Fisheries Code amendments to focus on safety of imports

THE Department of Agriculture (DA) said on Tuesday that its proposed amendments to the Fisheries Code will include border controls to ensure the safety of imported fish.

"*Wala sa* Fisheries Code *ang* pre-border controls (the Fisheries Code is silent on pre-border controls), which are very necessary to ensure food safety of the imported fish that get into our country," Undersecretary Mercedita A. Sombilla said during the Post-State of the Nation Address (SONA) goverment briefings.

"There's a need to establish offices that would ensure that imported fish are really safe to enter our country," she said.

President Ferdinand R. Marcos, Jr., who also serves as his own Secretary of Agriculture, asked Congress during his 2nd SONA to pass new amendments to the Fisheries Code.

"Our Fisheries Code must be revised to incorporate and strengthen science-based analysis and determination of fishing areas. This approach will protect both the interests of our fisherfolk and our fisheries and aquatic resources," he said.

"To this end, we will seek the support of Congress to amend the Code to guarantee sustainable development of our fisheries sector in harmony with environmental balance," he added.

Republic Act No. 10654 or the Amended Fisheries Code of the Philippines has been recently amended to address illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing (IUUF).

Ms. Sombilla said that the proposed revisions also include adding a section that will require fisheries management to be conducted with an eye towards enhancing the ecosystem.

She also said the DA is proposing to redraw the limits for fishing in municipal waters.

"As of now, even catches of three tons and above are allowed. I think we need to control, limit or totally eliminate (such catches), she said, adding that if left unchecked, municipal waters risk being destroyed.

Under the proposed amendments, the DA will also seek to improve the tracking of catches to arrive at better supply-demand estimates.

"I think the information that we need here is real-time supply and demand. I think our information is still not on a real time basis," she said. — **Sheldeen Joy Talavera**

Amendments to Fisheries Code favor commercial operators, fisherfolk say

THE Pambansang Lakas ng Kilusang Mamamalakaya ng Pilipinas (Pamalakaya), an organization of subsistence fisherfolk, said planned amendments to the Fisheries Code are likely to favor commercial fishing companies.

The amendments "will certainly benefit owners of commercial fishing vessels who will be institutionally allowed to conduct large-scale fishing activities inside the 15-kilometer municipal waters intended for small-scale and subsistence fisherfolk," Pamalakaya said in a statement.

During his second State of the Nation Address, President Ferdinand R. Marcos, Jr. sought Congressional support to further amend the Republic Act No. 10654, or the Amended Fisheries Code of the Philippines.

It was recently amended to include rules to address illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing (IUUF). Trade concessions the Philippines enjoys with the European Union depend on Philippine compliance with a number of environmental and labor rights conventions, one of which requires signatories to crack down on IUUF.

"Our Fisheries Code must be revised to incorporate and strengthen science-based analysis and determination of fishing areas. This approach will protect both the interests of our fisherfolk and our fisheries and aquatic resources," Mr. Marcos said on Monday.

"To this end, we will seek the support of Congress to amend the Code to guarantee sustainable development of our fisheries sector in harmony with environmental balance," he added.

Under the law in its current form, commercial fishing vessels are only allowed to operate outside the 15-kilometer limit for municipal waters.

Pamalakaya said that the decision to amend was "the result of the continuous lobbying of big fishing firms (seeking) to operate within municipal waters."

"There can be no 'harmonization' between the municipal fishers and commercial fishing vessels because the latter outcompete the traditional and backward methods of fishing," the group said.

Groups such as Oceana and Samahan ng Mangingisda – Bataan earlier expressed doubts over the fresh amendments, saying that the last round of rule changes has not been given adequate time to be enforced effectively.

The Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources said it will issue a statement regarding the proposed amendments. — **Sheldeen Joy Talavera**

MUP pension reform law expected by year's end

THE proposed law reforming military and uniformed personnel (MUP) pensions will likely pass before the end of the year, Finance Secretary Benjamin E. Diokno said.

"The military pension reform is (on) the priority legislative agenda of the President, concurred in by Congress. We expect this to be passed before the end of the year. It will have an impact as soon as January," Mr. Diokno said at a briefing on Tuesday.

MUP pension reform is on the Legislative-Executive Development Advisory Council's list of 20 priority measures that are targeted for approval by December.

The Department of Finance (DoF) has said that a MUP reform bill will be presented to Congress by August.

"The reform of military pensions is going to be a game-changer. We have to address this issue once and for all; otherwise, it will have a catastrophic impact in the future," Mr. Diokno said.

Mr. Diokno has said the current entitlements would cause "fiscal collapse" if left unaddressed.

"The (reform) will open up a lot of fiscal space in the budget. If my numbers are right, in 2024, we have allocated something like P300 billion; that's approximately $6 billion, for military pensions," Mr. Diokno said.

