocated P4.5 billion special allotment release order for the first quarter this year.

This includes a specific notice of cash allocation of P900 million directed at the Philippine Crop Insurance Corp. (PCIC).

"In light of the escalating challenges posed by climate change, which heightens the risks to both our economy and food security, it becomes imperative to prioritize the provision of financial security and insurance to empower our farmers and fishermen," Budget Secretary Amenah Pangandaman said.

"This assistance is intended to help them safeguard their means of living, ensuring they can continue their activities despite unforeseen events," she added.

Pangandaman signed the release order on March 19, 2024.

Last year, the PCIC provided insurance coverage to over 2.3 million farmers and fishermen registered under the Registry System for Basic Sectors in Agriculture (RSBSA), surpassing the target by 44,855 beneficiaries.

The PCIC's main role is to offer insurance to farmers, protecting them from losses caused by natural disasters, plant diseases, pest outbreaks, and damage or loss of agricultural assets like machinery, equipment, and infrastructure due to insured risks.

**NIÑA MYKA PAULINE ARCEO
AND JANINE ALEXIS MIGUEL**



Subsidies to GOCCs up 21%

THE national government's subsidies to government-owned and -controlled corporations as of end-February rose 20.95 percent year-on-year, data released by the Bureau of the Treasury (BTr) showed.

According to the latest cash operations report, subsidies in the first two months of the year totaled to P12.72 billion, up from the P10.51 billion recorded in the same period a year ago.

The lion's share of the subsidies released to state-run firms, amounting to P7.09 billion, went to the **National Irrigation Administration (NIA)**, which is responsible for irrigation development and management.

Aside from NIA, the only other billionaire recipient is the National Food Authority (NFA),

which received P2.25 billion during the said period.

The BTr previously reported that the national government posted a wider budget deficit in February amid the double-digit hike in expenditures.

The government incurred a budget shortfall of P164.7 billion in February 2024, higher compared to the P106.4 billion recorded in the previous year.

The wider budget gap stemmed from the 22.14 percent year-over-year increase in expenditures, matched with the moderate revenue growth of 5.73 percent.

With the February turnout, the year-to-date fiscal balance reverted to a deficit of P76.7 billion, which is 26.56 percent higher relative to last year's P60.6 billion budget gap. - *Angela Celis*



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PhilRice eyes inbred rice yields of 5 MT/ha

THE Philippine Rice Research Institute (PhilRice) said it is seeking to increase the average yield of the inbred rice seed handed out to farmers.

Flordeliza H. Bordey, PhilRice director for the Rice Competitiveness Enhancement Fund (RCEF) Program Management Office, said the agency is planning to improve the yield of the rice seed variety to beyond 5 metric tons (MT) per hectare (/ha).

"We started with 3.6 (MT per hectare). So we have seen improvements over the years. *Pero medyo baka mabitin tayo dun sa 5* (MT per hectare) (But we might fall short of the stretch target of 5 MT)" Ms. Bordey said in an interview.

RCEF Seed and Rice Extension Services programs are components of Republic Act 11203, or the Rice Tariffication Law, which sets aside P10 billion a year from rice import tariffs to make rice farmers more competitive.

The program's target is to increase yields to 5 MT per hectare by 2025.

"So that's what we'll try to do in the next phase... we'll definitely set a new target," she added.

PhiRice said that the average yield of inbred seeds provided by RCEF increased to 4.36 MT per hectare last year, from 3.63 MT per hectare in 2022.

Among the government's goals is to increase self-sufficiency for rice to 95% by 2028.

Ms. Bordey said that this could be attained through the distribution of both inbred and hybrid seed to production areas where they are best suited.

She added that under RCEF, inbred seed is distributed to 42 provinces with low to medium yields, while hybrid seed is given to 25 high-yielding areas.

The inbred seed is distributed to Negros Occidental, Leyte, Samar and Panay, while hybrid seed varieties are sent to 15 provinces, including Nueva Ecija, Isabela and Pangasinan.

"According to the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA), rice harvest (is set to) increase slightly for the first quarter compared to the previous year... so prospects are good. We are hoping that the harvest would improve or at least not be lower than 2023," she said.

The PSA is projecting the palay or unmilled harvest to increase 1.1% to 4.83 million MT.

The Department of Agriculture is projecting a palay harvest of above 20 million MT this year. The harvest in 2023 was 20.05 million MT, equivalent to about 13 million MT in milled rice. —

Adrian H. Halili



DA pushing to lower cost of producing rice

THE Department of Agriculture is pushing for the construction of deep piers intended for large ships to lessen the logistics cost of farm inputs such as fertilizers that in the end could lower the cost of producing rice in the country.

Agriculture Assistant Secretary Arnel de Mesa said the Philippines is trying to be competitive compared to its Southeast Asian neighbors in terms of producing rice that's why the DA is working to lessen the cost of logistics of farm inputs.

De Mesa said in a news forum in Quezon City that Vietnam, for instance, is producing P6 per kilo of rice, while the Philippines produces a kilo of rice at P12 to P14.

Labor is the major cost component in producing rice, and labor cost is at a premium in the

Philippines, the DA official said, adding that's the reason for the passage of the Rice Tariffication Law, which allocates P10 billion annually under the Rice Competitiveness Enhancement Fund (RCEF).

Five billion pesos, or 50 percent, he noted, goes to farm mechanization aimed at lowering the labor cost component in producing rice.

"Mahal din iyong input sa atin dahil iyong logistics, iyong binabanggit palagi ni Secretary Tiu Laurel iyong fertilizernadadalhinng Mindoromang-gagaling pa iyon ng Bataan, so bago makarating iyong fertilizer from Bataan to Mindoro na nakailang lipat iyong tracking ang laki ng gastos," De Mesa said in a news forum in Quezon City.

"So, kung mayroon tayong



deep na pier—iyong malalim na pier, ang tawag nila nga doonay panamax ba—malakihan, puwedeng doon na dalhin directly iyong barko, magdaong mas malakiiyong matitipid—bababa about P15 to P20 immediately iyong presyo ng inputs," he added.

De Mesa said that aside from improving logistics, the DA is also focusing on enhancing the distribution system, as well as post-harvest facilities to make the country's agriculture sector more competitive.

According to the DA official, the agency targets to attain much higher rice productivity, noting that currently, the national average is only at 4.1 metric tons per hectare.

