

Quality-control AI at Dole Mindanao operation to see wider adoption

By **Revin Mikhael D. Ochave**
Reporter

DOLE Sunshine Co., the international food company, said a quality control system using artificial intelligence (AI) which it pilot-tested at its Mindanao pineapple operation will be rolled out for wider use en route to its goal of zero fruit waste by 2025.

Barbara Guerpillon, global head of Dole Ventures, the conglomerate's innovation arm that supports startup initiatives, said in an e-mail interview that the company's AI-based quality control platform was developed by Israeli software company Clarifruit, which describes itself as a provider of quality control as a service (QCaaS) solutions.

"The objective is to make our internal processes more efficient and sustainable which, ultimately, we believe will impact our business bottom-line in the long run," the Singapore-based Ms. Guerpillon said.

According to Ms. Guerpillon, the Clarifruit platform will help Dole achieve a 10% reduction in fruit losses by 2024, bringing the company closer to its ultimate target of zero losses.

She said the platform allows Dole to better match fruit sent to retailers

to the latter's requirements for shape, size, ripeness, and color, resulting in a lower customer rejection rate.

"Since implementing the Clarifruit software, Dole has seen a more than 2X productivity increase and reduction in error-prone quality control reports. While this technology does not directly help farmers, we were able to upskill our employees at the farm and enable them to use technology to improve their overall efficiency," Ms. Guerpillon said.

Ms. Guerpillon said the AI quality control platform was piloted in early 2021 on Dole pineapples exported from the Philippines.

"The Clarifruit application was piloted by Dole's quality control teams at the pre-inspection facility at Mindanao Island in the Philippines, from where our pineapples are exported to six key destination markets worldwide," Ms. Guerpillon said.

"The success of the pilot led to the decision to scale our partnership with Clarifruit to other markets and fruit categories, including bananas, papayas, and avocados. On a more macro level, this will also help Dole cultivate a culture of innovation within the company while digitalizing our supply chain at its core," she added.

Tawi-Tawi seaweed industry may receive South Korean support

MORE development assistance, this time from the South Korean government, could be in the works for the seaweed industry in Tawi-Tawi, which accounts for about 70% of Philippine output of the agricultural commodity, from which carrageenan is extracted.

The Mindanao Development Authority (MinDA) said South Korean Embassy Second Secretary Kim Myungjin recently discussed the possibility of launching a technical assistance project on seaweed research and development as well as marketing.

The project could tap financial support from the BIMP-EAGA-Republic of Korea Economic Cooperation Fund.

BIMP-EAGA is a sub-regional grouping within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. It is composed of the neighboring areas of Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines.

MinDA has an ongoing program with the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) Philippines for a renewable energy project in Tawi-Tawi that is intended to support the development of value-added seaweed products. The project, with funding support from the European Union, will also provide electricity to the island province's residents.

With South Korean interest, the development agencies along with the regional and provincial governments "are looking at the complementation of different initiatives to further develop the seaweed industry of the region," MinDA said.

Meanwhile, the Bangsamoro regional government recently held an investment forum in



Tawi-Tawi for the revival of the poultry industry, which took a hit from the drop in demand due to the coronavirus pandemic.

"We are hopeful that this activity will help revive the industry, generate investment leads that will eventually become full blown enterprises and propel the creation of jobs and income for the Bangsamoro," said Deputy Minister Sukarno Abas of the region's Ministry of Trade, Investments, and Tourism.

A similar forum was previously held in other parts of the region, including Sulu and Cotabato City.

"Due to weak consumer demand brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) has recorded the biggest annual decline of minus 50.6% in poultry products — from 1,708 metric tons in 2020's first quarter to 844 metric tons in 2021's first quarter," the regional government said in a statement.

Among those involved in the poultry revival initiative are the Philippine Halal Manok Corp., Land Bank of the Philippines, and Amanah Islamic Bank. — **Marifi S. Jara**

Global food costs ease from near record, offering respite from inflation

GLOBAL food prices declined from near a record high at the end of last year, offering some respite to consumers and governments facing a wave of inflationary pressures.

A United Nations index tracking everything from grains to meat fell 0.9% in December, potentially helping to ease the run-up in prices of grocery store products. Still, the gauge remains near 2011's all-time high and average prices jumped about 28% in 2021, the most in 14 years.

Prices have surged on the back of harvest setbacks and high freight rates,

as well as labor shortages and an energy crisis that hit supply chains. Those issues will remain at the fore as farmers face uncertain weather and the prospect of fertilizer shortages in the months ahead. The costs have trickled through to supermarkets, piling pressure on officials and household budgets and worsening hunger, particularly in poor nations.

Food costs are unlikely to stabilize for a while yet, according to Abdolreza Abbassian, a senior economist at the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

"Nothing fundamentally changed over the last two to three months to make us feel any degree of optimism that the food market is going to resettle at more steady or even lower prices," he said. "All of the uncertainties are right there, they haven't disappeared, which means that anything is still possible."

The fall in food prices last month was mainly driven by vegetable oils and sugar, the FAO said on Thursday.

Anger over inflation recently led to violent protests in Kazakhstan, while Sri

Lanka unveiled a \$1-billion package to temper concerns over pricey food and medical items. Countries including Ukraine, Russia and Argentina have also taken steps to keep food costs in check.

Weather worries still abound across major crop suppliers, as the La Niña weather pattern disrupts typical growing conditions. Drought in parts of Brazil and Argentina is trimming expectations for bountiful soy and corn harvests. In Malaysia, recent floods have inundated some palm-oil plantations. And Australia faced a

November deluge that curbed the quality of its wheat.

The recent energy crunch has sent fertilizer prices higher too, threatening to further add to food-production costs. There are already signs that farmers are cutting back on nutrient purchases or shifting from grains to less fertilizer-intensive crops. Inflation is also contributing to the world's hunger crisis, with higher prices for everything from fuel to housing cutting into what people can spend on food. Roughly a 10% of the global population was undernourished

in 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit — and food costs have jumped much more since then.

In other moves to combat rising prices or tight supplies, Thailand this week imposed a ban on hog exports until early April. US President Joe Biden promised to "fight for fairer prices" for farmers and consumers in a bid to tackle meat-price inflation, while purchase limits have been reintroduced in hundreds of Australian supermarkets as cases of the Omicron virus strain hobble supply chains. — **Bloomberg**



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