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DA teams to develop farming infra projects

BY JANINE ALEXIS MIGUEL

THE Department of Agriculture (DA) has established three teams tasked with developing and building key infrastructure projects aimed at enhancing food production, with a focus on rice and corn, and reducing post-harvest losses.

Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel has created the teams to develop feasibility studies for priority infrastructure projects to be led by Undersecretary for Special Concerns and for Official Development Assistance Jerome Oliveros.

The three project-preparation teams are tasked to draft the framework and plans for the proposed post-harvest program for rice and corn, solar-powered cold storages, and proposed solar-powered irrigation systems.

Undersecretary for Operations Roger Navarro will co-chair the team assigned to formulate the feasibility study on the post-harvest program for rice and corn.

Meanwhile, Undersecretary for High Value Crops Cheryl Marie Natividad-Caballero will be the co-chairman of the team in-charge of the proposed solar-powered irrigation system project.

Assistant Secretary Arnel de Mesa, who also serves as the department's spokesman, will

assume the role of vice chairman for the team tasked with organizing the solar-powered cold storage project.

Tiu Laurel instructed the team working on the solar-powered irrigation system project to ensure alignment with the sites listed in the National Irrigation Administration's database and the Bureau of Soil and Water Management's irrigation master plan.

He also emphasized the need to ensure the project documents are compliant with the requirements of the DA-wide project clearing house system and the National Economic and Development Authority-Investment Coordination Committee.

Earlier this year, the Agriculture chief said that around P94 billion is needed in the next couple of years to build facilities and minimize losses in harvest.

Tiu Laurel said that approximately P93 billion must be allocated for constructing post-harvest infrastructure for rice and corn to reduce losses.

Additionally, P1 billion is required for building cold storage facilities to prolong the shelf life of vegetables.

He said that this is in line with the DA's goal to modernize the agriculture sector, ensuring fair returns for farmers, affordable prices for consumers, and reasonable profits for traders.

In order to achieve this, the Agriculture secretary launched a three-year plan that involves expanding agri-fishery areas, modernizing production, improving infrastructure, optimizing logistics, enhancing market access, implementing digitalization, balancing developmental and regulatory roles, and fostering partnerships with the private sector.



NIA HELPS FARMERS INCREASE RICE PRODUCTION

THE National Irrigation Administration (NIA) remains committed to increasing crop yields and dedicated to making the Philippines self-sufficient in rice production.

This was made known by NIA administrator Eduardo Guillen at the Harvest Festival for Dry Crop 2024 in Barangay Tampac 1, Guimba, Nueva Ecija on Monday.

Guillen also introduced Contract Farming that aims to support farmers through the distribution of hybrid and inbred seeds, farm machinery, and other equipment to help in the production of agricultural products in the area.

He also shared NIA's programs and plans to provide the needs of the agricultural sector, which included the use of Alternate Wetting and Drying Technology, adjusting the Cropping Calendar, and providing projects such as solar-powered pump irrigation to supply water to farmlands.

During the harvesting trials in the province, Guillen said the agency harvested 73.5 bags from a 0.3-hectare area. The average output is computed at 245 bags per hectare at 50 kilograms per bag.

A Philippine Statistics Authority report

said that, as of February 1, the estimated palay production based on standing crop for January to March 2024 may increase to 4.83 million metric tons or by 1.1 percent from its actual output of 4.78 million metric tons in the same period of 2023.

The estimate of palay production for the period January to March 2024 also exhibited an increase of 0.6 percent from its estimate of 4.80 million metric tons.

The NIA administrator, meanwhile, said that he will propose to President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. to revise the cropping seasons for next year.

"We are going to change the cropping calendar. At least two planting seasons for the dry crop season from October to February and from March to July are expected to increase rice production, aside from wet season," he said.

Guillen also told reporters that the agency has been successful with 99 percent delivery of water irrigation services to farmers in the region.

The event was attended by Guimba Councilor Kenth Natividad and Municipal Administrator Dr. Casimiro Galapon Jr.