Nueva Ecija, the country's rice granary, produces six to eight metric tons per hectare, he said, noting there are many areas in the country that are producing three to four metric tons per hectare because of limited use of high-yielding varieties, irrigation, and fertilizer due to high input cost. **PCO**



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Gov't not planning price cap on rice

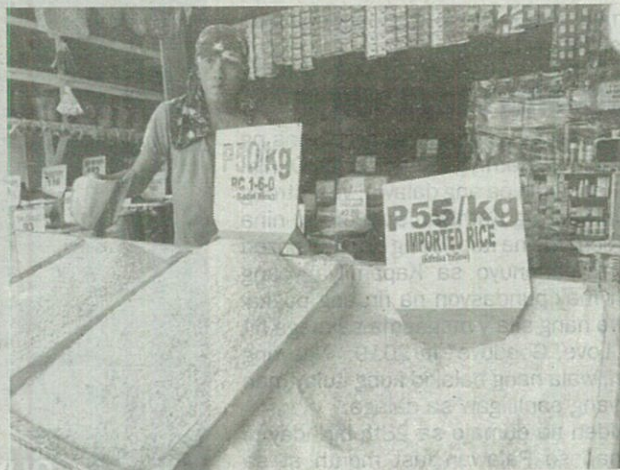
THE Department of Agriculture (DA) said Saturday there are no plans to recommend a price ceiling or suggested retail price (SRP) on rice amid its inflation uptick of 24.4 percent in March.

"Wala kaming plano na magkaroon ng price cap or SRP kasi medyo may mga mabigat din na epekto iyan pagdating ng panahon," Department of Agriculture Assistant Secretary Arnel De Mesa said at the Saturday News Forum in Quezon City.

The rice inflation in March eclipsed February's 23.7 percent and is the highest since 2009.

De Mesa explained that the increase was due to the low base effect for the same period in 2023, when rice was sold at P39 to P40 per kg.

He said the elevated rice inflation would likely stay until



July but would ease by August or September as prices in the same period last year were already close to P49.50.

Meanwhile, he noted that retail prices for rice have decreased from P52 last month to

about P50 to P49 at present.

"So iyong presyo ng bigas ay bumababa versus last month pero versus last year ay tumaaas," he said.

De Mesa said the DA is currently focused on increasing

the level of rice production, lowering the production cost, and reducing post-harvest losses.

"In terms of productivity or yield per unit hectare, we are at par actually with Vietnam at (and) Thailand because we also use the same variety that they have. Our technology is also the same. The only issue is our competitiveness in terms of cost to produce," he explained.

Vietnam is producing at P6 per kg. while the cost per kg. in the Philippines goes as high as P12 to P14.

Under the Rice Tariffication Law, De Mesa said, P5 billion is allocated for mechanization annually to reduce the labor cost component of production.

The DA also makes sure that the variety of rice per cluster or region is at a maximum of three for efficient milling and higher head rice recovery.



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Farming could be good fallback for retirees

FARMING in the Philippines may be a reliable backup for retirees to venture into with the right training, according to Department of Agriculture (DA) Assistant Secretary Arnel De Mesa.

De Mesa told reporters in a press conference on Saturday in Quezon City that 20 percent of the population in the Philippines is engaged into the sector of agriculture, which significantly contributes to the GDP growth rate of the country.

"Iyong percentage ng population na engaged sa agriculture is 20 percent, so 1/5 of total population natin engaged in agriculture in one way or another," De Mesa said.

"Iyong contribution ng sector natin sa GDP is nine or less than 10 percent. So, ibig sabihin nito, malaking populasyon natin ang engaged pa rin sa sektor ng agrikultura at nag-eemploy," he added.

Based on studies, De Mesa said, there are many retirees who venture into farming, but fail to sustain it due to lack of training, preparation, and knowledge.

He urged Filipinos who opted to resort into farming after retiring to prepare themselves and invest into trainings so that they will have sufficient knowledge and ensure higher success rate in farming.

"Kasi akala nila after retirement kapag nag-farm everything is easy and ok, but agriculture is a science. Hindi puwedeng pag-retire mo magbi-venture ka agad without any experience, without any training, without anything sa field ng agriculture kasi madi-drain talaga iyong savings and retirement ng ating mga kababayan," De Mesa said.

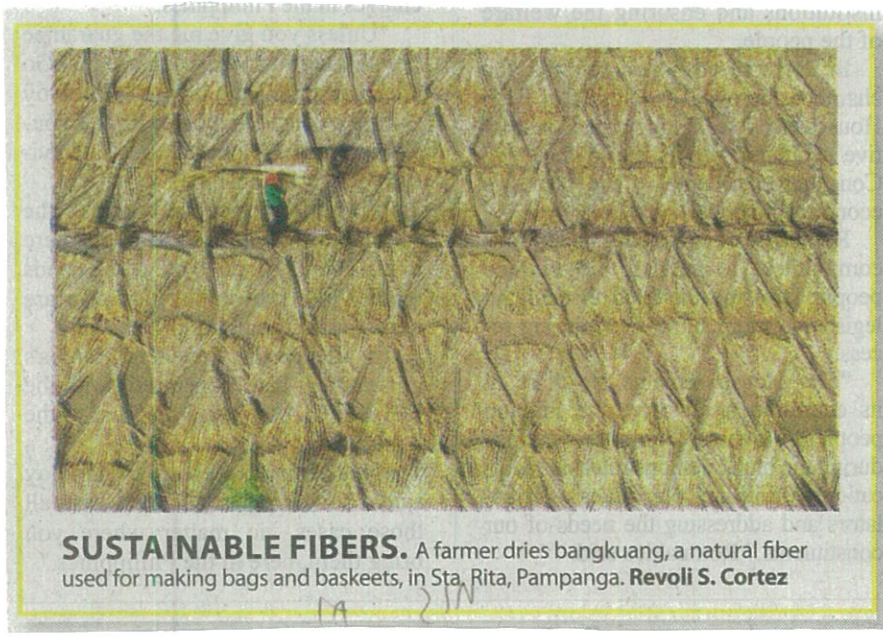
"So, dapat habang malayo pa iyong retirement at plano nila na mag-venture into farming or agriculture kailangan hinahanda rin nila iyong kanilang sarili technically speaking, financially speaking para kapag nag-retire na sila at handa na sila 100 percent sumabak sa pag-bubukid. Handang-handa sila at hindi masasayang iyong kanilang retirement money or iyong pinahirapan nila. So, mas magiging successful - iyong degree ng success ay magiging mas mataas," he added.

Manila Standard

Date: APR 03, 2014 Page: A1



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SUSTAINABLE FIBERS. A farmer dries bangkuang, a natural fiber used for making bags and baskets, in Sta. Rita, Pampanga. **Revoli S. Cortez**



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DBM releases P4.5b to cover crop insurance

THE Department of Budget and Management (DBM) has released P4.5 billion to cover the crop insurance premium of farmers and fishermen in the country.

