

Tight grain, oilseed supplies to keep prices elevated

SINGAPORE — Drought or too much rain, the war in Ukraine and high energy costs look set to curb global farm production again next year, tightening supplies, even as high prices encourage farmers to boost planting.

Production of staples such as rice and wheat is unlikely to replenish depleted inventories, at least in the first half of 2023, while crops producing edible oils are suffering from adverse weather in Latin America and Southeast Asia.

“The world needs record crops to satisfy demand. In 2023, we absolutely need to do better than this year,” said Ole Houe, director of advisory services at agriculture brokerage IKON Commodities in Sydney. “Ast this stage, it looks highly unlikely, if we look at the global production prospects for cereals and oilseeds.”

Wheat, corn and palm oil futures have from

dropped from record or multi-year highs but prices in the retail market remain elevated and tight supplies are forecast to support prices in 2023.

With food prices climbing to record peaks this year, millions of people are suffering across the world, especially poorer nations in Africa and Asia already facing hunger and malnutrition. Food import costs are already on course to hit a near \$2 trillion record in 2022, forcing poor countries to cut consumption.

Benchmark Chicago wheat futures jumped to an all-time high of \$13.64 a bushel in March after Russia's invasion of key grain exporter

Ukraine reduced supplies in a market already hit by adverse weather and post-pandemic restrictions.

Corn and soybeans climbed to their highest in a decade, while Malaysia's benchmark crude palm oil prices climbed to a record high in March. — **Reuters**

FULL STORY



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Agri tech transfer seen critical for realizing benefits of RCEP

By Kyle Aristophere T. Atienza
Reporter

THE agriculture industry must harness the technology transfer opportunities if it is to fully take advantage of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), an agriculture analyst said.

“Beyond 2023 until 2025, the Philippines can open up its economy more by participating in freer trade agreements like RCEP. For as long as it is prepared to harness technology transfer in all possible fronts especially in agriculture, a freer trade regime is good for the (industry),” Roy S. Kempis, a retired professor at the Pampanga State Agricultural University, said in a Viber message.

“Our farmers and agribusinessmen have to learn how technology can improve their productivity,” he added.

Agriculture accounts for about a 10th of Philippine gross domestic product (GDP). Agriculture output contracted in the first two quarters of 2022 but expanded 1.8% in the third quarter.

Of particular concern was the capacity to bring the cost of production to at least level with other countries, Mr. Kempis said. “The idea is to scale up (initially), to achieve sufficiency, and eventually to be able to export what is not needed domestically.”

RCEP is a free trade agreement involving the 10 members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and dialogue partners China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand.

“With RCEP being ASEAN-based, the Philippines has a platform for extending free trade agreements to non-ASEAN blocs,” Mr. Kempis said. “The country can make itself attractive not only for mutually beneficial trade, but also for needed investments from foreign governments and businesses.”

The Senate failed to ratify RCEP earlier this year, with senators citing the lack of safeguards for the agriculture industry.

RCEP is viewed as a means for China to minimize US influence in the region. As a counter, the US has offered the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), a bid to achieve greater economic integration.

Trade Secretary Alfredo E. Pascual said in July that participation in the RCEP was a government priority. President Ferdinand R. Marcos, Jr. who is

concurrently Agriculture Secretary, has said that after a review, he requested that the Senate ratify the trade agreement.

Mr. Kempis said the key for the Philippines is to obtain more investment in research and development to boost farm productivity, and to set up more processing facilities to preserve the harvest, develop the cold chain, add to the logistics and distribution network, and to innovate in the marketing of its produce.

“With President Marcos (expressing a preference for) an investment-led regime (to create) jobs, improving job quality, and generate decent incomes. this in turn will in turn perk up consumer appetite,” Mr. Kempis said. “This cycle when repeated will be good for the economy and well-being of the majority of, if not all Filipinos.”