CELSO CAJUCOM

SALT OF THE EARTH

Artisanal salt makers in Zambales keep generations-old craft alive despite hard times



HARD LABOR: Mae Abuan rakes the brine sand for collection, as Editha Morayag prepares nipa leaves for packing salt. Nanay Helen gathers brine sand to add to her own stockpile. HENRY EMPEÑO



TRADITIONAL COOKING: The production of *asin sa buy-o* makes use of earthen hearth, iron vat, and native equipment like a ladle made of coconut shell. HENRY EMPEÑO



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BY HENRY EMPENO

BOTOLAN, Zambales—Just after the rains when the soil is still moist but already loose enough to be worked on, the arduous task of *pagkukupkop* starts at this three-hectare strip of land where organic salt is produced naturally from pliant earth at the seaside community of Panayunan here.

Pagkukupkop, which translates to “gathering” in the local dialect, involves the collection of sandy earth from a field nurtured by the salty waters of a nearby estuary. It starts with weeding and clearing the field, then plowing and harrowing it to break down the soil and to further remove any remaining vegetation.

The dark soil, pried from the remnants of a bog enriched by tides in the rainy months of June until October, is raked in rows, collected and carried by hand into a palm-leaf leaching vat where salt-water washes through it to produce precious brine drops.

Brine water is then collected in earthenware jars, and when there is enough for cooking, it is poured into a *kawa*, which is a huge iron vat sitting over a wood-fired earthen stove. Cooked in high heat for hours, the salty water soon crystallizes into salt, which is later packed in the now familiar green palm leaves.

The field-clearing part of *pagkukupkop* is done as early as November. But stockpiling the harvested earth and cooking the collected brine commences in January and goes on until June. In July, and in the succeeding rainy months, salt production grounds to a standstill, as rainwater dilutes what salinity

could be extracted from the soil.

The production process starts again in November when the cycle is repeated.

“It’s a backbreaking job, but that’s how it is done here,” says Editha Morayag, a fourth-generation salt maker, who learned the craft from her mother. “We get our salt from the soil. There is no other way.”

Traditional craft

PANAYUNAN is a sliver of land at the western fringe of Barangay Danabunga, one of the six coastal villages among the 31 barangays of Botolan, the biggest town in Zambales in terms of land area.

Like other places similarly named in the Sambal-speaking areas of the province (There is also Panayunan in Masinloc and Candelaria towns), it refers to a swampy place where folks catch fish by lamplight (*manuyo*) at night. Naturally, Panayunan is also a place where saltwater is traditionally dried by the sun to produce crystalline deposits.

Botolan’s Panayunan is no exception. Only that its salt products come not from sun-baked beds but from the juice of brackish soil.

Morayag remembers that as a nine-year-old growing in the

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seaside community, she could see makeshift salt factories along the whole length of Panayunan’s coast—from Asinan, the old salt-making center, up to Dawey-Dawey, a mangrove area at the mouth of the Bancal River which marks the boundary of Botolan and Iba towns.

Already, the locals were then using nipa palm leaves (*buy-o*) which are abundant in the mangrove area, to wrap their salt products with, Morayag recalls.

“We used *hahayop* [a woven bamboo basket used to catch fish in shallow waters] and *tiklis* [also woven bamboo basket for carrying fruits and vegetables] to store salt in bulk at the *kamalig* [native storehouse], but when just a small measure is sold or given away, the salt is packed in palm leaves like what we still have today,” Morayag explains.

Green and healthy

THE nipa palm packaging is actually a basket that gives Botolan’s *asin sa buy-o* (literally “salt in nipa leaves”) its distinct image of an organic product. Shaped like a bell with a closed bottom reinforced by a bamboo ring and dried banana stalk, the woven palm fronds are stitched together with thin rattan or bamboo strips and tapers off at the top where the mouth is secured with a bamboo thong.

But aside from the green



packaging, *asin sa buy-o* is actually healthy, says Mae Abuan, who markets her family's products online.

"It doesn't have any chemical introduced in the manufacturing process," explains Abuan. "And the minerals, nutrients and natural taste from the brine is retained because it is simply cooked over fire the traditional way."

As such, *asin sa buy-o* has become a popular item that sells at top prices in Metro Manila shops that offer organic and healthy food.

Balighaya Store, an online grocery that prides itself with selling "unique and hard-to-find local food products," sells one kilo of *asin sa buy-o* in its nipa-leaf package at P350 each.

