

CLIPPINGS FOR TODAY, APRIL 01, 2024

A. SEC. FTL Jr. QUOTED

MANILA STANDARD

DA gets \$1-M FAO technical grant to help boost domestic food production

THE MANILA TIMES

Czech Republic's Agriculture Minister visits the Philippines

MALAYA BUSINESS INSIGHT

DA readies more projects on food security

BUSINESS WORLD

FAO grant funds 3 PHL agri feasibility studies for \$1 million

B. DA FAMILY

THE MANILA TIMES

FAO grants \$1M to boost PH fisheries sector

BUSINESS MIRROR

'Law gives LGUs important role in reviving salt industry'

PHL pork inventory falls by 7.2% -NMIS data

ABANTE TONITE

Pag-ikot sa mga post office ng PHLPost, DA Kadiwa Pop Up Store dinagsa

C. AGRI-RELATED STORY

PHILIPPINE DAILY INQUIRER

PH government tweaking incentives for banana industry

IRRI cues debut in 2025 of grains that Dampen craving for rice

THE PHILIPPINE STAR

Coming soon: Rice for diabetics

Sketches: Endangered

THE MANILA TIMES

IRRI planning release of diabetic – friendly rice

Japan empowers Bohol's agriculture, fishery communities

BUSINESS WORLD

Low glycemic-index rice being trialed in multiple locations, IRRI says

PILIPINO STAR NGAYON

ACT- agri Kaagapay, Tunay na kaagapay ng mga Pilipino

D. FOREIGN STORY

MALAYA BUSINESS INSIGHT

Corn rallies, soybeans down

BUSINESS WORLD

In Iraq, water crisis leaves farmers clinging to sidr trees

London cocoa prices climb; robusta coffee falls 2%

EU envoys agree deal on Ukraine agricultural imports, Belgium says



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DA gets \$1-m FAO technical grant to help boost domestic food production

By Othel V. Campos

THE Philippines received a \$1-million technical grant from the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations, the Department of Agriculture (DA) said over the weekend.

It said the technical cooperation funding would be used to implement various projects aimed at improving food production capabilities.

“We will make it a point to fast track the preparation process to ensure that our agricultural sector can benefit from this investment, especially the assistance intended for areas heavily damaged by El Nino, which is a key priority of the **DA Secretary**,” said DA spokesperson Arnel de Mesa.

The FAO grant is about 40 percent higher than the \$594,000 proposed by the DA. The final allocation of

\$1 million signifies a significant investment in strengthening the Philippines’ agri-fisheries sector, it said.

FAO intends to execute the technical cooperation projects with a focus on creating a more efficient and sustainable food production chain.

The projects will provide additional support to regions affected by El Nino, helping communities recover and build resilience against future climate challenges, in addi-

tion to promoting investments in aquaculture and seaweed production.

The collaboration between the DA and FAO strengthens their existing partnership in tackling the challenges faced by the agriculture and fisheries sectors.

It said the grant is a potential springboard for securing further resources from other international organizations.



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Czech Republic's Agriculture Minister visits the Philippines

THE Minister of Agriculture of the Czech Republic Marek Výborný, accompanied by a business delegation composed of 40 representatives, visited the Philippines for a series of meetings with local officials to discuss agricultural cooperation with the Philippines.

On that occasion, the Czech Embassy in Manila in partnership with the Czech Chamber of Commerce and the Ministry of Agriculture of the Czech Republic organized Czech-Philippine Agribusiness Forum 2024 in Makati and Davao on March 21 and 22 respectively. The Czech companies presented their solutions for the brewing industry, dairy production, meat processing as well as other related agriculture industries.

During the Minister's keynote address he stated, "I believe that the rich and diverse participation in today's forum may result to enriching and strengthening the cooperation, especially in the sectors that we represent here today, and that's agriculture and food industry. I would be very glad for our partners from the Philippines to perceive this as a clear signal how much we are interested in strengthening our contacts with partners in the Philippines."

The Minister of Agriculture also paid a courtesy visit to the

University of the Philippines (UP) and discussed with President Angelo Jimenez potential research and university collaborations in forestry, tropical and

subtropical agriculture, as well as in water management.

The visit to Manila culminated in a bilateral meeting with Secretary Francisco Laurel of the Department of Agriculture during which a Letter of Intent on Cooperation in Agriculture and the Food Industry was signed by the two dignitaries. Both Minister Výborný and Secretary Laurel agreed to enhance the collaboration in various areas, including veterinary issues, livestock production, aquaculture, as well as dairy production.

Additionally, discussions extended

to food production and its accompanying technologies, water management for agriculture, and to fostering scientific research exchanges.

Overall, the visit of the Czech Minister of Agriculture Marek Výborný to the Philippines emphasized a commitment to enhance mutual trade and economic relations in the agriculture and food industry sectors as well as to foster stronger partnership between the universities and research institutions in the Czech Republic and the Philippines.



■ (From left) Undersecretary Jerome Oliveros, Secretary of the Department of Agriculture Francisco Tiu Laurel, Minister of Agriculture Marek Výborný, and Ambassador Karel Hejč. PHOTO COURTESY OF DA-OSEC



DA readies more projects on food security

BY JED MACAPAGAL

ADDITIONAL projects meant to further secure the country's food supply are being prepared, according to the Department of Agriculture (DA).

The DA said the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations has granted a \$1-million funding for technical cooperation projects in the Philippines agri-fisheries sector.

In a report to Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr., DA spokesman and assistant secretary Arnel de Mesa said that in his recent meeting with FAO Philippines representative Dr. Lionel Dabbadie, the agency has initially proposed about \$594,000 for FAO's consideration.

