

Fuel subsidy for farmers due out this month

THE Department of Agriculture (DA) said that it will provide a fuel subsidy worth P3,000 to farmers that own or rent machinery for crop, livestock, and poultry production.

"This initiative aims to alleviate the financial burden on farmers amid the rising cost of fuel," Agriculture Secretary Francisco

P. Tiu Laurel, Jr. said in a statement on Sunday.

The DA said that about 160,000 beneficiaries will receive the fuel subsidy, which will be disbursed starting late July.

"The disbursement of subsidies to beneficiaries is contingent upon the Department of Energy's certification that the average

monthly price of Dubai crude oil per barrel has reached \$80," it added, citing the benchmark price for fuel traded to east Asia as determined by the Mean of Platts Singapore.

The Department of Energy had said that fuel prices are expected to increase this week with gasoline increasing by P1.50 per

liter, by P0.60 for diesel and by P0.80 for kerosene.

Last week, oil companies raised prices by P0.95 per liter for gasoline, P0.65 for diesel, and P0.35 for kerosene.

Farmers listed in the Registry System for Basic Sectors of Agriculture will be eligible for the subsidy.

The DA added that the funds will be distributed via cards provided by the Development Bank of the Philippines and its financial technology partners.

"This project underscores the government's commitment to providing immediate financial relief to farmers grappling with

increased production costs due to elevated fuel prices, thereby supporting their ongoing agricultural activities crucial to sustaining the country's food supply," the DA added.

The DA allocated about P510.447 million for the fuel subsidy program in its 2024 budget. — **Adrian H. Halili**

US awards Moderna \$176 million to develop vaccine against bird flu

THE US government has awarded \$176 million to Moderna to advance development of its bird flu vaccine, the company said, as concerns rise over a multi-state outbreak of H5N1 virus in dairy cows and infections of three dairy workers since March.

Funds from the US Biomedical Advanced Research and Development Authority will be used to complete late-stage development and testing of a pre-pandemic mRNA-based vaccine against H5N1 avian influenza.

US officials said late-stage testing will begin in 2025, pending results expected in the coming weeks of Moderna's phase 1 trial. The late-stage trial will likely focus on safety and immune response. The contract includes options to accelerate the development timeline if needed, based on an increase in human cases, the severity of cases or human-to-human transmission of the virus.

It is too early to tell how many doses Moderna will be able to manufacture, said Robert Johnson, director of the medical countermeasures program at HHS.

In March, US officials reported the first outbreak of the H5N1 virus in dairy cattle, which has since infected more than 130 herds in 12 states. Scientists are concerned that exposure to the virus in poultry and dairy operations could increase the risk that the virus will mutate and gain the ability to spread easily among people, touching off a pandemic.

The risk to the general public from bird flu remains low, and vaccination is not currently recommended for any segment of the population, Dawn O'Connell, assistant secretary for preparedness and response at the US Department of Health and Human Services, said.

However, "robust discussions" are occurring within government agencies about whether vaccinating farm

workers would be helpful, said Nirav Shah, principal deputy director of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, adding that no final decisions have been made.

The government expects to have more announcements on H5N1 vaccines in the near future, Ms. O'Connell said.

In a previous briefing, Ms. O'Connell said her agency was also negotiating with Pfizer for an mRNA vaccine against H5N1. Both the Moderna and Pfizer vaccines use messenger RNA, the technology used in their COVID-19 vaccines.

"mRNA vaccine technology offers advantages in efficacy, speed of development and production, scalability, and reliability in addressing infectious disease outbreaks, as demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic," Moderna CEO Stephane Bancel said in a statement.

Manufacturing of conventional flu vaccines using cell or egg-based technology can take four to six months. US officials previously announced they were moving bulk vaccine from CSL Seqirus that closely matches the current virus into finished shots that could provide 4.8 million doses if needed.

Some of those doses could be available as early as this month, Ms. O'Connell said. Those shots could potentially be used to inoculate farm workers and others at risk of exposure off a pandemic.

Lab experiments from the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) continue to confirm that pasteurization inactivates the bird flu virus in dairy products, said Don Prater, director of the agency's Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition.

The FDA is conducting ongoing tests of retail dairy products for traces of avian flu and has cautioned against consuming raw milk. — **Reuters**

Move to impose rice safeguard measures seen negating impact of import tariff cut

By **Adrian H. Halili**
Reporter

THE use of safeguard measures against rice imports may end up canceling out any price declines resulting from tariff cuts, a government researcher said.

Roehlano M. Briones, a senior research fellow with the Philippine Institute for Development Studies, said safeguards measures against rice imports may "nullify the reduction in rice prices due to the tariff cut."

"We cannot go on penalizing consumers as heavily as in the past," Mr. Briones said via Viber.

