CAMP JOHN HAY

DA to propose P513.81-billion infra-heavy budget for 2025

THE Department of Agriculture (DA) said Thursday that its significantly expanded budget proposal for 2025 will help address shortcomings in farm infrastructure.

In a statement, the DA said that it will propose a P513.81 billion budget for 2025. If approved, this would be more than double the DA budget of P208.58 billion in 2023.

Agriculture Secretary Francisco P. Tiu Laurel, Jr. said that the funds will support the construction of irrigation and postharvest facilities.

"(The budget) is still a work in progress but clearly shows the direction we are headed," he added.

Under its proposed budget plan, the bulk of expenditures will go to the National Irrigation Administration, National Food Authority, Philippine Coconut Authority, Philippine Fisheries Development Authority, and the National Dairy Authority.

"The proposed combined budget for the eight DA attached corporations is P287.98 billion, more than triple their total budget of P94.3 billion for this year," the DA said.

Mr. Laurel has said that P93 billion is needed for postharvest facilities to reduce rice and corn waste.

He added that about P1.2 trillion will be required to irrigate an additional 1.2 million hectares to boost rice production and reduce imports.

"For the DA itself, the envisioned budget for 2025 is nearly double at P225.83 billion... to allow various bureaus to cope with the need to modernize the fisheries and farm sectors as well as address food safety and anti-smuggling efforts," the agency said.

The DA said that 57% or P294.21 billion of the proposed budget will be dedicated to rice.

Fisheries will get P50.6 billion, while locally funded projects will be allotted P45.48 billion.

It added that cross-cutting programs will be allocate P34.5 billion, high value crops P32 billion, livestock P28.56 billion, foreign-assisted projects P13.77 billion, corn P11.3 billion, and credit programs P3.38 billion. — **Adrian H. Halili**

John Hay's potential to be unlocked by SC ruling — investment secretary

FREDERICK D. GO, Special Assistant to the President for Investment and Economic Affairs said a Supreme Court (SC) decision resolving a dispute between the Bases Conversion and Development Authority (BCDA) and lessee, CJH Development Corp. holds the potential to open up the John Hay Special Economic Zone (SEZ) to investors.

"This development will enable the government to unleash the full potential of the John Hay SEZ and spur inclusive economic opportunities for northern Luzon," Mr. Go said in a statement Thursday.

"We invite private sector partners to look into John Hay as an ideal investment hub in the northern region for commerce, eco-tourism, and leisure," he added.

He said that this development will help in realizing the Marcos administration's goal of promoting investment "by utilizing and fully supporting ecozones, consequently bringing in strategic industries and promoting growth outside Metro Manila."

The SC said on April 10 that it had upheld an arbitral ruling ordering CJH Development to vacate John Hay.

The SC, through Justice Japar B. Dimaampao, upheld the decision of the Philippine Dispute Resolution Center, Inc. (PDRCI), which found that CJH Development and BCDA breached their obligations under their agreement.

The decision ordered both parties to revert to their original positions prior to the execution of the agreement, as far as practicable.

In particular, CJH Development was ordered to return the leased property with the improvements to BCDA, with the BCDA to refund the rent paid by CJH Development worth P1.42 billion.

On Monday, Executive Secretary Lucas P. Bersamin also welcomed the decision and said: "The BCDA will meet with stakeholders to map out the next plan of action following the ruling of the High Court."

In a previous statement, the BCDA said that the decision will allow it to recover the 247-hectare property in the former Camp John Hay, a former rest and recreation center for US forces based in the Philippines. — **Justine Irish D. Tabile**

DTI, Plug and Play accelerator program expected to help 40 startups each year

AT LEAST 40 startups annually are expected to obtain funding and training from an accelerator program launched by the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) and US venture capital firm Plug and Play Tech Center.

On the sidelines of the program launch late Wednesday, Plug and Play Co-Founder Jose Avelino Flores said in partnership with the DTI, Plug and Play will act as the facilitator in identifying the problems faced by startups and market them to sources of capital worldwide.

"Normally, with startups, and we see about 20,000 a year globally; these startups will not have 100% of the solutions," he said.

"So they will have to go through that acceleration program where, on that platform, they will work with the industry to build the products that will work," he added.

Plug & Play can help the startups tap the $10 billion pool of the firm's network globally, said Mr. Flores.