The identified focus items are on agrifood system transformation, additional responses to El Niño-affected areas and agricultural investment for aquaculture and seaweed production, the DA said.

"We will make it a point to fast track the preparation process to ensure that our agricultural sector can benefit from this investment, especially the assistance intended for areas heavily damaged by El Niño, which is a key priority of our secretary," de Mesa said in a statement.

The agency did not provide further details on the FAO grant.

Meanwhile, the DA has created three teams to prepare and finalize the feasibility studies for priority infrastructure projects that will boost food production, particularly rice and corn.

Tiu Laurel designated Jerome Oliveros, DA undersecretary for special concerns and for official development assistance, as the chairperson across all three project-preparation teams that would draft the framework and plans for the proposed post-harvest program for rice and corn, solar-powered cold storages as well as solar-powered irrigation

systems.

Tiu Laurel said the teams will have to ensure that the project documents are compliant with the requirements of the DA-wide project clearing house system and the National Economic and Development Authority-Investment Coordination Committee.

As a special instruction for the solar-powered irrigation system project, the DA secretary said the team involved should ensure consistency on the proposed sites with the database of the National Irrigation Administration and with the Bureau of Soil and Water Management irrigation master plan.

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



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FAO grant funds 3 PHL agri feasibility studies for \$1 million

THE PHILIPPINES has received grants worth \$1 million from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) to support technical cooperation projects focused on the agri-fisheries sector.

In a statement, the Department of Agriculture (DA) said that the projects involve agrifood system transformation, protection for El Niño-affected areas, and aquaculture and seaweed production.

"We will make it a point to fast track the preparation process to ensure that our agricultural sector can benefit from this investment, especially the assistance intended for areas heavily damaged by El Niño, which is a key priority of our Secretary," DA spokesman and Assistant Secretary Arnel V. de Mesa said.

The funding exceeded the \$594,000-initial DA proposal



BETH MACDONALD-UNSPASH

when it met with FAO Philippines Representative Lionel Dabbadie.

In a separate release, the DA said it is set to finalize feasibility studies on infrastructure projects

that will boost production of rice and corn.

Secretary Francisco P. Tiu Laurel, Jr. created three project preparation teams to draft the framework for the post-harvest

program for rice and corn, solar-powered cold storage facilities, and proposed solar-powered irrigation systems.

Undersecretary Jerome V. Oliveros will chair the three teams, while Undersecretaries Roger V. Navarro and Cheryl Marie Natividad-Caballero and Mr. De Mesa will serve as co- and vice-chairs.

"The teams will have to ensure the project documents are compliant with the requirements of the DA-wide project clearing house system and the National Economic and Development Authority-Investment Coordination Committee," Mr. Laurel said.

The DA estimates that the government needs to put up P93 billion to build post-harvest facilities for rice and corn and P1 billion to build cold storage facilities to reduce losses and extend the shelf life of the vegetables. — **Justine Irish D. Tabile**



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FAO grants \$1M to boost PH fisheries sector

THE United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) is providing \$1 million to boost the country's fisheries sector, the Department of Agriculture (DA) said on Sunday.

The funding will be spent on technical cooperation projects (TCP) with focus on the agri-fisheries sector, Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel Jr. said.

"The identified TCPs focused on agri-food system transformation, additional responses to El Niño-affected areas, and agricultural investment for aquaculture and seaweed production," the DA said.

DA spokesman and Assistant

Secretary Arnel de Mesa said that the department initially proposed around \$594,000 of grant during his meeting with FAO Philippine representative Lionel Dabbadie.

"We will make it a point to fast track the preparation process to ensure that our agricultural sector can benefit from this investment, especially the assistance intended for areas heavily damaged by El Niño, which is a key priority of our secretary," said de Mesa.

According to the department, the technical cooperation strengthens the relationship between the DA and FAO while also addressing

the challenges in the agri-fishery sector.

Moreover, the DA said that this will open additional opportunities and additional resources from other multilateral organizations for the benefit of Filipino farmers and fisherfolk.

Last month, the DA and FAO announced plans to strengthen the country's agri-food systems and boost rice productivity.

This involves collaboration with the International Rice Research Institute and local government units in utilizing improved and resilient rice varieties.

Tiu Laurel and FAO Director-

General Qu Dongyu emphasized the significance of technology and innovation in elevating the Philippines' agri-food systems toward sustainability, resilience and inclusivity.

During the high-level ministerial session held in Sri Lanka, Dongyu highlighted the Philippines' aquaculture sector as a promising industry with the potential to contribute to economic growth.

Dongyu added that this sector could help provide decent livelihood at the local level and improve food security and nutrition.

JANINE ALEXIS MIGUEL



'Law gives LGUs important role in reviving salt industry'

By JOVEE MARIE N. DELA CRUZ
X@joveemarie

LOCAL government units (LGUs) are required by Republic Act (RA) 11985 to help the national government identify areas that are suitable for salt farming and to support local farmers in increasing their output to eventually turn salt into an export commodity.

Camarines Sur Rep. L Ray Villafuerte said RA 11985, or the Philippine Industry Salt Development Act, grants LGUs a "significant role" in revitalizing the salt industry.

He said the aim of the law is to support local farmers, increase production, and eventually turn salt into an export commodity.

Under RA 11985, LGUs are required to

establish their own Salt Industry Development Task Forces (Salt Task Forces) to survey existing salt farms and processing enterprises within their jurisdictions. This initiative is in support of a proposed five-year master plan aimed at expanding salt production areas, boosting domestic output, attracting investments, and marketing Philippine salt products.