How dams built by China starve the Mekong River Delta of vital sediment

SOC TRANG, Vietnam — Standing on the bank of the Mekong River, Tran Van Cung can see his rice farm wash away before his very eyes. The paddy's edge is crumbling into the delta.

Just 15 years ago, Southeast Asia's longest river carried some 143 million tons of sediment — as heavy as about 430 Empire State Buildings — through to the Mekong River Delta every year, dumping nutrients along riverbanks essential to keeping tens of thousands of farms like Mr. Cung's intact and productive.

But as Chinese-built hydroelectric dams have mushroomed upriver, much of that sediment is being blocked, an analysis of satellite data by Germany-based aquatic remote sensing company EOMAP and Reuters shows.

The analysis reinforces an estimate by the Mekong River Commission, set up in 1995 by countries bordering the river, that

in 2020 only about a third of those river-borne soils would reach the Vietnamese floodplains.

At the current rate of decline, the commission estimated, less than five million tons of sediment will reach the delta each year by 2040

Stretching nearly 5,000 kilometers from the Plateau of Tibet to the South China Sea, the Mekong is a farming and fishing lifeline for tens of millions as it swirls through China, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand and Cambodia before reaching Vietnam.

“The river is not bringing sediment, the soil is salinized,” said Mr. Cung, 60, who has grown rice at his family's 10-hectare farm for more than 40 years. “Without sediment, we are done,” he said.

His diminishing harvest now brings in barely half of the 250 million dong (\$10,636) annually that he earned just a few years ago, and his two children

and several neighbors have left the area to seek more stable and lucrative work elsewhere.

For decades, scientists and environmentalists have warned upriver dam projects jeopardize livelihoods in a region of some 18 million people and an annual rice market of \$10.5 billion that is a major food source for up to 200 million people across Asia, according to World Wildlife Fund (WWF) estimates, Reuters calculations and Vietnam's Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

Worry shared by Lower Mekong nations has already led Cambodia to pause plans for two dams on the river, according to the Mekong Dam Monitor, an online platform that provides real-time data on dams and their environmental impact.

But in China and Laos, dam-building goes on. Of seven new dams planned in Laos, at least four are co-financed

by Chinese companies, according to Mekong Dam Monitor data.

China's foreign ministry said the country accounted for only a fifth of the total Mekong basin area and only 13.5% of the water flowing out of the Mekong's estuary, adding that there was already a “scientific consensus” on the impact of China's upstream dams.

The ministry did not address the slide in sediment levels or the role of Chinese dams in that decline.

Using data derived from thousands of satellite images, EOMAP and Reuters analyzed sediment levels around four major dams on the Mekong, two in China and two in Laos. The analysis showed each dam drastically reduced the sediment that should have otherwise flowed through at those locations — by an average of 81% of the sediment load across the four dams.

“The dams are trapping sediment ... each one traps a certain amount, so there isn't enough reaching the floodplains,” said Marc Goichot, a WWF river specialist in Vietnam who was not involved in the analysis but reviewed the results.

“Sediment and deltas should be able to regenerate and rebuild themselves,” he said. “But the pace at which the natural balance is being forced to change in the Mekong is too fast for the sediment to keep up.”

Farmers in the Vietnamese Mekong River Delta region were not prepared for the speed at which their landscape — and fortunes — have changed. The area under rice farming has shrunk by 5% in the last five years alone, with many forced to adopt shrimp farming in salty seawater as an alternative.

Incomes in this once-booming region are now among Vietnam's lowest, even as the national economy grows at a projected 8% for 2022. The region has seen more outward migration than any other in Vietnam since 2009, according to Vietnam's Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

The Mekong River Commission estimated in 2018 that total sediment flow by now would be around 47 million tons per year. It could be far lower — estimated at just 32 million tons per year, according to scientific studies from the last decade including one published in July 2021 in the journal Nature Communications. — **Reuters**

FULL STORY



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FTX bankruptcy judge allows media firms to argue for revealing customer names

A US JUDGE overseeing the bankruptcy of FTX said on Friday that he will allow media companies to make their case that the collapsed crypto exchange must publicly disclose the names of its customers. US Bankruptcy Judge John Dorsey in Delaware said the *New York Times*, Dow Jones, Bloomberg and the *Financial Times* could present their arguments on requiring FTX to disclose customer names at a hearing on Jan. 11.