The DoF also announced that it recently concluded its series of roadshows on the planned MUP reforms.

"We explained to (beneficiaries) that this is really for their own good — to make the pension system more sustainable in the future," he said.

"The treasurer and my undersecretaries have been going around and explaining (the reforms). And so far, I think the results of the consultation are very encouraging," he added.

According to Mr. Diokno, the reform will slowly transition active-duty MUPs to make them bigger contributors to their pension scheme.

"Those who are already retired — we'll not touch (their pensions), more or less, because that's like a contractual obligation to them; those who are in active service will be asked to contribute gradually to the system; and those who are going to be recruited for the first time will pay the full amount of the benefit. That's basically the way it will be structured," he said.

Earlier versions of the MUP reform proposed that current active-duty personnel contribute 5% of their monthly pay over the first three years, which will be topped up with a 16% contribution from the government for a total monthly premium of 21%.

This scheme will gradually be adjusted to 9% and 12% shares, respectively, in the seventh year.

New MUPs would pay 9% of their base and longevity pay, with a 12% contribution from the government.

President Ferdinand R. Marcos, Jr. said in his second State of the Nation Address that the government is working on making the reform "fully functional and financially sustainable."

"We are once again working closely with Congress to ease the transition from the old system to the new one, so as to be able to guarantee that no effects are felt by those in the uniformed services," he added. — **Luisa Maria Jacinta C. Jocson**

Maharlika fund operations to begin in early 2024

THE Maharlika Investment Fund (MIF) is expected to be operational by early 2024, Finance Secretary Benjamin E. Diokno said.

"Immediately after the approval by the Senate of the bill, we started the preparation of the implementing rules and regulations (IRR), so we expect the IRR to be available by mid-August or, at the latest, last day of August," Mr. Diokno said in a briefing on Tuesday.

"We expect (to) appoint people in the right places by around September and so I think the Maharlika will be off and running by early next year," he added.

The MIF law was signed by President Ferdinand R. Marcos, Jr. last week.

Speaking separately to reporters, the government's chief economic planner Arsenio M. Balisacan said that the appointment process for the board overseeing the fund should not be rushed.

"It's already July, we still have to produce the IRR and organize the team. We have to ensure that we get the right people. We should not be in too much of a hurry to rush the vetting of the people who will be joining. It's a matter of organizing. It's almost August, how many more months left before the end of the year?" according to Mr. Balisacan, who is the secretary of the National Economic and Development Authority.

The Maharlika Investment Corp. (MIC) is tasked with managing the fund. It will be led by a nine-member board of directors.

The board is led by the Secretary of Finance, who will chair the board in an ex-officio capacity.

The board will also consist of the president and chief executive officer of the MIC, the president and chief executive officer of the Land Bank of the Philippines and the Development Bank of the Philippines, as well as two regular directors and three independent directors from the private sector.

During his second State of the Nation Address, Mr. Marcos said that the MIF will be guided by "principles of transparency and accountability."

He also said that the MIC board will be composed of a group of "internationally recognized economic managers" in order to ensure "sound financial management."

"This guarantees that investment decisions will be based on financial considerations alone, absent any political influence," Mr. Marcos said.

"The funds for the social security and public health insurance of our people shall remain intact and separate," he added, referring to the original plan while the law was being proposed to tap capital from the major government pension funds. — **Luisa Maria Jacinta C. Jocson**

House committee approves amendment to road tax law

THE HOUSE ways and means committee has approved a measure amending the law regulating motor vehicle user charges (MVUCs).

The bill "imposes an optimal motor vehicle road users tax for all private or for-hire motor vehicles including government-owned (vehicles)," Quirino Rep. Midy N. Cua told the committee.

For-hire vehicles like cars, PUVs, buses, trucks and trailers will receive a 50% discount on the MVUC, while motorcycles and tricycles are exempt, according to Ms. Cua.

The bill seeks to amend Republic Act No. 8794 or the Motor Vehicle Users' Charge law, which gives the President the authority to adjust MVUC rates.

House ways and means chairman and Albay Rep. Jose Ma. Clemente S. Salceda called the measure "progressive, given that around 52% of car-owning households belong to the richest percentile."

Revenue from the MVUC will finance the public utility vehicle (PUV) modernization program, providing 45% of incremental revenue, as well as the government's road infrastructure and safety programs, which gets 5%.

"The earmarking for PUV modernization will be enough for an equity subsidy of P500,000 per unit," Mr. Salceda said.

Ms. Cua added that the measure will have a multi-tiered structure and rate increase in three years. In the fourth year, a single rate will apply to all types of motor vehicle whether private, government, or for-hire.

Finance Undersecretary Maria Cielo D. Magno said the measure "would be very supportive of the needs of the Filipino people for seamless mobility that would provide safe, reliable and sustainable road systems."