The law mandates cooperation between LGUs and five government agencies, including the Department of Agriculture's Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) and the National Fisheries Research and Development Institute (NFRDI), the Departments of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) and Trade and Industry (DTI), and the Department of Science and Technology (DOST) regional offices. Together, they will identify suitable areas for local salt

production.

To facilitate this process, Bfar and DENR, along with the National Mapping and Resource Information Authority (NAMRIA), are tasked with mapping and designating public lands, including municipal waters, for salt production.

Villafuerte noted that three LGU organizations will be represented in the Philippine Salt Industry Development Council (Salt Council), responsible for crafting the five-year master plan and driving sector modernization.

Additionally, RA 11985 transfers supervision of identified public lands from the DENR to the BFAR. Within 90 days of the law's effectivity, the DENR will transfer suitable lands to the BFAR for salt production purposes.

The law also outlines provisions for preferential treatment of cooperatives or associations of small salt producers in accessing Salt Production Tenurial Instruments (SPTIs) and grants incentives to investors in salt farm development and processing facilities.

Villafuerte traced the local salt-making industry back to the 18th century, saying there was a time when Las Piñas and Malabon were the top salt producers before Pangasinan eventually became the country's leading area for salt production.

He said the decline of the salt industry was a result of the ratification by the Philippines of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) in 1994; and enactment

of RA 8172, or the Act for Salt Iodization Nationwide (ASIN).

GATT's ratification eventually led to the influx of cheap imported salt, he said, while the ASIN Law required the addition of iodine to salt to address the country's micronutrient malnutrition.

"The capital requirement for the machinery and technology for salt iodization was a heavy burden for local salt makers, leading many of them to drop one by one and shift to other livelihood sources."

He said the salt industry also suffered a great deal from rapid urbanization, which led to the conversion of more and more salt-producing places into residential and industrial areas; and from climate change, which caused wild weather conditions that affected salt production.

To reverse the poor state of the domestic

salt industry, he said the new law aims to increase salt production to attain salt self-sufficiency, and become a net exporter of salt; encourage salt farming and expand the number of salt-producing areas; and ensure sustainable production, management, harvesting, and soil and water conservation practices in salt-farming areas.

It also aims to promote public and private investments in the salt industry development programs; ensure the sustainability and viability of the salt industry through the establishment of cooperatives among salt farmers and salt producers; advance market access for Philippine salt products locally and internationally; and support research and development (R&D) activities for salt production and processing and introduce new and appropriate technology based on R&D outputs.



PHIL pork inventory falls by 7.2%—NMIS data

THE country's pork inventory declined a few days before Filipinos began the observance of Holy Week, according to data from the attached agency of the **Department of Agriculture (DA).**

Figures from the National Meat Inspection Service (NMIS) showed that pork inventory in local cold storage facilities declined by 7.25 percent to 65,582.05 metric tons (MT) as of March 18, from 70,709.07 MT a year ago.

Data from the agency indicated that the bulk of the inventory during the period consisted of imports, which reached 64,718.94 MT. The figure, however, was lower than the previous year's 67,536.31.

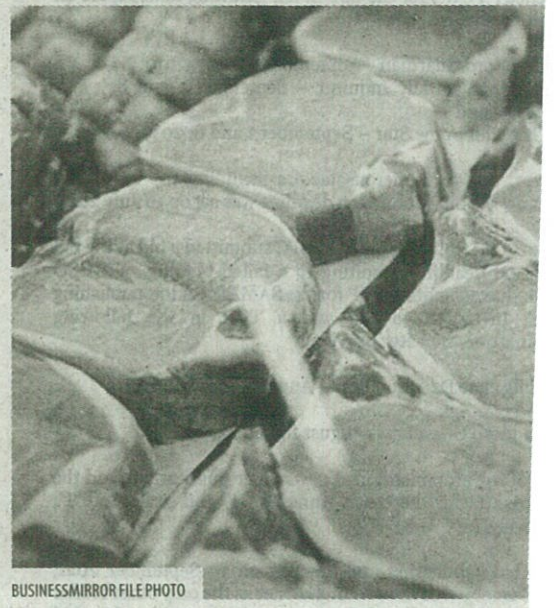
Pork from local raisers plunged to 863.11 MT, from 3,172.77 MT recorded a year ago, as African swine fever (ASF) continued to affect output.

On a monthly basis, however, cold storage facilities had more pork in March compared with the February volume of 61,285.42 MT.

NMIS data also showed that dressed chicken inventory as of March 18 rose by 9 percent year-on-year to 60,999.33 MT.

The bulk of the inventory consisted of imports which reached 41,779.47 MT, slightly lower than the previous year's level.

On a monthly basis, NMIS data showed that dressed chicken inventory was higher by more than 10,000



MT. Imports accounted for most of the increase at 8,536.45 MT.

Cold storage facilities in Region 3, Region 4-A and the National Capital Region (NCR) held the bulk of the pork inventory during the period.

The same regions accounted for a chunk of the dressed chicken inventory, according to NMIS.

The agency said the inventory of frozen pork came from accredited commercial and in-house cold storage facilities, including meat processing plants.

As for the dressed chicken inventory, the NMIS said the data covered those from accredited facilities. However, fresh chilled chicken and mechanically deboned meat were excluded from the report.

The Philippines has stepped up its purchases of meat products from abroad in recent years, particularly pork, as raisers remain unable to expand output due to ASF.