The media companies argued in a court filing that keeping the names of as many as one million customers secret could turn bankruptcy proceedings into a “farce” if creditors start fighting anonymously over how much money they should receive.

FTX has argued the US bankruptcy practice of disclosing details about creditors, which includes customers, could expose them to scams, violate privacy laws and allow rivals to poach them, undermining the FTX's value as it hunts for buyers.

FTX said on Friday it planned to sell its LedgerX, Embed, FTX Japan and FTX Europe businesses during its bankruptcy case. The four companies are relatively independent from the broader FTX group, and each has its own segregated customer accounts and separate management teams, according to an FTX court filing.

FTX is not committed to selling any of the companies, but it already received dozens of unsolicited offers. FTX expects to generate additional bids by scheduling auctions in February and March.

Other bankrupt crypto companies, like crypto lenders Voyager Digital and Celsius Network, have struggled to auction their assets. Voyager had planned to sell its assets to FTX before FTX's implosion, and Celsius said in a Thursday court filing it had postponed an auction of its business to try to improve the bids it had received.

FTX attorneys also said at Friday's hearing they have made “significant

progress” on recovering assets and are working to resolve a dispute with Bahamian securities regulators and attorneys overseeing the liquidation of the Bahamas-based FTX Digital Markets.

An attorney for the Bahamas-based liquidators, Jason Zakia, said FTX has prevented the Bahamas bankruptcy from moving forward by cutting off access to data and casting “aspersions” on the actions of the Bahamas government.

Mr. Dorsey will address the data access dispute on Jan. 6 if the two sides do not reach a deal.

Friday's bankruptcy hearing comes at the end of a dramatic week for the crypto exchange. Founder Sam Bankman-Fried was arrested on fraud charges on Monday, FTX CEO John Ray testified before the US Congress on Tuesday, and FTX opposed Bahamas-based liquidators' demand for access to its systems and records on Wednesday. — **Reuters**

Airbus, Qatar trial to be split as A350 jet row rumbles on

LONDON — A \$2-billion legal battle between Airbus and Qatar Airways looks set to drag through most of 2023 after a UK court split the case, amid a glimmer of hope that high-level contacts on the sidelines of the World Cup might yield a breakthrough.

The dispute over damage to the surface and lightning protection on A350 jetliners grounded by Qatar has led to months of legal manoeuvring between two of aviation's largest players and the unprecedented cancellation of large-scale orders.

Judge David Waksman ordered a trial set for next June to be split in two parts because of the sheer weight of disagreements, ensuring the unusually public industry saga rolls on for months.

The first part will focus on liability with the combined claims, estimated at around \$2 billion, tackled later.

Qatar Airways says widespread paint cracking has exposed deeper damage on some A350 jets, prompting it to stop taking deliveries. Qatar's regulator has grounded at least 29 of the jets, citing unanswered safety questions, over the past year.

Airbus has acknowledged quality problems with its premier long-haul model but denies any risk to safety and has canceled all outstanding new business with Qatar Airways, which has increased purchases from rival Boeing.

On Friday, the two sides clashed angrily over access to the affected planes with Airbus lawyer David Wolfson complaining with the aid of photographs that its experts had been forced to photograph jets from a distance “under the light of the moon.”

Qatar Airways strongly denied failing to cooperate with inspections and said it had given whatever access was practical to jets on short notice as it hosts the World Cup soccer tournament.

“We do have to bear in mind that this is an operating airline,” the carrier's lawyer Geraint Webb said.

