



Farmers want say in gov't sugar import plans

SUGAR producers said they need to be consulted on the Sugar Regulatory Administration's (SRA) sugar import plans.

In a statement, the Sugar Council said it recommended an import plan decided in consultation with the industry, with due consideration given to market conditions.

"If sugar imports are the last resort to fill the shortages that may be caused by El Niño, the Sugar Council emphasizes the need for a logical, transparent, and consultative import program," it said on Sunday.

Last week, the SRA said that it was studying to allow sugar imports during the end of the milling season to bolster supply.

SRA Administrator Pablo Luis S. Azcona said that the President had recommended allowing imports between 185,000 metric tons (MT) and 200,000 MT.

Administrative Order No. 20 tasked the SRA with streamlining and standardizing sugar import rules. It was also ordered to admit more traders into the sugar import program.

He added that the regulator and the Department of Agriculture will identify a trigger point for when to allow imports to enter the country.

"Unless the coming months see a spike in withdrawals (from inventory), the country might not need to import raw or refined sugar until the first quarter of

2025," the group said. It added that if imports were to come in prematurely, it could cause the millgate price of domestically-grown sugar to drop.

"With local production predicted to be low in 2024-2025, sugar farmers are in for a double whammy," it added.

The US Department of Agriculture is estimating that raw sugar production will be flat at 1.85 million metric tons (MT) during the 2024-2025 season, while cane production is estimated at 21.6 million MT.

Raw sugar production hit 1.92 million MT as of May 5, 9% higher than a year earlier.

The group added that excessive imports of sugar had caused the drop in millgate prices during the 2023-2024 milling season, prompting the government to directly procure sugar from farmers.

"While importing sugar can stabilize the retail market in the face of insufficient local production, it has to be a solution of last resort, done in consultation with stakeholders, especially sugar farmers, and its schedule and volume calibrated to avoid the milling season, it said.

The council is composed of the Confederation of Sugar Producers Associations, Inc., the National Federation of Sugarcane Planters, Inc., and the Panay Federation of Sugarcane Farmers, Inc. — **Adrian H. Halili**

China probes agri minister for suspected 'disciplinary violations'

BEIJING — China's agriculture minister is being investigated for suspected violations of law and discipline, the anti-graft regulator watchdog said Saturday.

Tang Renjian, 61, is under investigation for "serious violations

of discipline and law" by the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection (CCDI) and National Supervisory Commission, CCDI said.

The term is CCDI's typical euphemism for corruption. The notice gave no further details. It

is uncommon for an official of Mr. Tang's rank to be placed under investigation without first being removed from the post.

He most recently appeared in public on Wednesday at a conference on rural talent, where he gave a speech, according to a

post on the agriculture ministry's website.

Mr. Tang was governor of the western province of Gansu from 2017 to 2020 before being named minister of agriculture and rural affairs, according to official biographies. — **Reuters**



El Niño mitigation measures also seen useful during La Niña

THE MEASURES implemented to curb the effects of El Niño will also help reduce La Niña's impact on agriculture.

Rizal Commercial Banking Corp. Chief Economist Michael L. Ricafort said that the government's mitigation measures for El Niño will also come in handy for the heavier-than-usual rains brought about by La Niña.

"Preparations for El Niño include pre-emptive imports of rice and agricultural products, extension of reduced tariffs on some imported agricultural products and simplified import

procedures," Mr. Ricafort said in a Viber message.

As of May 8, damage and losses to agriculture due to El Niño hit P6.35 billion, affecting over 270,034 metric tons of crops. Rice and corn were the most affected commodities.

Last year, the government extended the lower tariff regime for rice, pork, and corn, via Executive Order (EO) No. 50.

The President also issued Administrative Order (AO) No. 20, which simplifies the procedures for agricultural imports, while removing non-tariff barriers.

Former Agriculture Undersecretary Fermin D. Adriano said that La Niña is expected to be delayed, as predicted by PAGASA, the government weather service.

"It (may) start July or August. Expect prices to increase because of the combined effect of rising production costs and climate change," Mr. Adriano said in a Viber message.

In its latest bulletin, PAGASA said that there is a 60% chance of La Niña occurring between June and August as El Niño is weakening. El Niño's impacts, however, such as hotter and drier conditions, may persist.