The DA said the outbreak of the fatal hog disease, which first struck the country in 2019, has caused P200 billion in damages. At present, the agency said approximately 50 percent of all the hogs in the Philippines are still affected by ASF.

In November 2023, the Bureau of Animal Industry said only 11 provinces out of the 82 remain ASF-free. They are Batanes, Occidental Mindoro, Palawan, Bohol, Siquijor, Biliran, Bukidnon, Basilan, Lanao del Sur, Sulu and Tawi-Tawi.



Pag-ikot sa mga post office ng PHLPost, DA Kadiwa Pop Up Store dinagsa

Bilang paghahanda at paggunita ng pamilyang Pilipino sa Maha na Araw, dinagsa ng mga mamimili ang murang mga produktong itinitinda tulad ng dried fish, gulay, prutas at maging mga salted egg na may turmeric flavor ang “Kadiwa Pop Up Store”-ng PHLPost Olongapo City Post Office.

Dumalo sa pagbubukas ng “Kadiwa Pop Up Store” sina PHLPost Northwest Luzon Area 2 Director Merma Abalos, City Agriculturist Francis Maniago, Olongapo City Post Office Postmaster-II Virginia S. Salang at Eugenio S. Patawaran – Marketing Specialist ng Department of Agriculture.

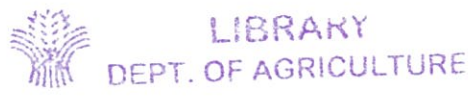
Dumating din ang iba’t ibang grupo ng mga magsasaka at mga SMEs sa isinagawang Kadiwa Pop Up Store ng PHLPost Olongapo at Department of Agriculture. Maaga pa lamang ay napuno na ang lugar upang samantalahin ang mga murang paninda

pantawid sa mahabang bakasyon ngayong Semana Santa.

Bilang isang government logistics at courier provider, layunin ng PHLPost na maging katuwang ng mga magsasaka at mga SMEs sa rehiyon at probinsya sa bansa upang maghatid ng mga produkto na maibebenta ng mura mula sa mga sakahan patungo sa proyektong Kadiwa ng pamahalaan.

“Nakatutuwa na maging bahagi ang PHLPost sa isinusulong ng Department of Agriculture at ng administrasyon ng ating mahal na pangulong BBM tulad nitong Kadiwa Pop Up store na patuloy na tinatangkilik ng mga lokal na mamimili dito sa ating Post Office Area”, pahayag ni PHLPost Postmaster General Luis D. Carlos.

Nais ng PHLPost na maghatid hindi lamang ng mga sulat at pakete, kundi ng mga produkto at serbisyo mula sa mga magsasaka upang mapakinabangan ng ating mga kababayan.



ANTICIPATING FTA WITH SOUTH KOREA

PH GOVERNMENT TWEAKING INCENTIVES FOR BANANA INDUSTRY

By **Alden M. Monzon**
@AldenMonzonINQ

The Philippine government is already planning the changes in the fiscal incentives scheme for the local banana industry, ahead of the implementation this year of the country's free trade agreement (FTA) with South Korea, Trade Undersecretary Ceferino S. Rodolfo said last week.

Rodolfo said this was among the number of preemptive moves by the government to make sure that things will go smoothly once the bilateral trade deal comes into force.

"We are also preparing, for example, our incentives regime for plantations. We are tweaking it now so that banana companies can then take advantage of it," Rodolfo told reporters in

a chance interview in Makati City.

"The South Korean embassy here has also been very active in the development of technical cooperation with them, for example, when it comes to mechanical equipment," he added.

Asked when he saw the FTA being ratified by the Philippine side, Rodolfo said "by the middle of this year."

He added that the ratification process in Seoul is also progressing, based on their communication with the Koreans.

In September of last year, the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) said that more than P170 million worth of locally produced agricultural goods each year—including bananas and processed pineapple—will be covered under the FTA.

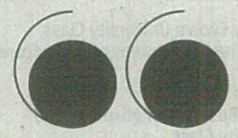
Rodolfo had said back then

that the 30-percent import tariffs currently levied to Philippine banana exports to South Korea will be reduced annually in equal increments, until it becomes zero on the fifth year of effectivity of the FTA.

Philippine exports of processed pineapple, which are currently subjected to a 36-percent import tariff, will also see a gradual tariff reduction in a span of seven years, he added.

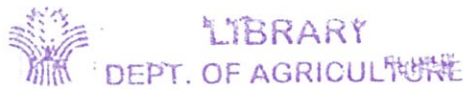
The export value of these agricultural goods coming from the Philippines and shipped to South Korea is estimated to be worth more than \$3 million annually, based on the DTI's records.

Also last September, President Marcos announced the signing of the FTA during the 43rd Association of Southeast Asian Nations Summit in Jakarta, Indonesia. *INQ*



The South Korean embassy ... has also been very active in the development of technical cooperation with them

Ceferino Rodolfo
Trade Undersecretary



WHEN HALF-SERVING FAILS ...

IRRI CUES DEBUT IN 2025 OF GRAINS THAT DAMPEN CRAVING FOR RICE

By **Jordeene B. Lagare**
@jordeenelagare

The Laguna-based International Rice Research Institute (Irri) has set a goal of introducing a variety of rice that is rich in protein by 2025.

“Hopefully by next year, it (an ultra-low glycemic index or GI, high protein rice variety) will be released to farmers. It will be released in the Philippines for the first time if ever,” Irri associate scientist Reuben James Buenafe said in a statement.

Buenafe explained that this new variety will help in muscle growth as well as in the development of brain activity.

Despite having the same calorie component compared to the usual rice, the Irri noted the one they are developing is “more balanced.”