Budget Secretary Amenah Pangandaman ordered last March 19 the release of P4.5 billion and its corresponding notice of cash allocation for January to March 2024 in the amount of P900 million to the Philippine Crop Insurance Corp. (PCIC).

Pangandaman said the allotment was meant to assist the agriculture sector cope with the impact of the El Niño dry spell and other natural challenges.

"In light of the escalating challenges posed by climate change, which heightens the risks to both our economy and food security, it becomes imperative to prioritize the provision of financial security and insurance to empower our farmers and fishermen," Pangandaman said in a statement.

"This assistance is intended to help them safeguard their means of living, ensuring they can continue their activities despite unforeseen events," she added.

In 2023, the state-run PCIC, mandated to provide insurance protection to farmers, was able to insure more than 2.3 million farmers and fishermen listed under the Registry System for Basic Sectors in Agriculture, overshooting the target number of beneficiaries by 44,855.



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Gov't watches impact of El Niño, La Niña on prices

THE government is ramping up efforts to shield Filipinos' purchasing power from the effects of El Niño and La Niña on food and energy supplies, Finance Secretary Ralph Recto said over the weekend.

"The Inter-Agency Committee on Inflation and Market Outlook is all hands on deck in monitoring weather-related disturbances as well as other external factors and their effects on the prices of essential goods to protect Filipinos' purchasing power," Recto said.

"Mitigating the effects of inflation, especially on our vulnerable sectors, is our top priority," he said.

"Rest assured, we are doubling down on our efforts to address the ongoing El Niño situation while actively preparing for the anticipated La Niña phenomenon in the latter part of the year," Recto said.

El Niño is characterized by abnormally dry and hot weather that brings drought or dry season, while La Niña is associated with above-normal rainfall that results in flooding.

Despite the ongoing onslaught of El Niño in March, the government managed to keep the inflation rate at 3.7 percent, within the target band of 2 percent to 4 percent, due to vigorous implementation of measures that ensured sufficient imports of key commodities and improved agricultural production. **Darwin G. Amojelar**



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INCLUSIVE GROWTH. National Economic and Development Authority Secretary Arsenio Balisacan (right) welcomes World Bank officials led by regional director for equitable growth, finance and institutions in Europe and Central Asia Lalita Moorty and country director Ndiame Diop on April 4, 2024. They discussed how to sustain inclusive growth in the Philippines through the efficient and proper implementation of existing economic and fiscal policies and addressing the challenges faced in the overall devolution effort across the country.

PH dispatches second batch of mangoes to Australia

THE Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) said over the weekend FastboxPH will dispatch another batch of mangoes to Australia in April 2024.

"This move is poised to further fortify the trade relations between the two countries," the DTI said in a statement.

Philippine Ambassador to Australia Ma. Hellen De La Vega cited the significance of the second mango shipment under the strategic partnership established in September 2023.

"The Philippines and Australia share a strong commitment to fostering trade ties, and the arrival of our

mangoes signifies a delightful milestone in our partnership, especially as we celebrate Filipino Food Month in April," she said.

Meanwhile, FastboxPH, the logistics firm entrusted with the recent mango shipment, reported a surge in demand within the Australian market, attributing it to the unparalleled taste and quality of Philippine mangoes.

FastboxPH plans to further expand its presence across Australia. The company aims to establish partnerships with additional retailers and distributors nationwide, ensuring wider accessibility of Philippine mangoes

to Australian consumers.

"The overwhelmingly positive response to our initial shipment last year has paved the way for a triumphant return of Philippine mangoes to Australian tables this April. We are steadfast in our commitment to making Philippine mangoes a household staple in Australia," said Miguel Ripoll, managing director of FastboxPH.

Highlighting the robust recovery of bilateral trade between the Philippines and Australia, DTI Secretary Alfredo Pascual said trade levels between the two countries soared beyond pre-pandemic figures.

Manila Standard

Date: APR. 03, 2024 Page: BS



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SALT INDUSTRY. A man rakes salt to dry as the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) declares as priority areas for salt production Ilocos Norte, Ilocos Sur, La Union, Pangasinan, Zambales, Bataan, Occidental Mindoro, Oriental Mindoro, Palawan, Marinduque, Quezon Province, Misamis Oriental and Antique. The agency is mandated to map and identify public lands, including portions of municipal waters, as suitable salt production areas to revitalize the salt industry under Republic Act (RA) 11985.



DBM releases P900-M crop insurance funding

To cover the crop insurance premium of subsistence farmers and fisherfolk in the country, the Department of Budget and Management (DBM) has released P4.5 billion and its corresponding Notice of Cash Allocation for the 1st Quarter of the year in the amount of P900 million to the Philippine Crop Insurance Corp. (PCIC).

"In light of the escalating challenges posed by climate change, which heightens the risks to both our economy and food security, it becomes imperative to prioritize the

provision of financial security and insurance to empower our farmers and fishermen. This assistance is intended to help them safeguard their means of living, ensuring they can continue their activities despite unforeseen events," Budget Secretary Mina Pangandaman said.

Pangandaman signed the release order on March 19.

In 2023, the PCIC was able to insure more than 2.3 million farmers and fisherfolk listed under the Registry System for

Turn to Page 5

DBM From Page 1

Basic Sectors in Agriculture. This exceeded the target number of beneficiaries by 44,855.

For this year, PCIC's authorized appropriation of P4.5 billion under the 2024 General Appropriations Act is expected to cover the full cost of crop insurance premiums of over 2.292 million targeted farmers.

Earlier this year, President Marcos reassured farmers of heightened government support in all their efforts to ensure a sustainable harvest, emphasizing that every seed sown will contribute to a robust and

prosperous future.

"Our cooperation to improve our agriculture sector is one of the first steps to a Bagong Pilipinas – where no one will starve and everyone contributes to a bountiful future," the President expressed.

PCIC's primary mandate is to provide insurance protection to farmers against losses arising from natural calamities, plant diseases, and pest infestations of crops as well as against damage to or loss of non-crop agricultural assets including but not limited to machinery, equipment, transport facilities, and other related infrastructures due to perils insured against.

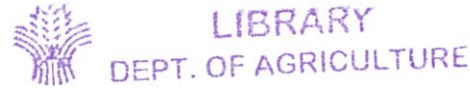
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SUPPLEMENTAL HARVEST — Farmers start work at the break of dawn, harvesting 'pechay' from this farm located along Bay-Calaun Highway in Laguna on Sunday, April 7, 2024. To augment their earnings, farmers have been planting vegetables in their fields after their regular harvest of 'palay' to add to the cycle of planting in their farms. (Noel B. Pabalate)



70 hog raisers affected by ASF given assistance



CASH/AID FOR HOG RAISERS Hog raisers who were affected by African swine fever in 2023 line up to receive financial assistance from the Cagayan provincial government during payout on Friday, April 5, 2024, at the Cagayan Provincial Capitol. PHOTO FROM CAGAYAN PIO

TUGUEGARAO CITY: Seventy hog raisers affected by African swine fever (ASF) in 2023 received financial assistance from the Cagayan Provincial Veterinary Office (PVET) and the Provincial Treasury Office on Friday, April 5.