"You know, I invest about $25 million a year in startups. But... it's just one fund. I am relatively small, and I have access to at least $10 billion worth of funding from our network globally," he said.

The project will not only be open to Filipino startups but also international ones as well, and will cycle every six months with at least 20 participants in each batch.

"The idea is that these startups will now also attract foreign direct investment from venture capitalists in the Philippines, attract other companies that also want to look at their solutions and build those solutions," he said.

"Because these solutions will be built anyway in other parts of the world, so why are we waiting and buying these solutions made outside of the country when we can build them here? So that is the idea, so we will have the intellectual property," he added.

He said that the long-term goal of the program is for the startups to sell their solutions to the global market after being deployed in the Philippines.

Called the National Startup Accelerator Platform, the program will initially run for two years and is expected to be extended to five years.

Under the partnership, the DTI will be providing the office and coworking space to house the startups at the National Innovation Gateway.

"And of course, we'll introduce them to existing startups that we're working with already out of our other programs," Trade Secretary Alfredo E. Pascual said.

In terms of priorities, Mr. Pascual said these include artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, software development, animation, agritech, and foodtech.

During the launch, Plug and Play also signed a memorandum of understanding with its first corporate partner under the accelerator program, DFNN, Inc.

Under the partnership, DFNN Executive Chairman Ramon C. Garcia, Jr., said that the company will provide the incubating companies with access to markets for their products.

"Second, we ourselves are also contributing cash for the next five years to seed these startups, and what the DFNN Group hopes to get in return is an external way to look at innovative processes that we ourselves may tap and use within our own operations," he said.

"Remember, when you talk about seed funding, you're talking about $10,000–$20,000 per investee. So it really doesn't take a lot, but we're hoping to get a big return over the next number of years," he added.

In particular, the DFNN is interested in innovations involving cybersecurity, defense technology, and space technology. — **Justine Irish D. Tabile**

NEDA Board to approve revised PGH cancer center plan next week

THE National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA) board is set to approve a revised plan for the Philippine General Hospital (PGH) cancer center next week, addressing changes in project cost and parameters, the Public-Private Partnership (PPP) Center said Thursday.

"The thing with cancer center is since it was the first approved (PPP project) under the Marcos administration, some of the assumptions were set in the pre-pandemic (period)" PPP Executive Director Ma. Cynthia C. Hernandez told reporters on the sidelines of a luncheon organized by the European Chamber of Commerce of the Philippines.

The NEDA Board, which is chaired by President Ferdinand R. Marcos, Jr., initially greenlit the project on Feb. 2, 2023.

However, the cost for the 300-bed cancer center was raised to P9.4 billion from P6 billion. This includes the financing, design, engineering, construction, operation, and maintenance of the hospital.

"When they were drafting the detailed terms and conditions, I think PGH realized that they need to substantially upgrade the standards, especially they want it to be world class. So there were adjustments to the project cost which necessitated another round of NEDA (Board) approvals," Ms. Hernandez said. — **Beatriz Marie D. Cruz**

Well-milled rice prices average P57.03 per kilo in early April

THE national average retail price of well-milled rice in early April was P57.03 per kilogram (kg), the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) said in a report.

The average price was up from the P56.95 recorded between March 15 and 17, which the PSA refers to as the second phase of the month.

The highest retail price in the first phase was reported in Central Luzon, averaging P59.18 per kg during the period.

At the low end during the period was Ilocos Region with rice prices averaging P50.37 per kg.

The PSA reported that regular-milled rice averaged P51.39 per kg, up from P51.21 per kg during the first phase.

The highest price for regular-milled rice was recorded in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, with an average of P54.70 per kg.

Cagayan Valley posted the lowest price for well-milled rice at P46.69 per kg.

The Department of Agriculture has said that the retail price of rice is expected to remain elevated until midyear due to the impact of El Niño.

Meanwhile, the PSA said that brown sugar averaged P76.37 per kg, a 0.4% increase from the previous period.

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The PSA reported that brown sugar prices were highest in Calabarzon at P88.3 per kg during the first phase of April.

The lowest average price was reported in the Caraga Region at P69.47 per kg.

The PSA reported that the national average retail price for refined sugar was P87.29 per kg.

For the first phase of April, prices in Calabarzon were the highest with sugar averaging P96.56 per kg.

Prices for refined sugar were also lowest in Zamboanga Peninsula, where they averaged P81.43 per kg. — **Adrian H. Halili**