Protein is composed of building blocks called amino acids to help maintain and build body tissues and muscles. Some of the protein sources include eggs, nuts, lean meats, fish and dairy.

Irri researcher Rhowell Jr. Tiozon said the consumption of



URBAN RICE FIELDS A farmer inspects farm plots after planting rice for second cropping season in Quezon City.

—GRIG C. MONTEGRANDE

ultra-low GI, high protein rice has beneficial nutrition values and would reduce the craving for rice, a staple Filipino food.

Feeling full

Excessive rice consumption often leads to high blood pressure and increases the risk for Type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease. “Actually, one of the reasons why we crave and eat

as much rice is to cause spikes in blood sugar and in turn, the insulin level also rises. But if the food has low GI and high protein levels, the insulin level slows down and we will experience more of what we call satiety or the satisfied feeling of being full after eating,” he explained.

According to Irri, the multilocation trial for ultra-low GI, high protein rice variety al-

ready started in more than 10 provinces nationwide.

Tiozon said they expect that more rice farmers will cultivate this variety once the trials determine the target market. He also said the price of ultra-low GI, high protein rice is the same as the normal rice available in the markets.

Aside from that, he said the variety also has the same fertilizer requirement and planting conditions so “there should be no change of prices.”

In October last year, the Irri presented the first batch of ultra-low GI rice samples to President Marcos during the opening ceremony of the 6th International Rice Congress held in the country.

“Irri’s latest discovery offers the opportunity to develop rice varieties with low GI, and for the first time ever, ultra-low GI levels, to meet the health needs and dietary preferences of consumers,” said Nese Sreenivasulu, head of Irri’s Consumer-driven Grain Quality and Nutrition Research Unit. **INQ**



Coming soon: Rice for diabetics

Savoring staple sans sugar spike

By **JASPER EMMANUEL ARCALAS**

Filipino rice lovers may soon need not worry about their blood sugar level spiking when eating the staple as scientists at the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) are advancing well with its ultra-low glycemic index (GI) rice.

Reuben James Buenafe, an associate scientist at IRRI, said the institute is hopeful that the low and ultra-low GI rice varieties would be released to farmers next year.

The low and ultra-low GI project, which was first revealed in October 2023 before President Marcos, is currently undergoing multi-location trials in over 10 provinces nationwide. Marcos himself endorsed the low and ultra-low GI rice varieties, pointing out that the new varieties would boost Filipinos' nutrition intake.

The variety is being touted as a

viable alternative to commercially available white rice that contains high GI levels, which can increase the risk of Type 2 diabetes.

Since IRRI is based in the country, Buenafe said Filipino rice farmers would be the first to have commercial access to the new varieties.

In October last year, IRRI interim director general Ajay Kohli said the low and ultra-low GI rice varieties would be "market-ready within two years."

The low and ultra-low GI rice varieties boast lower GI index compared to commercially available white rice.

Rice has high GI levels if its GI is 70 and above, medium if 55 to 69, low if less than 59 and ultra-low if less than 45.

For comparison, most of the rice varieties sold in the market, including the Pinoy favorite Dinorado, have GI levels between 70 and 72 while IRRI's ultra-low GI rice can

go as low as 25.

IRRI scientists explained that the low and ultra-low GI rice varieties would be beneficial to people with diabetes since their blood sugar level would not spike upon consuming the staple.

Latest data released by the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) showed that diabetes mellitus is the fourth leading cause of death in the country.

"One of the reasons why we crave more rice is the insulin response due to a fast spike in our blood sugar level when we eat," said Rhowell Tiozon Jr., a researcher and doctoral scholar at IRRI.

"If the food has low GI and high protein, our insulin response would be slow because we will experience satiety or satisfaction in food – so you get full faster," Tiozon added.

Turn to B3

Savoring... From B1

IRRI scientists also discovered that the ultra-low GI rice variety they were producing also contains high protein content of about 14.5 percent.

The higher protein content would help in muscle growth and boost brain activity which IRRI scientists pointed out would be beneficial to kids, particularly those struggling in their studies.

IRRI scientists are also working on converting the Dinorado variety into a low or ultra-low variant, making it more palatable to consumers while getting the benefits of their scientific discovery.

IRRI scientists emphasized that the cost to farmers and possible retail price of the low and ultra-low rice varieties would be the same as the ones sold in the market today.

"It has the same planting re-

quirements, therefore there should not be any change in the price. It will even fetch a premium for farmers since it will have a niche market," Tiozon said.

"Diabetic Filipino consumers would be encouraged to buy this variety," he added.

Buenafe noted that the low and ultra-low GI rice market was valued at \$3.12 billion in 2019 and was expected to grow by five percent annually.



SKETCHES

ANA MARIE PAMINTUAN

Endangered

Before the Holy Week break, among the topics in our newsroom chats was salt. Top-quality, non-iodized sea salt of just the right size – not too fine, not too large like some varieties of Himalayan pink.

It's not pricey French *fleur de sel*, the caviar of salt, but sea salt from Pangasinan, my paternal grandmother's home province.

I found out that I wasn't the only one who preferred non-iodized rock salt from the wet market, sold uncovered in a *bilao* or bamboo winnowing basket, scooped out of a large mound and weighed in front of you.

And I found out that I wasn't the only one who preferred salt from Pangasinan, whose salt beds face the West Philippine Sea. At least Beijing is not laying claim (yet) to the salt beds.

Salt was one of the stuff I set out to buy when I visited Pangasinan again, during the Holy Week break. Dagupan is one of my favorite travel destinations during Lent, of course for the *bangus* or milkfish, the best in the country, and the other fish that's special to the province, *malaga*.