The recipients were from the towns of Enrile, Piat, Solana, Santo Niño, Tuao, and Tuguegarao City.

The PVET also clarified that only hog raisers whose pigs were culled or slaughtered by the Municipal Agriculturist Office and PVET were given financial assistance.

One of the recipients, Angela Paralla-Bruno of Namuccayan, Sto. Niño, Cagayan, said 15 of her pigs

were culled due to ASF.

"It is painful and difficult to lose pigs, especially since it could have been sold and help our family," she added.

She advised everyone to take extra precautions to keep the pigs safe.

"Make sure that technicians and buyers disinfect when they come to their area and if possible, avoid buying frozen products to be safe from ASF," she added.

"We do not expect ASF disease to perpetuate, so let us be careful to keep our pigs safe. It's a pain in the pocket when our pigs are victimized," the hog raiser added.

VINCE JACOB VISAYA



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Negros Occidental wants to host 2027 Organic World Congress

BACOLOD CITY: Negros Occidental will bid for the hosting of the 2027 Organic World Congress, Gov. Eugenio Jose Lacson said on Thursday, April 4.

Lacson made the announcement after consulting with stakeholders on the province's intention to bid for the hosting of the international event at the Capitol Social Hall.

"Today marks the beginning of our pioneering journey as we prepare for the bid process to host the 2027 Organic World Congress in our province," Lacson told those present at the organizational meeting, including Bacolod Mayor Alfredo Abelardo "Albee" Benitez.

"The bid will be in December

this year but the event will happen in 2027," the governor said.

Countries from Europe and Asia are expected to attend the 2027 Organic World Congress, he added.

However, Lacson said that they don't know yet what countries or cities will place bids for the hosting.

"Our strength is the fact that the organic movement in the country started in Negros Occidental. We are really pushing for organic. We also have 18,000 farmers who are into organic farming," he pointed out.

"We would just like to introduce ourselves to the world and one way to do that is to host the congress," he said.

The organic farming initiative in the province began some 40 years ago, paving the way for Negros Occidental and Negros Oriental to execute a memorandum of agreement, pledging to engage in unified sustainable agricultural rural development for the entire island, and eventually make Negros Island the organic food bowl of Asia, he pointed out.

In 2022, Negros Occidental had an estimated 18,000 hectares of organic farmland, and in 2023, the province targeted to increase yield by 10 percent annually, Lacson said.

To mitigate the debilitating effects of depleting natural resources and in response to the urgent need

for ecosystem recovery and conservation efforts, Lacson said the provincial government implemented the organic farming program even before the enactment of Republic Act 10068.

The Organic Agriculture Act of 2010 calls for the promotion of the practice of organic agriculture that will cumulatively condition and enrich the fertility of soil; increase farm productivity; reduce pollution and environmental degradation; prevent the depletion of natural resources; further protect the health of farmers, consumers, and the general public; and save on imported farm inputs, Lacson said.

"Due to our adherence to such practices, the province has earned several national awards over the years, including the Top Performing Organic Agriculture Province, Outstanding Focal Person, Outstanding Organic Farmer, and a National Finalist in the Organic Farming Family category," he said.

More than the implementation of legislation and policies to support organic farming, Negros Occidental is also the lead exporter of organic sugar, the governor added.

To further the advocacy and involve farmers and stakeholders in the organic sector, the provincial government has also been organizing the annual Organic Farmers

Festival where several foreign organic farming advocates have also been invited, he said.

Organic agriculture goes beyond mere cultivation and represents a commitment to rejuvenating the environment and ensuring the well-being of both present and future generations, Lacson said.

"Our plan to host the 2027 Organic World Congress ... represents a continuation of our gains and achievements. ... Our success will not only be measured by our ability to secure the bid but also by the lasting legacy we leave for our province and the global organic community," he said.

EUGENE Y ADIONG



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PH makes second mango shipment to Australia

THE Philippines has sent a second shipment of mangoes to Australia, which will help increase the country's bilateral trade with that country, according to the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI).

In a statement over the weekend, Trade Secretary Alfredo Pascual said the latest mango shipment will help increase the country's bilateral trade with Australia, which reached \$4.1 billion in 2023, or 20 percent higher from the previous year's \$3.4 billion.

"The continued growth in our bilateral trade underscores the vast potential for our products in the Australian market. The successful export of our mangoes exemplifies the significant strides we're making in facilitating agricultural trade, which is pivotal for our economic agenda," he said.

Moreover, Pascual highlighted the significance of key policy instruments such as the Second Protocol of the Asean-Australia-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement (AANZFTA), ratified by the Philippines on Feb. 14, 2024, in further optimizing the trade and investment relationship between the two countries.

Asean is the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

"We would like to provide enhanced market access for our stakeholders/exporters to as many countries as possible, even the non-traditional partners. For this year, we are working on an FTA with EU (European Union), UAE (United Arab Emirates), and Canada under the Asean-Canada FTA negotiation," the trade chief said.

The logistics firm FastboxPH, which facilitated the mango delivery, has noted a surge in demand for the tropical fruit in Australia, attributing it to the

quality and exceptional taste of Philippine mangoes.

"The overwhelmingly positive response to our initial shipment last year has paved the way for a triumphant return of Philippine mangoes to Australian tables this April," FastboxPH Managing Director Miguel Ripol said.

FastboxPH is positioned to expand its reach across the country and establish partnerships with more retailers and distributors nationwide to ensure wider availability of Philippine mangoes to Australian consumers.

Philippine Ambassador to Australia Ma. Hellen de la Vega emphasized the importance of the second mango shipment under the strategic partnership forged in September 2023 between the two countries.

"The Philippines and Australia share a strong commitment to fostering trade ties, and the arrival of our mangoes signifies a delightful milestone in our partnership, especially as we celebrate Filipino Food Month in April," she said.

The Philippine Trade and Investment Center in Sydney (PTIC-Sydney), an agency under the DTI, spearheads the effort to broaden the market for high-quality Philippine agricultural goods, specifically mangoes. Through strategic measures like trade expos and consultations, PTIC-Sydney is actively striving to boost the global presence of Philippine products.

"With the DTI spearheading efforts and the unwavering dedication of all involved parties, the future of Philippine mango exports to Australia looks brighter than ever, promising mutual prosperity for both nations," the DTI said.

