

Reducing rice imports to require larger farms, more mechanization

LARGER farm sizes and mechanization will help reduce dependence on rice imports, an economist said at an Asian Development Bank (ADB) forum on Wednesday.

“(The) Philippines has been increasing imports of rice. Indonesia has a problem of high production costs of rice, so they restrict imports. That is going to continue, unless we expand farm size, facilitate mechanization, and facilitate labor saving technology,” Keijiro Otsura, a development economics professor at the Kobe University Graduate School of Economics, said at the ADB’s Food Security Forum.

Milled rice imports to the Philippines totaled 886,963.11 metric tons (MT) as of March, running ahead of the pace for imports in the first quarter of 2023.

El Niño is expected to weigh on rice production this year. The US Department of Agriculture forecasts that Philippine rice imports could hit up to 4 million MT this year.

Food security experts also noted the importance of extending financing to small-scale farmers and food producers, who supply 80% of the Asia-Pacific region’s food, according to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization.

Paul Winters, executive director of the Innovation Com-

mission for Climate Change, Food Security, and Agriculture at the University of Chicago, noted that around 2-3% of climate financing goes to small-scale farmers, who are deemed most vulnerable to climate change impacts.

“We need to explore opportunities, not just working with governments, but working directly with farm cooperatives, farm organizations, and direct funding (to increase small-scale farmers’ allocations),” he told the forum.

Jyotsna Puri, associate vice-president of the International Food for Agricultural Development, said inputs from small-scale farmers are essential, as they are “more likely to be incorporating bio-diverse methods, agro-ecology, agro-forestry.

Meanwhile, André Zandstra, global director for Innovative Finance & Resource Mobilization at the Consortium of International Agricultural Research Centers, noted that financial institutions should be more precise in their agendas for agricultural and food systems funding.

“Obviously, there’s been a very clear interest and importance in agriculture and food systems... but it’s also creating competition and fragmentation that we need to resist,” he said. — **Beatriz Marie D. Cruz**

Australian \$3-M waste-to-energy project to be operational this year

THE Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) said on Wednesday that an Australian waste-to-energy project is projected to start operations by the end of 2024.

In a statement, the DTI said that Australian startup Cyclion Pty. Ltd. signed a memorandum of understanding with the National Development Co. (NDC) last month for an investment of \$3 million in the waste-to-energy project.

NDC General Manager Antonilo DC Mauricio said: “Our joint efforts will advance waste

management solutions, contributing to the national agenda on energy security and environmental sustainability.”

“We are excited to work on this partnership and contribute to the country’s sustainable future with our innovative and sustainable solutions,” Cyclion Founder and Chief Executive Officer Philip Major said.

Under the agreement, Cyclion will build a processing plant in Manila employing the Australian company’s technology for converting bio waste into green fuel.

“The facility’s modular design will enable the processing of 900 tons of waste daily, highlighting the project’s scalability and adaptability to varying waste volumes,” the DTI said.

Trade Secretary Alfredo E. Pascual said that the partnership between the NDC and Cyclion highlights opportunities for Australia and the Philippines to collaborate.

“By strengthening the collaboration between our public and private sectors, we can unlock new avenues for growth and innova-

tion in key sectors like agriculture, education, critical minerals, and clean energy,” Mr. Pascual said.

Aside from the partnership with NDC, Cyclion also signed a letter of intent with Murdoch University’s Algae Harvest Pty. Ltd. for a research collaboration last year.

The DTI said that the collaboration aims to study new ways of using algae to turn waste into “high-value” products which will be used in the Australian firm’s projects in the Philippines. — **Justine Irish D. Tabile**

Exporters continue opposition to storage fee hikes at ports

THE Philippine Exporters Confederation, Inc. (Philexport) said its members continue to oppose the increase in storage fees imposed by the Philippine Ports Authority (PPA).

“We are still protesting against it. The problem is, every time there is a problem in the ports, they increase the rates,” Philexport President Sergio R. Ortiz-Luis, Jr., told reporters on Friday.

The exporters are proposing a one-time grant of amnesty by the Bureau of Customs to resolve the dispute, as well as weekly auctions of confiscated goods.

“Customs is unlike BIR (Bureau of Internal Revenue), which every time there is a change of administration, declares an amnesty,” Mr. Ortiz-Luis said.

“Customs doesn’t have the power to declare an amnesty, so from

the time it was set up, there has been no declaration of amnesty. So what we are suggesting is to declare a one-time amnesty (in Customs) for them to be able to clean out all the (backlog),” he added.

Aside from the one-time amnesty, Mr. Ortiz-Luis also called for a weekly auction of confiscated goods to help decongest PPA facilities.

“The auction of the confiscated goods should be done every week so that (congestion) will decrease... What is important is for us to dispatch the confiscated goods,” he said.