My annual visit to the province is also a chance for me to visit a paternal aunt, a retired psychologist. Her home is just across the main highway from Patring's *Tupig*, the best I've ever tasted. Business must be good for Patring's. Even on Good Friday, I could see many folks within the compound scraping the coconuts, so there must have been more inside the house doing the actual cooking of the flattened rice cake.

Preparing *tupig* is a labor of love. I enjoy cooking, but this is one product I leave to the expert *tupig* makers, and Patring's never disappoints.

What was disappointing was my failure to find sea salt in the Dagupan market. Maybe I didn't look in the right place. But I got my large *bangus* and *malaga*, plus live *suahe*, and of course the other famous Pangasinan product, mangoes.

Red onions were retailed at P60 a kilo. Yes, the vendor told me, they were of the same local variety sold for P700 a kilo at the end of 2022.

Another disappointment: no local garlic. The vendors were all selling large Taiwanese garlic (P120 to P140 a kilo) because, they told me, the local variety was too small and expensive.

In Manila, Ilocos garlic is retailed for a whopping P450 to P500 a kilo, so I was hoping to get the local bulbs, which are of superior quality than the Taiwanese, at a lower price in Pangasinan.



It's a shame that we're losing our local garlic to imports. We import 93 percent of our national salt needs; the percentage must now be the same for garlic.

From Dagupan on the way back to Manila, I looked for roadside stalls where Ilocos garlic used to be sold. I finally found a grouping of stalls along the highway, I think it was in Urdaneta, where Ilocos garlic in the traditional bundles and braids were still displayed alongside dried red shallots, Lingayen fish sauce and *bagoong isda*.

The garlic was priced at P330 to P350 a kilo depending on the size. I got the largest ones at a discounted P320 because I bought a lot, plus a large bunch of dried shallots and top-quality *walis tambo*, another popular product of Northern Luzon. And several kilos of rock salt, at P100 for three kilos.

President Marcos has said he found it unacceptable that the country is importing *galunggong* or round scad, the so-called poor man's fish (not anymore). Being an Ilocano, he should find it even more unacceptable that we are almost entirely dependent on imports for our salt needs, and Ilocos garlic production is a dying enterprise.

Before leaving the roadside stalls, I looked wistfully at the array of native garlic and shallots – familiar sights in my youth, but now looking like endangered species – wondering how long they would still be around.

Will the salt beds and garlic plantations of Pangasinan soon be converted into residential subdivisions or shopping malls?

The government should be energetically assisting local farmers, fishers and salt producers in making their livelihoods viable and profitable. Liberating them from poverty must be a priority in our still largely agricultural country. Their livelihoods are also tourist draws.

Instead government officials take the easy way out, by simply importing many of the food commodities the country needs. Recently when I bought my regular supply of rice from the wholesaler, fragrant long-grain rice from Myanmar was being retailed at P51 per kilo, much lower than local varieties of similar quality.

Importation is meant to stabilize supply and prices of various agricultural commodities especially outside the harvest season. But importation can be habit forming, and must be balanced carefully with protection of the livelihoods of domestic agricultural producers, especially the marginalized ones.

What we're seeing instead is all-year-round importation, with little accompanying support for boosting local agricultural output. This is discouraging domestic production of a wide variety of food commodities, from rice to onions, garlic and salt.

We urgently need to do something more than hang our heads in shame.





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IRRI planning release of diabetic-friendly rice

THE International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) is eyeing the release of an ultra low glycemic index (GI), protein-enriched rice in the Philippines following results of its preliminary trials, adding it has started multilocation trials for planting.

In an interview with reporters, IRRI rice breeding researcher Rhowell Tuazon Jr. said that after the multilocation trials, they are expecting an increase in the number of planting for the ultra-low GI, high protein rice variety.

"Once we define the market sooner or later, we should see it in the market as well," said Tuazon.

He added that there's no definite timeline for how long it will take for the whole process for it to be commercially available as that will also depend on how the acceptance for the variety will turn out.

"It depends on the stakeholders, including those within the government and the value chain stakeholders," said Tuazon.

According to IRRI, the majority of rice cultivated in the Philippines is high-GI that can easily spike the

sugar level of consumers. It added that foods rich in protein supports not only muscle development but also enhances brain function.

In terms of pricing, Tuazon said the variety shouldn't be more expensive than normal rice.

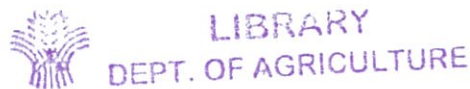
"It should have the same price as the [current] rice variety being cultivated, with the same requirements for planting on the farm and the same fertilizer requirements," he said.

Tuazon added the ultra low-GI, protein-enriched rice could also benefit farmers as the variety can generate more markets and cater to Filipinos with diabetes.

IRRI Associate Scientist Reuben James Buenafe, for his part, said that there are more than 10 provinces with multilocations planted with the ultra low-GI rice. And once available in the market, he said rice variety should be labeled with its ultra low-GI characteristic as it will be considered a specialty rice.

"Hopefully next year this will be released to farmers, it will be released here first if ever in the Philippines," he said.

JANINE ALEXIS MIGUEL



Japan empowers Bohol's agriculture, fishery communities

THE Embassy of Japan on March 19 led the ceremonial turnover of agriculture and fishery inputs to the beleaguered communities of Bohol.