JANINE ALEXIS MIGUEL



Editorial

Providing the momentum for salt industry's comeback

It is ironic that with a coastline touted to be longer than that of the United States, the Philippines has to import more than 90 percent of its salt requirements.

The salt industry has been on life support for the past decades. Salt farms have shrunk in size and productivity, if not abandoned entirely, victims of rapid urbanization and an archaic law that requires adding iodine to salt to eliminate "micronutrient malnutrition."

For years, salt makers have been warning of the impending demise of their livelihood if the government does not come up with a rescue plan. They warned that if no corrective measures are in place, the country will import 96 percent of the salt it needs by 2030. That means 1.3 million tons will have to be outsourced at a cost of P6 billion.

Local salt producers will be edged out of the market, and the industry will sail into the sunset.

That will be tragic because salt self-sufficiency could be one of the engines that will drive the country's agro-industrial development.

One salt maker also believes that without a flourishing salt industry, "the Philippines is vulnerable to a food supply chain crisis."

Last March 11, President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. signed Republic Act (RA) 11985, or the Philippine Salt Industry Development Act, in a key move to reverse the toxic trend and get the government more involved in helping salt farmers recover and prosper.

Under RA 11985, a "Salt Council" will see to it that a Philippine Salt Industry Development Roadmap is effectively implemented.

But perhaps the law's most striking feature is that it lifted the requirement under RA 8172 that all locally produced salt be iodized.

Enacted in 1995, RA 8172, or An Act for Salt Iodization Nationwide (the ASIN Law), has a noble enough intention: eliminating iodine deficiency. It, however, failed to factor in the impact of mandatory iodization on the salt-making sector.

Salt-making had long been a thriving traditional industry; in the 1970s, there were 5,000 hectares of salt farms in the country, producing 240,000 metric tons annually.

RA 8172 stifled salt production because few farmers could afford the cost of the iodization process. As a result, many salt farms closed down.

In 2022, the government spent \$54 million to import 628,000 metric tons of salt because the local output of 7 percent was simply inadequate to fill the huge supply gap.

In accordance with the new salt roadmap, the Department of Environment and Natural Resources will work with the National Mapping and Resource Information Authority and the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources in identifying public lands that are suitable for salt production.

The search is initially focused on 13 provinces in Luzon and the Visayas.

The DENR said abandoned fish ponds are being eyed for conversion into salt farms. One project along this line is the 473-hectare salt farm in Pangasinan, a province that is the acknowledged leader in milkfish farming.

With the passage of RA 11985, business groups now have high hopes for the salt industry.

The Philippine Exporters Confederation Inc. (Philexport) said the new law will enable small sea salt producers forced out of business to restart production.

Becoming a global player

The Philippine Chamber of Commerce and Industry is confident RA 11985 will plug the loopholes in the ASIN Law and create opportunities for rural salt makers.

And Sen. Joel Villanueva sees salt-making as "an enormous, untapped and neglected resource that could change the lives of about 60 percent of our total population, who live in coastal zones."

Once the salt industry becomes robust enough, the next step is ambitious but highly rewarding: making the Philippines a player in the global salt market.

Only 25 percent of the salt the world produces is for human consumption; nearly 60 percent goes to industrial applications.

Salt is a key element in making polyvinyl-chloride (PVC) plastic. It is the source of chlorine and sodium that are supplements in animal feeds.

Salt helps prevent mineral salt buildup in pipes and water tanks.

The road ahead is full of promise. It is now up to the government to provide the momentum to sustain the salt industry's recovery.



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DBM releases Q1 crop insurance fund



An officer of the Plaridel-Guiguinto Irrigators Association in Bulacan shows the damage caused by rains to a rice field on Oct. 22, 2020. The 2024 General Appropriations Act is expected to cover the full cost of crop insurance premiums of over 2.292 million targeted farmers. (PNA Photo).

BY ANGELA CELIS

THE Department of Budget and Management (DBM) has authorized the issuance of a special allotment release order amounting to P4.5 billion and its corresponding notice of cash allocation of P900 million for the first quarter of the year to cover the crop insurance premium of subsistence farmers and fisherfolk in the country.

In a statement, the DBM said the Philippine Crop Insurance Corp.'s (PCIC) authorized appropriation of P4.5 billion under the 2024 General Appropriations Act is expected to cover the full cost of crop insurance premiums of over 2.292 million targeted farmers.

"In light of the escalating chal-

lenges posed by climate change, which heightens the risks to both our economy and food security, it becomes imperative to prioritize the provision of financial security and insurance to empower our farmers and fishermen," Budget Secretary Amenah Pangandaman said.

"This assistance is intended to help them safeguard their means of living, ensuring they can continue their activities despite unforeseen events," she added.

In 2023, the PCIC was able to insure more than 2.3 million farmers and fisherfolk listed under the Registry System for Basic Sectors in Agriculture.

.....
See DBM ► Page A2

DBM

This exceeded the target number of beneficiaries by 44,855.

The corporation's primary mandate is to provide insurance protection to farmers against losses arising from natural calamities, plant diseases and pest infestations

of crops as well as against damage to or loss of non-crop agricultural assets including, but not limited to, machinery, equipment, transport facilities and other related infrastructures due to perils insured against.



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Second mango shipment due for delivery to Australia this month

THE PHILIPPINES is set to dispatch 3,000 kilograms of mangoes to Australia this month, the second such shipment sent under the terms of a strategic partnership, according to the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI).

"(The) 3,000 kilograms will be sent to Perth and Sydney. An additional shipment will follow two or three weeks later, then possibly another shipment in June," the DTI said late Saturday.

"The last shipment for the year will be in August or September, which is before the mango season in Australia starts," it added.

Trade Secretary Alfredo E. Pascual said that an increase in trade could be expected with market access in Australia, which has strict quarantine rules that Philippine crops have fallen afoul of.

"Our challenge would be on the production side. We will check the status of our mango industry. For DTI, we would like to provide enhanced market access for our exporters to many countries, even non-traditional partners," Mr. Pascual said.

"For this year, we are working on a free trade agreement (FTA) with the European Union, United Arab Emirates, and Canada under the ASEAN-Canada FTA negotiations," he added.

Trade between the Philippines and Australia rose 20% to \$4.1 billion last year.

"The continued growth in our bilateral trade underscores the vast potential for our products in the Australian market," Mr. Pascual said.

"The successful export of our mangoes exemplifies the significant strides we're making in facilitating agricultural trade, which is pivotal for our economic agenda," he added.

In September 2023, the Philippines and Australia made a joint declaration that elevated their bilateral relationship to a strategic partnership.

FastboxPH, the logistics firm behind the shipment of mangoes, said that there is a surge in demand for Philippine mangoes in Australia, leading to plans for the company to expand its presence in Australia.

