

Coconut tree planting goal set at 8.5M seedlings

THE Philippine Coconut Authority (PCA) is gearing up to plant 8.5 million coconut seedlings this year as the government moves to refresh the country's coconut plantations.

In a statement, PCA Administrator Bernie F. Cruz said that the number of seedlings represents the full extent of its nursery capacity.

"We made use of remaining funds from previous years to partner with supportive LGUs and cooperatives to establish nurseries and expand our sources of planting materials, in compliance with (President Ferdinand R. Marcos, Jr.'s) directives," Mr. Cruz added.

"We are also maximizing our resources and stepping up our efforts in our regular planting programs," he added.

He said that the PCA is expecting further expansion of its tree planting program in the coming years due to a significant rise in parent trees being used to produce seedlings.

Last year, Mr. Marcos ordered the PCA to draft a plan for the rehabilitation of the coconut industry, including the planting of 100 million coconut trees by 2028. The rehabilitation plan aims to address the advancing age of the bearing trees.

"While the planting goal is for 2028, he told us to abide by a plan that looks ahead in terms of fully rehabilitating the coconut industry, and to ensure that every peso invested is well-spent," Mr. Cruz said.

In 2023, the PCA planted more than 2.1 million seedlings.

A medium-term replanting plan assumes that the PCA will plant 20 to 25 million seedlings annually between 2023 and 2028.

In order to meet the planting targets, the PCA established the Task Force for Massive Coconut Planting and Replanting and Productivity Enhancement.

The group was primarily charged with forging partnerships with LGUs, coconut farmers' organizations, and cooperatives, as well as the private sector. — **Adrian H. Halili**

Agri department floats rice output enhancement program of P1.3 trillion

THE Department of Agriculture (DA) said a program to expand rice output and minimize post-harvest losses would require investment of about P1.3 trillion over a number of years.

"The Philippines needs to invest at least P1.3 trillion over the next few years to boost rice production, reduce wastage of agricultural products, and ensure food security," Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel, Jr., said in a statement on Wednesday.

He added that the funds will support irrigation projects for over 1.2 million hectares of farmland.

The proposed amount is equivalent to nearly a quarter of the 2024 national budget of P5.77 trillion.

Mr. Laurel said on Tuesday that the DA will start investing in more post-harvest facilities for rice and corn.

He said that the DA would need about P93 billion over the next three years to make a dent into post-harvest losses of about P10.7 billion, equivalent to 23 days of rice consumption.

The DA is hoping that output of palay or unmilled rice this year does not fall below 20 million metric tons,

equal to the production target in 2023.

Part of the DA's plan to reduce food waste is to build more cold storage facilities to stockpile vegetables and high-value crops, with which it hopes to smooth out supply in periods of shortage or take excess produce off the market during bumper crops.

The DA has allocated P1 billion for funding such projects in 2024, with a projected requirement of another P5 billion over the next three years.

Its first facility to be constructed will rise on a 1.3-hectare site at the

Food Terminal, Inc. (FTI) complex in Taguig City at a cost of about P500 million.

"The 5,000-pallet position cold storage facility in FTI will take at least 12 months to complete," the DA said.

Mr. Laurel said local governments should take the lead in assessing supply conditions for vegetables and high-value crops, citing the devolution of some agricultural functions.

"The DA will assist, nonetheless, in resolving these perennial problems," he added. — **Adrian H. Halili**

Ohio, California poultry imports banned after outbreak of bird flu

THE Department of Agriculture (DA) has banned shipments of poultry products from two US states after outbreaks of H5N1 highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI), or bird flu.

In a statement on Wednesday, the DA said that imports of domestic and wild birds, poultry meat, day-old chicks, eggs, and semen from Ohio and California were suspended starting Jan. 15.

Agriculture Secretary Francisco Tiu Laurel, Jr. said that the import ban was necessary to prevent the entry of bird flu into the Philippines.

"The rapid spread of the HPAI H5N1 strain in the United States since the first laboratory detection necessitates wider coverage of the trade restriction to prevent the entry of the HPAI virus and protect the health of the local population," he added.

In 2016, Philippine and US veterinary authorities agreed that statewide bans could be imposed if three or more counties in each state are affected by the virus.

The US Veterinary Services notified the World Organisation for Animal Health in November of the bird flu cases in the two states.

Mr. Laurel said that he had ordered the immediate suspension of the processing, evaluation, and issuance of the Sanitary Phytosanitary Import Clearances on shipments from Ohio and California.

He added that such shipments from the two states may still be accepted provided that the items were produced or slaughtered 14 days before the first outbreak.

"Poultry and poultry products imported to the country from the states of California and Ohio after Nov. 14 and Nov. 21, shall be seized and destroyed by the DA, or returned to the country of origin," it said.

It added that other US states excluded from the ban may still ship poultry and poultry products to the Philippines.

Poultry meat imports from the US amounted to 166,356 metric tons in 2023; the shipments were valued at \$175.78 million. The US accounts for about 40% of Philippine poultry imports.

The DA earlier banned imports of poultry from Iowa, Minnesota, and South Dakota after a similar outbreak of HPAI. — **Adrian H. Halili**

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