Jumpei Tachikawa, First Secretary and Agriculture Attaché of the Embassy of Japan led the turnover held in Ubay, Bohol. Said initiative by Japan aims at restoring livelihoods and enhancing the resilience of farmers and fisherfolks affected by Typhoon Rai or Odette. Ubay City Mayor Constantino Reyes,

President Carlos Garcia City Mayor Fernando, Estavilla, Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) Representative in the Philippines Lionel Dabbadie, Department of Agriculture officials, local government officials, and project beneficiaries also graced the event.

Typhoon Odette struck the Philippines in December 2021, causing substantial damage, particularly in the agriculture sector. According to FAO's rapid assessment in Region 8 (Eastern

Visayas) and Caraga (Region 13), there has been significant damage to coconut production. In addition, fishermen were unable to continue fishing due to damage to their boats, equipment, and gear. The typhoon also had an impact on local food security.

Recognizing this urgent need for assistance, Japan, pledged a \$2 million initiative, partnering with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) to address the plight of

the farmers and fisherfolks in Bohol, Surigao del Norte, and Southern Leyte.

As part of this project, 30 units of water pumps will be distributed to community-based organizations in the municipalities of Ubay, Mabini, and President Carlos Garcia. These will support the irrigation needs of farmers experiencing rainfall reduction by 60 percent due to El Niño. The project will also provide for the ready-to-lay Bohol native chicken, considered to exhibit high tolerance to harsh weather conditions.

Other agriculture and fishery inputs to be provided include assorted lowland vegetable packets, fertilizers, feeds, milkfish fingerlings, and sets of drift gillnet, among others. Along with these inputs, the beneficiaries also received capacity buildings including livelihood training and capacity building on climate information systems or early warning system facilities.

The Japanese government hopes that this effort will inspire impacted people to rebuild from the damages caused by the typhoon.



■ Jumpei Tachikawa, First Secretary and Agriculture Attaché of the Embassy of Japan (sitting, sixth from left) leads the turnover held in Ubay, Bohol.



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Low glycemic-index rice being trialed in multiple locations, IRRI says

THE International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) said that rice variants rated low and ultra-low on the glycemic index (GI) are undergoing trials, with market studies also ongoing prior to being released to the public possibly next year.

“Right now, we are doing the multi-location trial. After that we expect to increase the amount of ultra-low GI rice that will be

planted, and then once we define the market, sooner or later we will see it on the market,” according to Rhowell N. Tiozon, Jr., researcher at IRRI’s rice breeding innovation department.

Reuben James Buenafe, IRRI’s associate scientist for biochemistry and data science, said: “We hope next year this will be released to farmers and if ever, this will be released first

in the Philippines,” Mr. Buenafe said.

IRRI classifies GI levels below 45 as ultra-low, 46-55 as low GI, 56-69 as intermediate GI, and 70 and above as high GI.

Mr. Tiozon said that most of the cultivated rice varieties in the Philippines have high GI values, which are not healthy for diabetics as they can create a spike in blood sugar levels.

“Typically, they are in the high GI range so around 60 GI usually, but it varies. Generally, especially in the Philippines, our rice variants have high GI. For example, the Dinorado variant can spike sugar quickly,” he said.

Meanwhile, the IRRI is also looking into developing an ultra-low GI and high-protein rice which is currently undergoing clinical trials. Mr. Buenafe said that the

high-protein variant will help in meeting children’s protein needs.

“It can help in muscle growth not only for gym users but also for children who are having difficulties in their studies because protein also helps in brain activity,” he added.

However, IRRI said that the rice will still have the same number of calories but noted that the development will allow them to transfer

low GI traits to popular rice varieties which can potentially slow the incidence of diabetes globally.

“The rice will have the same calories but the macronutrients that people will get from consuming rice with ultra-low GI and high protein values will be better and it will be more balanced compared to the usual rice,” Mr. Tiozon said. — **Justine Irish D. Tabile**

Table

Date: APR 01 2024 Page: 2



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ACT-Agri Kaagapay, Tunay na kaagapay ng mga Pilipino

Muling ipinamalas ng ACT-Agri-Kaagapay Organization sa pamumuno ni Ms. Virginia Ledesma Rodriguez ang malasakit at pagkalinga sa kapwa makaraang mamigay ng pagkain at mineral water nitong Semana Santa sa libu-libong Pilipino.

Unang namigay ang grupo ni Rodriguez sa mga namamanatang Pilipino at nagsasagawa ng Visita Iglesia sa Simbahan ng Balut at Gagalangin sa Tondo noong Huwebes Santo habang sa

Quiapo, Maynila at Payatas, Quezon City naman namigay noong Biyernes Santo.

Kasama ang mga lokal na lider ng ACT-Agri-Kaagapay Organization sa pangunguna ni Ronald Castillo, sa kanilang pagtulong sa mga "less fortunate" na sinabayan ng Pabasa ng Pasyon ng mga mananam-palataya tuwing panahon ng Kuaresma.

Matagal ng ginagawa ni Rodriguez ang panata ng pagtulong sa kapwa hindi

lamang tuwing mahal na araw, maging sa panahon ng kalamidad at trahedya tulad ng mga nagiging bik-tima ng sunog at bagyo ay laging una sa pagtulong ang ACT-Agri Kaagabay Organization.

Nagpapasalamat naman si Rodriguez sa kanyang grupo at mga taong nagiging bahagi ng pagsusulong ng kanyang adbokasiya na balang araw ay walang Pinoy na magugutom. (Mer Layson)

Malaya Business Insight

Date: APR. 01, 2024 Page: A0



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Corn rallies, soybeans down

CHICAGO- Chicago Board of Trade corn futures posted their biggest one-day rally since July after the US Department of Agriculture reported grain stocks and intended plantings below trade estimates.