"The overwhelmingly positive response to our initial shipment last year has paved the way for a triumphant return of Philippine mangoes to Australian tables this April," said Miguel Ripoll, managing director of FastboxPH.

"We are steadfast in our commitment to making Philippine mangoes a household staple in Australia," he added. — **Justine Irish D. Table**



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Funding approved for first quarter crop insurance

THE Department of Budget and Management said it has approved the release of first quarter funding for crop insurance to compensate for agricultural damage.

“In light of the escalating challenges posed by climate change, which heightens the risks to both our economy and food security, it becomes imperative to prioritize the provision of financial security and insurance to empower our farmers and fishermen,” Budget Secretary Amenah F.

Pangandaman said in a statement on Sunday.

On March 19, Ms. Pangandaman affirmed the release of a Special Allotment Release Order amounting to P4.5 billion and a Notice of Cash Allocation worth P900 million for the Philippine Crop Insurance Corp. (PCIC).

“This assistance is intended to help them safeguard their means of living, ensuring they can continue their activities despite unforeseen events,” Ms. Pangandaman said.

The PCIC has been allocated funding of P4.5 billion under the 2024 national budget to cover the crop insurance premiums of more than 2 million farmers.

Apart from losses due to natural calamities, pest infections, and plant diseases, the PCIC also provides assistance in the event of the loss or damage of non-crop assets like equipment, transport facilities, and infrastructure.

El Niño has caused agricultural damage worth P2.63 bil-

lion, affecting 54,203 farmers and 53,879 hectares of farmland, the Department of Agriculture said last week.

Damage to the rice crop, which accounted for about 65% or P1.7 billion worth of agricultural losses, was also one of the main drivers of this month’s uptick in rice inflation at 24.4%. This was the highest reading since the 24.6% recorded in February 2009. — **Beatriz Marie D. Cruz**



PHL poised to export more mangoes to Australia—DTI

THE Philippines will ship 3,000 kilograms (kg) of mangoes from Zambales to Australia this month, according to the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI).

The DTI said the move aims to bolster the Philippines's trade relations with Australia. Last year, bilateral trade between the two countries soared beyond pre-pandemic levels.

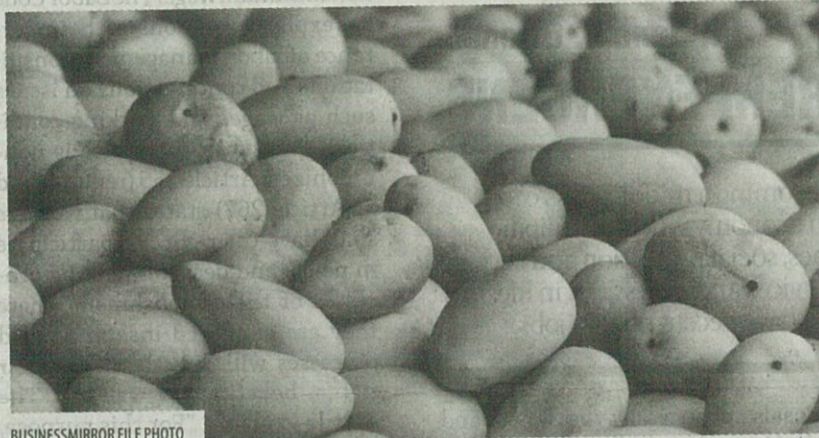
Government data indicated that the trade volume between the two nations surged to \$ 4.1 billion in 2023, a 20-percent increase from the previous year's \$3.4 billion.

DTI said FastboxPH, the logistics firm entrusted with the recent mango shipment, will be dispatching another batch of the country's renowned mangoes to Australia.

In a Viber message sent to reporters, the Trade department said 3,000 kgs will be shipped to Perth and Sydney. "Additional shipment to follow 2 or 3 weeks later, then possibly another shipment in June."

"Last shipment for the year will be in August or September before the mango season in Australia starts," said DTI, adding that the mangoes will come from Zambales.

DTI said Fastbox reported a



BUSINESSMIRROR FILE PHOTO

"surge in demand" within the Australian market, attributing this to the "unparalleled taste and quality of Philippine mangoes."

The Trade department noted that Philippine mango exports to Australia passed the "stringent" biosecurity regulations, documentation and inspection procedures.

"FastboxPH is now poised to further expand its presence across Australia. The company aims to establish partnerships with additional retailers and distributors nationwide, ensuring wider accessibility of Philippine mangoes to Australian consumers," DTI said in a statement on Saturday.

For his part, Trade Secretary Alfredo E. Pascual expressed

confidence that the shipment to Australia could open up opportunities for the Philippines in other countries.

"For Australia, with the market access, we can expect an increase in trade," Pascual said, adding that DTI aims to provide enhanced market access for Philippine stakeholders/exporters to many countries "as much as possible" including the non-traditional partners.

"Our challenge would be on the production side."

Pascual said "key policy tools" such as the Second Protocol of the Asean-Australia-New Zealand Free Trade Agreement, which was signed by the Philippines last February 14, are essential to the administration's goal of

expanding exports.

"The continued growth in our bilateral trade underscores the vast potential for our products in the Australian market. The successful export of our mangoes exemplifies the significant strides we're making in facilitating agricultural trade, which is pivotal for our economic agenda."

DTI told the BUSINESSMIRROR that Philippine exports of guavas, mangoes, and mangosteens, fresh or dried to Australia amounted to \$389,659 in 2023.

The Trade department noted that Philippine Trade and Investment Center in Sydney (PTIC-Sydney) is leading the charge in expanding the reach of premium Philippine agricultural products, particularly mangoes.

"Through strategic initiatives such as trade fairs and consultations, PTIC-Sydney is actively working to enhance the international visibility of Philippine products."

The first shipment of Philippine mangoes arrived in Sydney and Perth last September 2023. This batch of mango shipment was harvested from the local farms in Malalag, Digos, Bansalan and Magsaysay municipalities in Davao del Sur. **Andrea E. San Juan**



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Local planters sell produce via WalterMart program

By VG CABUAG
X@Villyge

SM Investments Corp. (SMIC), the holding firm of the Sy family, said it is supporting the country's agriculture sector by giving farmers access to their retail chain, WalterMart.

WalterMart's program provides Filipino farmers with market access that enables them to bring farm-fresh produce to the customers efficiently, according to SMIC.

WalterMart goes above and beyond hosting products from farmers for just a limited period. Instead of bringing them in through concessionaires, they integrate them across 38 stores by providing a venue for them to sell daily, the company said.

