

CA revokes biosafety permits for Golden Rice, Bt Eggplant

THE Court of Appeals (CA) has revoked the biosafety permits for the commercial propagation of Golden Rice and Bt Eggplant, citing their potential risks to the environment and the health of consumers.

In a 143-page decision issued on April 17, the appellate court also stopped the field testing and use, as well as imports of, genetically modified organisms (GMO) until all measures have been to ensure they are safe.

The appellate court's Fourth Division granted the privilege of the Writ of Kalikasan to the Magsasaka at Siyentipiko para sa Pag-unlad Agrikultura (MASIPAG), Greenpeace Southeast Asia - Philippines (Greenpeace), and others, "citing the constitutional right to health and maintaining environmental integrity."

It also issued a cease and desist order, halting the commercial propagation of the Bt Eggplant and Golden Rice.

"Considering the unmistakable importance of the constitutional right to a balanced and healthful ecology, especially in these times, we remind the government of its eminent duty to assiduously protect said right," according to the decision, written by Associate Justice Jennifer Joy C. Ong.

The appellate court found that the petitioners proved the adverse health and ecological effects of the Golden Rice and Bt eggplant projects are scientifically plausible but uncertain.

"Under the circumstances, applying the 'precautionary principle,' steps should be

taken to avoid or diminish any possible adverse effect to health and ecology," National Union of Peoples' Lawyers President Ephraim B. Cortez said.

Mr. Cortez added that "once proof of compliance with safety, health, and legal requirements are submitted by concerned government agencies, the respondents may resume activities relative to the commercial propagation of Golden Rice and Bt Eggplant."

"The conflicting scientific views (are) compounded by the lack of administrative monitoring for which the regulators were unable to determine whether or not there were health and safety issues during the process," he added.

The Supreme Court, sitting en banc, had granted the petitioners the Writ of Kalikasan, referring the case to the appellate court for "acceptance of the following returns on the Writ of Kalikasan, and for hearing reception of evidence, and rendition of judgment."

MASIPAG, a coalition of farmers and scientists, requested a temporary environmental protection order against the DA to halt the commercial cultivation of Golden Rice and Bt Eggplant until evidence of safety and compliance with legal requirements is provided.

A Writ of Kalikasan is a legal recourse aimed at safeguarding individuals from environmental harm that jeopardizes life, health, or property across two or more municipalities. — **Chloe Mari A. Hufana**

Tree replanting singled out as priority use of coco trust fund

By **Adrian H. Halili**
Reporter

THE GOVERNMENT needs to fully utilize the coconut levy asset fund to revitalize the industry by mounting a major replanting effort, according to coconut products manufacturer Axelum Resources Corp.

"There's a lot of money for replanting. If there is political will to utilize that money to replant and to implement all the programs of (the Philippine Coconut Authority [PCA]), we'll be in a good place," Romeo I. Chan, Axelum Chairman and

Chief Executive Officer told *BusinessWorld*.

Republic Act No. 11524, or the Coconut Farmers and Industry Trust Fund Act, ordered the placement of coconut levy assets into a trust fund aimed at rehabilitating and modernizing the industry.

Last year, President Ferdinand R. Marcos, Jr. 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 nut bearing trees.

In January, the PCA said that it was planning to plant 8.5 million coconut seedlings this year.

"On our part in the private sector, we are doing our share of replanting," Mr. Chan added.

He said that in a partnership with The Vita Coco Company, Inc., it is planning to replant one million coconut trees in the next five years.

Meanwhile, Mr. Chan said that the impact of El Niño on the coconut industry may manifest itself after 12 months.

"If you look at the total coconut landscape, it's not going to be a great deal. Our food industry only occupies 10% of the total market. The rest of the coconuts go to copra," he told reporters.

According to the US Department of Agriculture, about 80% of

copra produced in the Philippines is used for coconut oil production.

He said that the company also looking at using the unused coconut water thrown out during copra production.

"The copra farmers throw away the water as well, so that is another area for use to increase our supply base," Mr. Chan said.

The company last week renewed a coconut water supply deal with Vita Coco. The deal has an initial 10-year period, with an optional five-year extension.

"But you can gauge from the last 15 years, we did P15 billion, which is average of P1 billion a year. But we're going to do much more than that in the next years," Mr. Chan said.

Australia pushing farm chemicals regulator reforms

CANBERRA — The Australian government will push the country's farm chemicals regulator to improve the quality and integrity of its decision-making and reduce its focus on approving pesticides at a consistent pace, it said.

A review of the Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority (APVMA) last year questioned its corporate culture and standard of oversight, suggesting it may have been too accommodating of industry interests.

However, farm and industry groups say turmoil at the regulator due to the review and government reaction to it has resulted in the APVMA taking too long to approve new products and that this is leading to

preventable crop losses worth billions of dollars.

Agriculture Minister Murray Watt said that under previous governments, the regulator had a disproportionate focus on approving chemicals within statutory time frames and not enough attention was paid to compliance and enforcement.

He said the APVMA should take a more balanced approach that would elevate environmental and public health considerations, stakeholder engagement and compliance alongside time frames.