The data delivered a bullish jolt that also buoyed wheat prices, analysts said.

"It shocked the market," said Don Roose, president of US Commodities. "Corn was positive all the way around."

Intended plantings of US corn for the 2024 harvest came in at 90.036 million acres, the USDA said, below the average analyst

estimate of 91.776 million acres. Quarterly corn stocks as of March 1 were 8.347 billion bushels, below analysts' expectations for 8.427 billion.

The most-active CBOT corn contract soared 15-1/4 cents, settling at \$4.42 a bushel. Benchmark May futures reached their highest price since Feb. 9 at \$4.48 and finished about 3 percent higher for the month, after declining the previous four months.

CBOT wheat gained 12-3/4 cents to close at \$5.60-1/4 a bushel, and soybeans lost 1 cent to \$11.91-1/2 a bushel. - *Reuters*



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In Iraq, water crisis leaves farmers clinging to sidr trees

BASRA — Faced with a failing date palm business due to scarce resources, Iraqi farmer Ismail Ibrahim has planted “sidr,” or jujube, trees which require far less water during an irrigation crisis.

Iraq is part of the “Fertile Crescent,” arable land sweeping from the Mediterranean to the Gulf which has been farmed for thousands of years.

Today, the landscape has been devastated by upstream damming of the main two rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates, lower rainfall trends and decades of armed conflict, leaving farmers such as Mr.

Ibrahim facing the loss of their livelihoods.

As Mr. Ibrahim tended the soil, he explained that the medium-sized evergreen sidr trees native to the Middle East consume little water and are able to rely on salty groundwater.

The sidr bears fruit from its second year, while the palm takes at least five years, he added.

“I turned to sidr because I see its financial return is better than palm trees,” he said. “Even if you give it salty water, the fruit will be the same, and it may even be better.”

Palm trees are not as durable, he added. “If you give them salty water constantly, the taste will not be sweet, and it will not grow as much, and it may die, and it may not give you the same quality,” he said.

“Here we are on sandy land. Sidr here would be number one.”

Iraq has been trying to emerge from years of conflicts ranging from former President Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990 to the 2003 US-led invasion that toppled him to the violence wreaked by Islamic State militants who took over large swathes of the country, destroying its economy.

For farmers, the water shortage is the latest blow to their business.

After years of investment in his palm farm, Abbas Ali is coming to grips with the grim reality that his produce has fallen victim to the high percentage of salt in the water.

“The destruction of the palm tree, and the contamination of the soil in general, lead to most farmers to abandon palm cultivation due to the high percentage of salts,” he said.

“The high percentage of salts can continuously pollute the soil, it cannot be disposed of easily because if the salt tide comes, you cannot get rid of it in an instant.” — *Reuters*



AMIRHADI MANAVI/UNSPASH



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London cocoa prices climb; robusta coffee falls 2%

NEW YORK — London cocoa futures on ICE closed up on Thursday with the market consolidating below a record high set earlier this week, while robusta coffee prices fell.

There will be no trading on ICE on Friday due to the Good Friday holiday.

COCOA: July London cocoa settled up £62 or 0.8% to £7,725 per metric ton, although prices remained well below a record peak of £8,009 set on Tuesday.

Dealers said the market's focus was turning to the mid-crop in top grower Ivory Coast, which begins next week with a decline to around 400,000 to 500,000 tons expected, down from 600,000 tons a year ago.

Some African cocoa farmers have been impacted by illegal gold mining that destroys their fields, one more reason for smaller crops.

July New York cocoa was little changed at \$9,306 a ton.

COFFEE: May robusta coffee settled down \$80 or 2.2% at \$3,479 a ton, slipping back slightly after the market's recent strong rise.

Dealers said supplies were exceptionally tight in Vietnam while there were concerns that dry weather could reduce next year's crop in the world's top robusta producer.

A sharp year-on-year decline in exports from Indonesia has also helped to support prices.

May arabica coffee fell 0.9% at \$1.8885 per pound (lb).

SUGAR: May raw sugar settled up 0.33 cent or 1.5% at 22.52 cents per lb.

Dealers said recent rainfall appeared to have improved the outlook for Brazil's 2024/2025 cane crop, although some concerns about dry conditions remained.

"Brazil may have a strong early harvest, which may be bearish in the short term, but harvested cane volumes may disappoint later in the year," Rabobank said in a report.

May white sugar rose 1.1% at \$652.50 a ton. — **Reuters**



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EU envoys agree deal on Ukraine agricultural imports, Belgium says

BRUSSELS — Ambassadors from European Union (EU) countries reached a deal to extend tariff-free food imports from Ukraine, with a “balanced approach between support for Ukraine and protection of EU agricultural markets,” the Belgian EU presidency said.

The agreement will now go to the European Parliament for its approval, with the aim of a “swift agreement,” the Belgian presidency said in a post on social media platform X.

The EU had reached a provisional agreement on the matter last week, but France and Poland said planned restrictions did not go far enough and pushed for further curbs to prevent what they called the destabilization of EU agricultural markets.

An EU diplomat familiar with the new deal said it was similar to a previous agreement but changed the reference period used to determine when an emergency brake imposing tariffs on some products would be applied.

The original deal stipulated that tariffs would kick in on poultry, eggs, sugar, oats, maize, groats and honey if imports exceeded the average levels of 2022 and 2023. The new compromise expands the reference period to include the second semester of 2021, the diplomat said.

No products were added to the list of those that would be subject to the emergency brake, the diplomat added. —

Reuters