"Making a difference in people's lives has been an advocacy of the group borne from the simple dream of SM founder Henry Sy Sr. to uplift the livelihood of local farming communities," SMIC president and CEO Frederic C. DyBuncio said.

By harnessing the resources of SMIC, DyBuncio said the company aims to empower local farmers, strengthen rural economies and

contribute to food security.

"Our partnership with local producers through the Palengke Fresh program [of WalterMart] bridges the gap between farm and table and cultivates a sustainable agricultural culture between farmers and customers with each direct sale.

For us to make an impact on the livelihood of our farmers, we make it to a point that they are involved in our supply chain process," Jennilyn Uy, president of WalterMart, said.

The Palengke Fresh program started in February 2022, with a few stores in Central Luzon. It has now transformed into one of WalterMart's flagship programs in reaching out to more farmers and serving the best available produce to its customers.

Since its launch, Uy said the program has empowered several farmer cooperatives, selling over 2000 metric tons of produce, bolstering their income.

"The program helps our farmers sell their fresh produce," she said.

"As a community mall, we look at more ways to create a positive impact and be inclusive of our communities and the customers we serve."



Brace for EU deforestation law, exporters told

By ANDREA E. SAN JUAN
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EXPORTERS of coffee, beef, soy, palm oil, and rubber need to prepare for the entry into force of a law that aims to prevent the shipment of products linked to deforestation to countries in the European Union.

The Philippine Exporters Confederation Inc. (Philexport) said the EU Deforestation Regulation (EUDR) or Regulation (EU) 2023/1115 will enter into force in December.

"Exporting products to the EU has become increasingly challenging with its new and emerging regulations as part of the EU Green Deal. These regulations aim to make the EU the first climate-neutral continent by 2050," Bianca Pearl Sykimte, director

of the Department of Trade and Industry-Export Marketing Bureau, said in a statement issued by PhilExport.

According to Sykimte, EUDR applies to entities exporting commodities such as cattle/beef, soy, coffee, coco, palm oil, rubber and wood.

"It requires these entities to demonstrate that their products are deforestation free and not linked to forest degradation."

Philexport noted that these

seven products, all of which are major drivers of deforestation, will no longer be sold in the EU if sourced from areas affected by deforestation or forest degradation practices.

The EUDR was "formally adopted" and came into effect on June 29, 2023 to prevent the importation of commodities linked to deforestation to curb forest loss, land degradation, and biodiversity loss.

"Companies have until December 30 this year to be compliant, except for micro and small undertakings, for which the regulation will apply from June 30, 2025," said Philexport.

It further noted that businesses should now consider the impact of the EUDR on their supply chain due diligence to prepare for the new obligations that apply from December 2024.

Among the important considerations that firms need to be aware of, according to Philexport, is that the new measure covers a wide

BusinessMirror

A broader look at today's business

Date: APR . 08, 2024 Page: A9



LIBRARY
DEPT. OF AGRICULTURE

range of products.

"According to global law firm White & Case, the EUDR covers the said seven commodities as well as their many derived products listed in the annex to the regulation. Examples of these derived products are meat products, leather, chocolate, coffee, palm nuts, palm oil derivatives, glycerol, natural rubber products, soybeans, soybean flour and oil, fuel wood, wood products, pulp and paper, printed books."

Citing the law firm, Philexport said it is important to check carefully which products are covered, with reference to the products' tariff classification under the Combined Nomenclature.

Philexport said the EUDR applies to goods produced on or after June 29, 2023 (except for timber and timber products, which are covered if produced before that date and placed on the EU market from December 31, 2027). However, it does not apply to goods produced entirely from material that has completed its life cycle

and would otherwise have been discarded as waste.

Philexport also said non-compliance with the EUDR will prevent access to and exports from the EU.

Citing Global legal intelligence platform Lexology, the umbrella organization of Philippine exporters listed the requirements that must be met by commodities to be able to export to the 27-member bloc.

Philexport said the commodities should be deforestation-free; they have been produced with the relevant legislation of the country of production in terms of environmental protection, land use rights, and labor rights; and they are covered by a due diligence statement.

It also reminded companies of the penalties for non-compliance. "These may take the form of fines of up to 4 percent of the company's EU turnover, confiscation, or exclusion from public funding or contracts."

Last year, the EU was the Philippines's sixth largest export market

with receipts reaching \$8.4 billion.

"Food exports were valued at more than \$400 million and included tuna, desiccated coconuts, preserved pineapples and pineapple juice, fruits and nuts, breads and pastries, rum and other distilled fermented sugarcane products," Philexport said.

Business stakeholders such as officials of the Philippine Chamber of Commerce and Industry (PCCI) welcomed the resumption of free trade talks between the Philippines and the EU as this will strengthen bilateral cooperation and "deepen" economic ties between the two parties.

However, they noted that Philippine negotiators should also be "extra cautious in giving in to certain conditionalities imposed by the EU and ensure that these are justifiable and fair based on the country's level of development." (See: <https://businessmirror.com.ph/2024/03/21/biz-groups-raise-concerns-ahead-of-resumption-phl-eu-fta-talks/>)



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Avocados help lower risk of CVD

EATING two or more servings of avocado weekly was associated with a lower risk of cardiovascular disease, and substituting avocado for certain fat-containing foods like butter, cheese or processed meats was associated with a lower risk of cardiovascular disease events.

Clinical trials have previously found avocados have a positive impact on cardiovascular risk factors including high cholesterol. Avocados contain

dietary fiber, unsaturated fats especially monounsaturated fat (healthy fats) and other favorable components that have been associated with good cardiovascular health.

Researchers at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health in Boston believed this was the first, large, prospective study that supported the positive association between higher avocado consumption and lower cardiovascular events, such as coronary heart disease and stroke.

"Our study provides further evidence that the intake of plant-sourced unsaturated fats can improve diet quality and is an important component in cardiovascular disease prevention," said lead study author Lorena S. Pacheco, Ph.D., M.P.H., R.D.N., a postdoctoral research fellow in the nutrition department at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health in Boston.

Researchers found that among study participants who ate at least two servings of avocado each week had a 16

percent lower risk of cardiovascular disease and a 21 percent lower risk of coronary heart disease, compared to those who never or rarely ate avocados.

Based on statistical modeling, replacing half a serving daily of margarine, butter, egg, yogurt, cheese or processed meats such as bacon with the same amount of avocado was associated with a 16 to 22 percent lower risk of cardiovascular disease events.

They also found that when they substituted

half a serving a day of avocado for the equivalent amount of olive oil, nuts and other plant oils, it showed no additional benefit.