The Department of Agriculture (DA) said that it is preparing for a "more destructive" La Niña which could potentially affect crops late in the year.

The DA said it will focus on areas which were historically affected by previous occurrences of the La Niña.

Agriculture Assistant Secretary and Spokesperson Arnel V. de Mesa told reporters last week that if La Niña were to happen during the end of that year, it could potentially affect the dry season planting. — **Adrian H. Halili**

Space data fuel India's farming innovation drive

BENGALURU — Lokeswara Reddy, an Indian farmer with two decades of experience, has seen his crops flourish after lean years, thanks to earth-observation satellites.

Shifting climate patterns, high input costs, a scarcity of labor and erratic weather began to disrupt his earnings about 10 years ago, said Mr. Reddy, 52, currently a contract farmer with global giant Syngenta.

Satellite data, gathered and crunched by Indian startup Cropin and provided to him by Syngenta, now gives him optimal sowing times, weather warnings, and better use of irrigation and pesticides, he said.

Mr. Reddy said that over the last decade he has increased his net profit to 20,000 rupees (\$240) per acre on corn at his farm in the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, up from 5,000-10,000 rupees.

"We are on a surer footing when it comes to agricultural practices; (using satellite data) safeguards us from climate change, pest and disease, problems with irrigation scheduling," he said.

The Indian government, which just relaxed foreign investment rules for the space sector, is leaning heavily into the use of satellite data to solve problems on the ground, with agriculture a key focus.

Reuters spoke to 11 experts and farmers, six startups in the industry and three NGOs who said space technology and big data were primed to help Indian agriculture reach new heights.

"India's path to leadership in the new space race lies in utilizing the power of data, and applications within the agricultural sector offer immense potential," said Pawan Goenka, chairman of the Indian National Space Promotion and Authorization Centre, the country's space regulatory body.

Market Research Future, an India-based data analysis firm, says the global space agriculture market will be worth \$11.51 billion by 2032, up from \$4.99 billion in 2023.

Although China holds the largest market share, the sector is growing faster in India than anywhere else in the Asia-Pacific region, it said.

Cropin, founded in 2010 and backed by both Google and the Gates Foundation, recently signed a deal with Amazon Web Services to crunch satellite data to solve for global food insecurity.

Cropin's partnership with farmers, the World Bank and the government of India in 244 villages digitized more than 30,000 farm

plots, covering 77 crop varieties across climate zones, a company project analysis in 2019 showed.

The study showed 92% of the farmers involved increased their average yield by 30% and their farm revenue by nearly 37%. The company got similar results in Africa.

Cropin and others are tapping into a burgeoning sector. The use of satellite data for crop insurance and horticulture has a market potential of about \$1.35 billion over the next 5 years, Deloitte said in a report.

Baring Private Equity-backed SatSure, another Indian startup, crunches earth observation data to inform loan analysis. Chief Executive Officer Prateep Basu said there are about 70 million active farmer bank accounts in the country, representing roughly 38% of the total pool. That makes up about \$200 billion of all lenders' loan books, he said.

India has 2,743 agricultural tech startups, many of which incorporate satellite data or other space technology. Funding hit a high of \$1.3 billion in 2021; companies gathered \$394.4 million in 2023 and \$136.7 million so far in 2024.

But there are barriers to large-scale adoption of space technology in agriculture. The average landholding size for farmers in India is just 1.08 hectares. That fragmentation, coupled with poverty and low levels of literacy, pose challenges for tech adoption, industry experts said.

"Agriculture has never been a tech-forward sector and often farmers want to rely on traditional practices, or the wisdom of their forefathers," said Raghunath Reddy, a Syngenta manager.

In India, McKinsey says agricultural technology has the potential to grow farmers' incomes by 25% to 35%.

Indian Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman, in her 2023 budget speech, announced a 703 million rupee (\$8.42 million) accelerator fund to boost agritech startups. In March 2023, the government said the fund was supporting 1,138 such companies.

For farmers like Mr. Reddy, agriculture tech has meant better living standards — over the past few years he has bought a car and bought a new house in town.

"This increase in earnings also means better education for my son, who has plans to be a software engineer abroad, in the US or London. At the end of the day, we want a better future for our kids," Mr. Reddy said. — **Reuters**

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