The PPA implemented a 32% hike in storage fees for foreign container cargo on Jan. 6, despite calls from the business sector to defer or reconsider the increase.

In particular, the British Chamber of Commerce of the

Philippines called for the increase to be deferred to mid-2024.

Other chambers that opposed the proposal include the American Chamber of Commerce of the Philippines, Inc., the German-Philippine Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and the European Chamber of Commerce of the Philippines.

Asked to comment, the PPA said that the port charges, including cargo handling charges, are based on the terms of concession agreements entered into by the government.

“These adjustments are based on established and accepted metrics and are subjected to thorough scrutiny through public consultations,” it said in a Viber message.

In a public consultation in October, the PPA said that the increase in storage charges will

ensure optimal use of the yards and encourage immediate withdrawal of containers, thereby minimizing congestion.

The Department of Transportation added that the increase is meant to “discourage” overstaying cargoes.

“The problem with high logistics costs is the unregulated charges being charged primarily by shipping lines, private container yards, trucking companies, and other service providers that are part of the logistics chain,” the PPA said.

“These charges are all unregulated and are increased arbitrarily without the benefit of any consultation. In the meantime, port charges, including cargo handling charges, account for only less than 5% of the logistics cost,” it said. — **Justine Irish D. Tabile**

MWSS: Angat can support water allocation of 50 cms

THE Metropolitan Waterworks and Sewerage System (MWSS) said Angat Dam water levels have not dropped below 195 meters, arguing for a water allocation of 50 cubic meters per second (cms), which it said was needed to ensure uninterrupted water supply.

“(The Angat Dam water level) did not drop below 195 meters,” which can accommodate a water allocation of 50 cms, Patrick James B. Dizon, a manager with the MWSS water and sewerage management department, said in a Viber message.

The National Water Resources Board set the raw water allocation for Metro Manila at 50 cms for March and early April.

“For MWSS, we want to provide a continuous 50 cms to avoid water interruption for our users,” Mr. Dizon said.

Angat Dam is the main source of water for the National Capital Region, accounting for about 90% of its potable water supply.

As of Wednesday morning, the water level in Angat Dam was 195.85 meters, against

the 196.15-meter reading a day earlier, according to the government weather service, known as PAGASA (Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration). — **Sheldeen Joy Talavera**



MOTORISTS are stuck in heavy traffic along the northbound lane of EDSA in Cubao, Quezon City, Dec. 22, 2023.

Rail projects, from S1/1

“If these things are not yet currently being done, ‘working double time’ does not really mean anything as yet.”

At the same meeting, Mr. Marcos said he wants local government units (LGUs) in Metro Manila to come up with common traffic management to lessen confusion among stakeholders.

“We must consider the road system and the mass transit system in Metro Manila as one system. And one system feeds into another,” he said.

Mr. Marcos said his government seeks to expand areas allowed for the country’s 15 million motorcycle riders.

“We’re trying to see what are the other areas, high-traffic areas, where our motorcycle services could expand.”

He said the government is also considering barring road works during daytime to avoid heavy traffic. He also expressed concern over the prevalence of vehicles plying the roads without necessary permits.

NO EXTENSION

Mr. Marcos, meanwhile, said he would no longer extend the deadline for the franchise consolidation under the government’s Public Utility Vehicle Modernization Program (PUVMP), which was already extended in late January.

“There will be no more extensions under the PUVMP. This extension is final,” Transportation Secretary Jaime J. Bautista said, adding that consolidation of transport workers into a cooperative will help address traffic congestion.

The Land Transportation Franchising and Regulatory Board earlier said 190,000 public utility vehicles units, including UV Express, jeepneys, mini-buses, and buses, have availed of consolidation.

Mr. Marcos also cited the need to decongest Metro Manila by creating more regional

centers and creating more roads outside the capital region, which is home to over 13 million people.

The President cited an interlink bridge project that seeks to cut travel time from Bataan in Central Luzon to Cavite to just 30-45 minutes from 4 to 5 hours.

Mr. Bautista said the first phase of the proposed Bataan-Cavite Interlink Bridge is expected to begin soon, amid questions on its progress after the National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA) changed the cost and the timeline for the project.

The project would cost P219.3 billion, up from the initial cost of P175.6 billion, NEDA said in October last year, adding that the implementation period may reach December 2029. The project was earlier projected to begin construction in late 2023.

“The procurement would already start,” Mr. Bautista told reporters on the sidelines of the town hall meeting.

Mr. Bonoan said the DPWH will be bidding out the first two out of the six segments by the first semester. The next two segments may be bid out in the third quarter.

Traffic solutions have so far been focused on Metro Manila, Mr. Marcos said, citing the need to craft similar solutions for other urban centers such as Cebu City in central Philippines and Davao City in the country’s south.

NEDA Secretary Arsenio M. Balisacan said the government encourages businessmen to invest in key areas outside the capital region such as Cavite, Laguna, and Batangas.