The study aligns with the American Heart Association's guidance to follow the Mediterranean diet — a dietary pattern focused on fruits, vegetables, grains, beans, fish and other healthy foods and plant-based fats such as olive, canola, sesame and other non-tropical oils. (American Heart Association)

Malaya Business Insight

Date: APR. 08, 2024 Page: A0



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DEPT. OF AGRICULTURE

Soy gains, corn falls

CHICAGO- US wheat futures spiked to a one-month high on Friday as the market was unsettled by spring weather risks in the northern hemisphere and renewed tensions in the Black Sea.

Soybeans gained and corn fell as investors weighed US planting prospects following generally favorable rains in the Midwest farm belt and rising export competition from South America.

Corn and soybean markets closed out the week with weekly declines, while wheat notched a third straight weekly gain.

The wheat market rose on ongoing rumors of delays to Russian export cargoes. Meanwhile, renewed drone attacks on Black

Sea grain ports caused fears of shipping delays, and concerns about declining French wheat conditions continued.

Wheat gains were mostly motivated by geopolitics, said Joe Davis, director of commodity sales at Futures International, noting that it was unusual that the stronger dollar on Friday was not deterring buyers. A firmer greenback makes dollar-denominated commodities costlier for those holding other currencies.

The May wheat contract on the Chicago Board of Trade (CBOT) rose 11 cents to \$5.67-1/4 a bushel after the benchmark contract rose to \$5.74-3/4, its highest since March 1. - Reuters

Malaya Business Insight

Date: APR 23, 2014 Page: A6



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DEPT. OF AGRICULTURE

EU wheat rises as Black Sea risks spur short-covering

PARIS- Euronext wheat futures rose on Friday, tracking a rally in Chicago as delays to some Russian exports and concern about an escalation in fighting between Russia and Ukraine encouraged participants to cover positions.

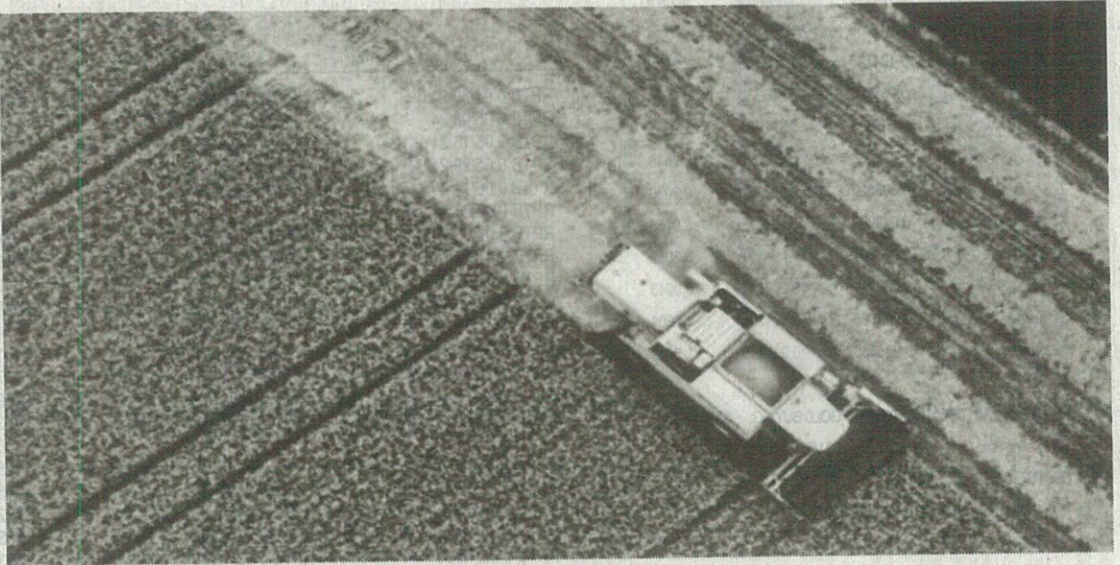
Adverse weather, including dryness in parts of North America and the Black Sea region, as well as damp conditions in France, also supported prices as the market enters the sensitive spring growing season in the northern hemisphere.

May milling wheat the most active position on Paris-based Euronext, was 1.4 percent up at 202.75 euros (\$219.80) a metric ton by 1615 GMT.

Chicago wheat was up 2 percent in US trading.

Fresh reports of administrative delays to Russian export cargoes, including vessels bound for major importer Egypt, unsettled the market like two weeks ago.

"There is definitely more market concern that something is happening to hinder Russian grain



A Belgian farmer harvesting a wheat field in Perwez, Belgium. (Reuters Photo)

shipments," a German trader said.

However, futures pared earlier gains after news that two grain cargoes, including one for Egypt, had received phyto-sanitary certificates from Russian authorities.

Some traders played down the idea of further cargo delays and

noted that Russian prices were stable, albeit maintaining recent gains.

"Currently I cannot see signs of more ships being delayed in Russian ports because of the phyto-sanitary dispute between export houses and the authorities," said one Russian trader involved in

Russian business.

"It seems to be more fear of delays than actual delays."

Russia is the world's largest wheat exporter and expectations that it will ship a record volume this season helped push futures to 3-1/2-year lows last month. - Reuters



World food prices higher in March—FAO report

THE Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) said rising international quotations for vegetable oils, dairy products and meat caused the benchmark index for world food commodity prices to go up for the first time in 7 months.

The FAO Food Price Index, which tracks monthly changes in the international prices of a set of globally-traded food commodities, rose by 1.1 percent last month. It averaged 118.3 points in March, down 7.7 percent from its corresponding value a year ago.

FAO said the Vegetable Oil Price Index led the increase in March, rising 8 percent from February and reaching a one-year high as quotations for palm, soy, sunflower and rapeseed oils all rose.

"International palm oil prices increased due to seasonally lower outputs in leading producing countries and firm domestic demand in Southeast Asia, while those for soyoil recovered from multi-year lows, boosted by robust demand from the biofuel sector, particularly in Brazil and the United States of America."

Dairy prices also rose for the sixth consecutive month in March, up 2.9 percent

from February, led by rising world cheese and butter prices.

"The FAO Meat Price Index also increased, rising 1.7 percent from the previous month, with international prices up for poultry, pig and bovine meats."

By contrast, the FAO Cereal price Index declined by 2.6 percent, averaging 20 percent below its March 2023 value.

"The drop was led by decreasing global wheat export prices, which declined due to ongoing strong export competition—underscored by cancelled purchases by China—among the European Union, the Russian Federation and the United States of America," FAO said.

"Maize export prices edged upwards in March, partly due to logistical difficulties in Ukraine, while the FAO All Rice Price Index dipped by 1.7 percent amid subdued global import demand."

The FAO Sugar Price Index declined by 5.4 percent from February, with the drop mainly driven by an upward revision to the 2023/24 sugar production forecast in India and the improved pace of the harvest in Thailand.