The online retailer describes the Botolan artisanal salt as "a

premium, unrefined sea salt that's sourced and crafted from the pristine waters of Zambales...carefully hand-harvested using traditional techniques passed down for generations."

Thus, purity and exceptional quality of the salt is ensured, Balighaya concludes.

Testimonies also abound that *asin sa buy-o* is a hit among the society's upper crust, who are more into healthy food fads and green products.

An official of a national bank who comes from Zambales gifted her officemates and friends with baskets of *asin sa buy-o* one Christmas and recalls the warm reception it received. "They were so enthusiastic! The people from Forbes Park, most especially, simply can't

get enough of *asin sa buy-o*," she reveals.

Due to more demand from friends, said official says she made several purchases directly from Panayunan salt-makers during that Christmas season.

Orphan industry

DESPITE its popularity, *asin sa buy-o* and other locally produced artisanal salt are said to be on the brink of extinction because of several factors like climate change, globalization, and a Philippine law that mandated the iodization of food-grade salt produced or sold in the country.

A study published by the Fisheries Postharvest Research and Development Division of the National Fisheries Research and Development Institute in the January-June



PRECIOUS DROP: Brine drips into an earthenware jar after leaching from soil washed with saltwater. Two jars of brine are needed in one batch to make about eight kilos of salt. HENRY EMPENO



FINISHED PRODUCT: *Asin sa buy-o* is organic sea salt wrapped in nipa palm leaves. HENRY EMPENO



NEWLY COOKED *asin sa buy-o* HENRY EMPENO



2024 issue of the *Philippine Journal of Fisheries* lamented that “despite being archipelagic, the Philippines heavily relies on salt imports to meet its annual demand.”

It added that local salt production is estimated at 114,623.29 metric tons (MT), or just 16.78 percent of the country’s annual salt requirement.

This production includes those of the three salt producers in Zambales, which jointly account for just a total production of 106.02 MT.

Countrywide, the biggest salt producer is Occidental Mindoro, which relies on solar production in ponds, with total average annual production volume of 65,831 MT, or 57.43 percent of the national total. Pangasinan, which is a neighboring province of Zambales, comes in second with 34,658 MT, or 30.24 percent.

The study identified the factors causing the decline of local salt production as: dearth of government policies and support services, thereby making it an “orphan industry”; seasonal patterns due to climate change; limited materials like clay tiles and wood planks for salt bed flooring, as well as heavy equipment; aging population of salt producers; passage of RA 8172, or ASIN Law, which became a deterrent to industry growth; high cost of land rental; market competition due to globalization and tariff reduction; labor practices that discourage job security; food safety compliance; limited research and development studies; changing business interest among salt producers; and conversion of salt farms into more profitable business.

The study warns that “failure to set forth holistic solutions to the said problems may indicate a total demise of the industry in the long run.”

The dwindling salt production nationwide is mirrored in Zambales where only three salt producers have been identified by the Zambales Provincial Agriculture Office (PAO) as of February 2024.

Accordingly, there is one in Iba town, which produces one metric ton of salt per day using a drilled water source and rock salt from Pangasinan; another in Palauig town, which produces iodized salt by processing salt from Pangasinan for about 60 kilos of salt per week; and the *asin sa buy-o* production in Danabunga, Botolan, with an out-

put of 10 kilos per day.

Despite the sluggish production and trade figures, Morayag and Abuan say they now can cook two to three batches of salt a day from their stockpile of salt-bearing earth, as three huge earthen jars of brine collected from soil would be enough for two cooking batches.

Each batch, they say, yields from seven to eight kilos of salt. So that during peak production season in summer months, they can produce up to 24 kilos of salt daily if they would cook three times a day.

This means starting to cook at 6:00 a.m. and keeping at it until 12 midnight, says Morayag.

Keepers of the hearth

AT *asin sa buy-o*’s current farm gate price of from P100 to P130 per kilo, hard work could earn the salt-makers of Panayunan up to P3,000 on a good day.

Morayag, whose partner also comes from a family of local salt-makers, says that if you worked hard enough, the humble craft of making *asin sa buy-o* could be a substantial source of income—more than enough to make daily household ends meet.