He also cited Bulacan, Pampanga, Laoag, Metro Cebu, Metro Davao, Cagayan de Oro, Iloilo, Bacolod, and General Santos City.

Public services in the countryside such as healthcare should also be improved to lessen the demand for services in Metro Manila, the NEDA chief said. — **Kyle Aristophere T. Atienza with inputs from Ashley Erika O. Jose**

SM Offices leverages proptech strategies to better serve tenant-partners

Maximizing the latest in technological advancements, the real estate industry has been quick to adopt various property technologies (proptech) into its operations to help open new avenues in advancing the quality of real estate.

Proptech brings forth inventive solutions that enhance buildings — boosting efficiency, streamlining operations, and improving customer experience.

SM Offices, a division of SM Prime, is one of the leading developers in the country that is actively leveraging on such technologies — taking great pride in the proptech solutions it utilizes to slash energy consumption and revolutionizing its space solutions to become more sustainable.

This forward-thinking approach to integrating proptech not only underscores SM Offices’ commitment to ESG goals but also paves the way for innovative adaptations in its infrastructure. In fact, SM Offices recently launched electric vehicle (EV) chargers at three of their office buildings in the Mall of Asia Complex, namely ThreeE-com Center, FourE-com Center, and FiveE-com Center.

By introducing EV chargers in its office buildings, SM Offices takes the next logical step towards reducing environmental impact and enhancing tenant experience, “Listening to the growing demand from our tenant-partners for more environmentally friendly transportation options, we have proactively installed EV chargers in our properties. This initiative is part of our broader commitment to improving tenant convenience and leading by example in adopting a low-carbon footprint lifestyle. Our efforts are a testament to our belief that green buildings and practices are not merely ethical choices but smart, long-term investments,” said Alexis L. Ortiga, SM Prime Holdings Vice President and SM Offices Head.

SM Offices has also embraced cutting-edge technologies like the Energy Recovery Ventilator (ERV) — another technology that promotes energy efficiency by transforming stale exhaust air into fresh outside air. Aside from improved energy efficiency, this system enhances air quality, moisture regulation, and provides cool and clean air to the tenants.

Other technologies in its office buildings include a Building Management System (BMS) and Air Conditioning and Ventilation System (ACVS) equipment, which are used to optimize desired comfort cooling requirements at the least energy and



Present at the ParkNCharge EV charging stations launch at SM Offices’ E-com Centers are (from left): DOE Energy Utilization Management Bureau Director (CESO III) Patrick Aquino; SysNet President and CEO Joel Sapul; SMDC Senior Vice President and Head of Property Management Erickberth Calupe; SM Commercial Properties Group (CPG) Senior Assistant Vice President Orliber Paule; SM Prime Holdings Vice President and Head of CPG Alexis Ortiga; EVAP (Electric Vehicle Association of the Philippines) Executive Director Jose Bienvenido Manuel Biona; and EEI Power Corp. President Cris Noel Torres.

water consumption for both common areas and applicable leased spaces.

National Building Code-compliant Seismic Accelerograph earthquake recording instruments and seismic detection devices are also installed to help ensure the serviceability, performance, and structural integrity of the buildings in the event of earthquakes. During seismic events, these technologies trigger alarms and provide relevant information to ensure that emergency protocols are implemented. Elevators also open at the nearest stop for immediate and proper evacuation of passengers. “Measures like this are crucial for protecting our tenant-partners and their businesses, offering them peace of mind and a secure working environment,” Ortiga emphasized.

And because time is money, SM Offices employs a Centralized Automated Meter Reading (CAMR) System to perform real-time and automatic meter reading for accurate recording, billing, and analytics. For SM Offices, this is a perfect feature to improve technician productivity and for tenants with spaces in multiple floors to access all data in a single location.

Extending the scope of technological integration beyond the confines of their office buildings, SM Prime also pioneers in the application of proptech to enhance

the broader infrastructure that supports their complexes. The implementation of adaptive traffic signals within the Mall of Asia Complex, where the SM E-Com Office Block is located, is a prime example of this expansive vision. These adaptive traffic signals detect vehicles and pedestrians crossing the different road lanes through sensors embedded within the pavement. According to their data, these adaptive traffic signals reduce delays by about 20%, stops by 20%, fuel consumption by 212%, and emissions by 7%.

SM Offices’ transformative use of proptech illustrates the profound impact it has on sustainability, efficiency, and the well-being of its tenant-partners. By integrating advanced solutions within its properties, SM Offices not only reimagines the development and management of office spaces but also sets new benchmarks for environmental stewardship and operational excellence. “We’re not just looking at immediate benefits. Our focus is on the long-term impact, setting new standards, and inspiring a shift across the industry. Through strategic proptech integration, we aim to create spaces that not only serve our current tenants but also pave the way for future generations,” Ortiga shared.