WORLD CUP DIPLOMACY

The exchange — cut short by an apparently exasperated Waksman — is just one example of the breakdown in co-operation between Airbus and Qatar Airways, once a star

customer and the first and largest buyer of Europe's premier long-haul jet.

The hearings have focused attention on a disintegrating business relationship at the heart of the \$150-billion jet industry, sprinkled with accusations of bad faith on both sides.

Both sides have accused the other of colluding with their respective regulators, both of whom have declined to comment.

The latest court confrontation comes as France's progression to the World Cup final in Qatar increases high-level contacts that have previously been seen as the opportunity to explore room for agreement. So far there are no signs of a settlement.

French President Emmanuel Macron was welcomed at Doha airport on his arrival for Wednesday's semifinal by officials including Qatar Airways Chief Executive Akbar Al Baker, Qatar News Agency reported. He will also attend Sunday's final.

The welcome by Al Baker in his capacity as minister of tourism is seen as a signal that the dispute is between companies rather than affecting strong diplomatic ties, though some diplomats have said politics may weigh on the outcome. — **Reuters**



Pag-IBIG Fund successfully launches Virtual Pag-IBIG Mobile App to bring services closer to members. In photo are Pag-IBIG Fund officials (from left) Chief Legal Counsel Atty. Marcial Pimentel, Jr., Trustee Pedrito Angeles, Deputy CEO Benjamin Felix, Jr., Trustee Ma. Lorelei Fajardo, Chief Executive Officer Marilene Acosta, Trustee Mylah Roque, Deputy CEO Alexander Aguilar, Trustee Atty. Cornelio Aldon, Deputy CEO Atty. Robert John Cosico, and Trustee Anthony Cesar Arellano

Pag-IBIG Fund launches Virtual Pag-IBIG Mobile App

Pag-IBIG Fund officially launched the Virtual Pag-IBIG Mobile App to bring its services closer to members as it marked its 42nd anniversary on Wednesday (December 14).

President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. recognized Pag-IBIG Fund's accomplishments over the years and welcomed the launch of its official mobile app through a recorded message for the agency.

“Through the years, the Pag-IBIG Fund has stayed true to its goal to realize the dreams of millions of Filipinos by providing secure savings programs and dependable and affordable housing loans,” said Marcos. “Today, we also welcome the launching of the Virtual Pag-IBIG Mobile Application. The app will bring Pag-IBIG Fund's services and benefits closer to every Filipino. In line with the unwavering commitment of this administration to digitize and streamline our services, be assured that this administration is committed to support you as you implement housing and development programs and initiatives,” the president added.

Secretary Jose Rizalino Acuzar of the Department of Human Settlements and Urban Development (DHSUD), who also heads the 11-member Pag-IBIG Fund Board of Trustees, meanwhile, assured members that Pag-IBIG Fund will continue to make use of information technology to improve its processes and services.

“I congratulate the Pag-IBIG Fund for launching the Virtual Pag-IBIG Mobile App. This service innovation will significantly help in providing social benefits to our fellow Filipinos, in line with the call of President Marcos to maximize the use of information technology in the delivery of public service,” Acuzar stated.

Pag-IBIG Fund Chief Executive Officer Marilene Acosta demonstrated the service features and the user-friendly interface of the agency's mobile app during the launch.

“With the Virtual Pag-IBIG Mobile App, our members can now get their Pag-IBIG Membership ID number, view the status of their Housing or Short-Term Loans, make online payments and create a Virtual Pag-IBIG account by using just their smartphones. Plus, once our members have their own Virtual Pag-IBIG accounts, they can also view their savings and annual dividends, the balance and due dates of their loans, as well as their payment records. And, we shall add even more features to the mobile app over the coming months. With the Virtual Pag-IBIG Mobile App, we are literally bringing our services to the palm of each members' hand,” Acosta said.

The Virtual Pag-IBIG Mobile Application is available for download via the Apple Store and Google Play. The mobile app has been downloaded by more than 750,000 users since its beta version was made available in August this year.