“Among the salt-makers here, there are those who were able to send their children to college just by making salt, and there are those who have set up their own grocery store with this kind of income,” Morayag beams.

She proudly adds that she herself has a daughter who is a nurse in San Diego, California. “If I’d want to, I could follow her in the US already, but there is still one child here who’s studying Political Science, and so we have to work still,” says Morayag.

Among the salt-makers here, Nanay Helen Abuan, Mae’s mother, is considered the grand lady of the local industry. At 69 years, she is active in the village’s Senior Citizens Federation affairs, attending meetings two times a week and helping do the rounds of members for collection of monthly dues.

Despite her age, she still rakes the earth to make her pile of salty soil, carries this to her own pile of dirt now covered with tarpaulin near the hearth, cooks the collected brine, and weaves nipa palm baskets for the distinctive packaging.

Nanay Helen, who started making salt since age 15, has also taught her 10 children—six girls and four boys—the craft, passing the art learned from her own grandmother to the coming generations.

“This business is a family affair. It has been ever since,” she observes.

But her children, Mae and Amy in particular, had taken the family’s means of livelihood a notch higher by using social media to promote their products, widen their customer base, and hence increase income.

Nanay Helen says that as much as 90 percent of their customers today place orders through Facebook, proof of the successful marriage of new technology with traditional production methods.

The Abuans and Morayags are just two of the few remaining

families who make *asin sa buy-o*. In 2002, when they organized the Samahan ng Mag-aasin at Mag-iisda ng Panayunan (SAMAMPA), there were 27 families involved in the business but these soon dwindled to nine, recalls Morayag.

Last year, 13 families joined the revival of the local group, now simply called Asin sa Buy-o after their famous product. For this reorganization, the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) gave each family a set of stainless-steel cooking vat and a matching brick oven to modernize the production process.

However, it soon became apparent that the locals couldn’t produce as much salt with the new equipment as when they cooked their brine over their old iron *kawa*.

“We don’t know why, but it seems the water we collect here are not compatible with the new vats. So we went back to our own cooking equipment,” Morayag relates. Inexplicably, she adds, they can produce salt with the new vats using seawater, but that would be too laborious for them as their cooking area is too far away from the sea.

BFAR reportedly has promised to pull out the mismatched equipment. But again, the setback has discouraged some families who were initially eager to start making salt anew.

“Now we are back to four,” laments Morayag.



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Cultural treasure

WHAT does the future hold for these guardians of tradition and keepers of hearth here in Panayunan?

Last year, Senator Loren Legarda filed a bill which seeks to promote the salt industry in the Philippines, by identifying and addressing challenges and gaps that weaken the industry.

In particular, Senate Bill No. 22434, or the Act Strengthening and Revitalizing the Salt Industry in the Philippines, targets the development of artisanal salt made with traditional methods. These include the *asin tibuok* of Bohol, *tutul* of Guimaras, *sugpo asin* of Pangasinan, and *asin sa buy-o* of Zambales.

"This is not just salt. This is considered a cultural treasure that we must preserve," Legarda was quoted as saying when she pushed for the legislation. "As an archipelagic country, the Philippines should always utilize all the opportunities given by our rich natural resources. And with that being said, we should start with our salt industry," adds Legarda.

In December last year, both houses of Congress—further noting that 92 percent of the country's salt requirements was already being imported—ratified the bill, which establishes a five-year roadmap for the Philippine salt industry.

Under the bill, which was listed as a priority measure by President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. through the Legislative Executive Development Advisory Council (Ledac), salt is classified as an aquatic resource product that is exempt from all taxes.

Similarly, 13 provinces are identified as priority areas for salt production: Ilocos Norte, Ilocos Sur, La Union, Pangasinan, Bataan, Occidental Mindoro, Oriental Mindoro, Palawan, Marinduque, Quezon Province, Misamis Oriental, Antique, and, of course, Zambales.

Moreover, the law also provides the necessary support to small salt producers and cooperatives: equipment and other inputs for salt development; salt farm warehouses; modern salt production and processing technologies.

Here at Panayunan, as they go about with cooking *asin sa buy-o*, Nanay Helen, Editha, Mae and their kin are waiting for just this kind of law.