"We want to ensure that we have the world's best chemical regulator, so that consumers and our overseas customers can have confidence

in the food and fiber we produce," Mr. Watt said. "At the same time, the APVMA needs to be structured so that it can independently and efficiently approve new, safe chemicals that help farmers do their job."

The agriculture ministry said the APVMA would not be moved back to Canberra, the capital. Its removal to the regional town of Armidale in 2019 caused huge staff turnover that damaged its performance, the review of the regulator found.

The review was sparked by accusations that a senior staff member urinated on colleagues at a staff Christmas party in 2021. The APVMA's CEO and board chair both resigned last year. — **Reuters**

US to spend \$1 billion on food aid abroad amid global hunger crisis

THE US Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the US Agency for International Development (USAID) will distribute \$1 billion in US commodities to countries with high hunger rates, the agencies said.

The countries that will receive the aid — including the Democratic Republic of Congo, Yemen,

South Sudan, Sudan, and Haiti — are among the most stricken by hunger, according to the United Nations' World Food Program.

Global hunger is getting worse, with 745 million more people moderately to severely hungry worldwide in 2023 than in 2015, leaving the world offtrack to meet a sustainable development goal

of ending hunger by 2030, according to the United Nations.

The causes of expanded hunger are global conflict, climate change, and the long tail of recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic for the world's poor, the UN says. Hunger is rising the most in Sub-Saharan Africa.

The US-grown commodities to be purchased and sent abroad in-

clude grains and beans, the USDA said. The USDA will buy the commodities and USAID will distribute them, the agencies said.

The US is also facing high hunger rates in the wake of the pandemic, and USDA in 2022 spent \$2.3 billion on food purchases for schools and food banks. — **Reuters**

DBS sees inflation tying BSP's hands on rate action until Q4

ELEVATED inflation will likely prompt the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas (BSP) to delay its rate-cutting cycle to the fourth quarter, DBS Bank Ltd. said.

"Factoring in these drivers, we revise our 2024 inflation forecast to 3.7% year on year. Rising inflation and its impact on inflationary expectations, in the midst of a tight labor market is likely to keep the BSP from loosening financial conditions this quarter and the next," it said in a report.

The BSP expects inflation to average 3.8% this year. In March, headline inflation accelerated for a second straight month to 3.7% from 3.4% in February.

The central bank has said that inflation may temporarily accelerate above

the 2-4% target over the next two quarters.

"Global cues by way of a delayed start to the US rate cut cycle and resultant peso volatility will also prompt the BSP to maintain a defensive posture," DBS said.

"In all, domestic and global risks are likely to keep the central bank from front-loading policy easing. We see an extended pause and delay our rate cut expectations to the fourth quarter of 2024," it added.

The Monetary Board kept its key rate unchanged at a near 17-year high of 6.5% at its April meeting.

From May 2022 to October 2023, the BSP raised borrowing costs by 450 basis points. — **Luisa Maria Jacinta C. Jocson**

Building permit approvals fall 5.5% in February

APPROVED building permits fell 5.5% year on year in February, a reversal from the 12.5% growth posted a year earlier, the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) said in a report.

Preliminary PSA data indicated that building projects covered by the permits numbered 13,100, equivalent to 3.61 million square meters of floor area.

Construction projects represented by the permits were valued at P43.27 billion, up 40.3% from a year earlier.

"(The drop in approved building permits) is driven by inflationary pressures and the persistence of high interest rates constraining developers from boosting construction activity," John Paolo R. Rivera, president and chief economist at Oikonomia Advisory & Research, Inc., said in a Viber message.

In February, inflation accelerated to 3.4%, the strongest reading since the 3.9% posted in December.

Permits for residential projects, which accounted for 63.7% of the total, fell 9.4% to 8,345.

These projects were valued at P19.34 billion, against the P16.03 billion a year earlier.

Meanwhile, single homes made up 85.1% of the residential category with approved permits declining 15.3% to 7,104.

Applications for apartment buildings grew 50.9% to 1,088 while applications for duplex or quadruplex homes were up 59.6% and totaled 142.

Nonresidential projects, on the other hand, totaled 3,177, up 1.4% from a year earlier, accounting for 24.3% of the total.

Nonresidential permits were valued at P19.47 billion, up 59.4% from a year earlier.

Meanwhile, approved commercial construction applications made up 69% of all nonresidential projects, down 2.1% to 2,192.

Institutional building permits rose 27.6% to 523, while industrial permits dropped 14.6% to 229.

Approved agricultural projects totaled 131, down 9.7%, while other nonresidential projects totaled 102, up 41.7%.

Alteration and repair permits amounted to 1,034, down 2.8% from a year earlier and were valued at P3.52 billion.

Mr. Rivera said the slowdown in approved building permits is expected to continue as interest rates remain high with no indication of easing.

The Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas kept its benchmark rate at 6.5% for three consecutive meetings in February.

The PSA said that construction statistics are compiled from the copies of original application forms of approved building permits as well as from the demolition and fencing permits collected every month by the agency's field personnel from the offices of local building officials nationwide. — **Karis Kasarinlan Paolo D. Mendoza**

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