"The MVUC rates were last adjusted in 2004 and have not been adjusted since," Wilman Ramo of the National Tax Research Center said.

Move As One Coalition Co-Convenor Robert Y. Siy said the bill will solve the country's "mobility crisis" and road congestion problem.

Modesto Floranda, president of Pinagkaisang Samahan ng Tsuper at Operator Nationwide said the MVUC will add to the financial burden experienced by those in the PUV industry.

The panel accepted an amendment from Electric Vehicle Expansion Services, Inc. President Yuri Sarmiento, which called for a "bias towards the promotion of active transport and the use of green technology" which will also be to the advantage of domestic vehicle manufacturers. — **Beatriz Marie D. Cruz**

SRA rules milling to start in Sept., rejects appeals from planters

THE Sugar Regulatory Administration (SRA) said it will stick to plans for a September opening to milling season, rejecting appeals from planters to begin in August.

"We will start in September to give the farmers an opportunity to earn more," the SRA said, noting that more mature cane will result in greater yields.

SRA Acting Administrator Pablo Luis S. Azcona told reporters on Tuesday that the ultimate goal in raising output is to become self-sufficient in sugar.

Three planter federations — the Confederation of Sugar Producers Associations, Inc., the National Federation of Sugarcane Planters, Inc. and the Panay Federation of Sugarcane Farmers, Inc. — appealed to the SRA to start the milling season in August, which was the start date set a year earlier.

They said the August season start in 2022 was caused by the shortage of sugar.

The groups claimed that delaying the start of milling operations may lead to overripe cane that had been planted in April this year rather than May.

According to Mr. Azcona, the Sept. 1 start is the long-standing practice, and is "based on science and weather patterns."

Citing the results of a simulation, he said milling in September will enable farmers to sell cane at P3,300 per ton, up from P2,800 a year earlier.

"So, it's a big difference... those who milled in August are our small farmer beneficiaries, so *sayang naman* (it would be a waste if they lose) the opportunity to earn more," he said.

Mr. Azcona said the industry was amply informed of the return to the traditional September start via a memorandum circular issued in May.

"(Out of) the 24 mills that we wrote, (only two mills asked) for reconsideration, and one of the two eventually agree to Sept. 1. So, at the moment, just one mill is questioning the September opening," he said. — **Sheldeen Joy Talavera**

CAAP seeking to shed its role as aircraft incident investigator

THE Civil Aviation Authority of the Philippines (CAAP) said it supports a new law that will transfer its aircraft incident investigation functions to a specialist agency.

CAAP spokesman Eric B. Apolonio said by telephone that it is improper for the regulator to be in charge of Philippine airspace while also being responsible for investigating aircraft incidents.

"It should be separated. We can create something like the one in the US, the National Transport Safety Board (NTSB), so that if there are violations (committed by) CAAP, it is the NTSB who will run the investigation, not the CAAP itself," he said.

CAAP management has received an expression of support for its proposal from Senator Rafael T. Tulfo in its "desire to separate the aircraft investigation function from the rest of the Authority, as this is a continuing safety observation from the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO)."

CAAP said Mr. Tulfo also pledged support for funding the regulator's plans to procure rescue aircraft, firetrucks, and measures to address bird strike risk.

"The CAAP is pleased to hear Mr. Tulfo's enthusiastic support for the programs and goals of CAAP," CAAP Director General Manuel Antonio L. Tamayo said.

"Being both a regulator and operator of most airports in the country, we truly appreciate and welcome the senator's endorsement and help in achieving the mission of developing and improving the state of the country's aviation sector," he added. — **Justine Irish D. Tabile**

Share of working children rises to 4.7% in 2022

THE share of children doing work rose to 4.7% of the child population in 2022, up from 4.3% a year earlier, the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) estimated.

The 2022 percentage is equivalent to 1.48 million, or five of every 100 children. The year-earlier percentage was equivalent to 1.37 million.

The PSA defines children as those who are between five and 17 years old. They are considered to be working if they are engaged in a family business, or any job, regardless of pay, for at least one hour per week.

The services sector accounted for 49.5% of working children, up from 45.4% in 2021. The 43.2% share of agriculture declined from 45.7% in 2021. Industry accounted for 7.3%, down from 9% previously.

In 2022, 75.6% of working children logged 20 hours or less each week, up from 55.9% a year earlier.

Child work was most prevalent in the Soccsksargen region, where the working population was 12.3% of all children in 2022. This was followed by Northern Mindanao at 8.6% and the Bangsamoro autonomous region at 7.3%.

A separate category is child labor, which the PSA defines as those engaged in hazardous work or work exceeding 40 hours that subjects the child to "any form of exploitation" and harm to their safety and health. — **Lourdes O. Pilar**