Section 10 of Republic Act (RA) 11203 or the Rice Tariffication Law authorizes the government to impose special duties on rice imports in the event of "sudden or extreme price fluctuations," triggering a special safeguard duty under the procedures prescribed by RA 8800 or the Safeguard Measures Act.

"With tariffs at 15%, it will depend on what provisions the special safeguard duty will provide to protect farmers which will not run contrary to (the Rice Tariffication Law)," University of Asia and the Pacific Center for Food and Agribusiness Executive Director Senen U. Reyes said via Viber.

Mr. Reyes added that even with previous import tariffs at 35%, farmers have

claimed that they are disadvantaged by foreign competition.

Farmers groups last week sought a delay in the execution of Executive Order (EO) No. 62 which lowered the tariffs on rice imports to 15%, until 2028, subject to a review of import duties every four months.

Agriculture Assistant Secretary and Spokesperson Arnel V. de Mesa said that any delays in carrying out EO 62 could hinder the reduction of rice prices, with broader implications for the inflation-containment effort.

"If there is a delay in imports, it will also have an impact on our national rice inventory. And of course, the possible decrease in rice prices will also be delayed," Mr. De Mesa told reporters last week.

The Department of Agriculture (DA) said that it was projecting national rice reserves at 3.64 million metric tons (MMT) by the end of the year, equivalent to about 95 days' demand.

The national rice inventory rose 10.3% to 2.08 MMT as of May 1, according to the Philippine Statistics Authority.

Agriculture Secretary Francisco P. Tiu Laurel, Jr. has said that the department would back a hike in rice tariffs once rice prices fall to P42 to P45 per kilogram.

Former Agriculture Undersecretary Fermin D. Adriano put forward a variable tariff regime that would save time

on determining that dumping — the unfair pricing of exports — is taking place.

"The better alternative is a variable tariff system as adopted and implemented in Bangladesh," Mr. Adriano said via Viber.

"The problem is to prove there is surge or dumping, which will take time to establish. DA does not have enough technical people to do the math and prove based on solid data that there or dumping or a surge in imports," he added.

Leonardo A. Lanzona, Jr., an economics professor at the Ateneo de Manila, said that the government should also provide subsidies on a large scale.

"Agriculture cannot be ignored in this case. The government must subsidize a massive agricultural development program, not only raising production but distributing income as well," Mr. Lanzona said via Messenger chat.

Tariff collections from rice imports support rice farmers through the Rice Competitiveness Enhancement Fund, with an annual allocation of P10 billion. The excess is also used for financial assistance to rice farmers.

The US Department of Agriculture is projecting Philippine imports at 4.6 MMT this year, driven by the cut in tariffs. If realized this would be 27.8% higher than the 3.6 MMT reported in 2023.

World food prices steady in June, UN says

ROME — The United Nations (UN) world food price index held steady in June, with increases in the indices for vegetable oil, sugar and dairy products balanced out by a fall in the price of cereals.

The UN Food and Agriculture Organization's (FAO) price index, which tracks the most globally traded food commodities, averaged 120.6 points in June, unchanged from May.

The May reading was revised after initially being given as 120.4.

Prior to June, the FAO index had risen for three consecutive months after hitting a three-year low in February as food prices receded from a record peak set in March 2022, following Russia's invasion of fellow crop export major Ukraine.

The June value was 2.5% down on its level one year ago and 24.8% below its 2022 high point.

In a separate report, FAO raised its forecast for global cereal production in 2024 by 7.9 million tons (+0.3%), putting it at 2.854 billion tons, up fractionally from 2023 levels and marking a new all-time high forecast. — **Reuters**

'Modern' skills in PHL workplace to depend on constant industry-schools dialogue — ORT Israel

THE PHILIPPINE government must enable constant dialogue between industry and schools to ensure that the future workforce is equipped with modern skills needed to be globally competitive, according to Israel's largest education network.

"We need to really create a close dialogue between the industry and education sector," Alona Kletsel, head of international business development and marketing of ORT Israel, told a media roundtable in Taguig City on July 5.

"The (dialogue participants) need to be quick enough and prompt enough, agile, to be able to adapt education programs in real time to real industry needs."

ORT, which is funded by Israel's Ministry of Education, has 30 vocational colleges and 220 secondary education schools worldwide.

She was in Manila last week to meet with officials from the Department of Education, Commission on Higher Education, Technical Education Skills and Development Authority,



TESDA

local government units, and universities on the potential use of artificial technology (AI) to lighten teacher workloads.

Israeli Ambassador to the Philippines Ilan Fluss said ORT is working closely with the private and public education industries to enhance science, technology, engineering, and mathematics programs.

"The start of innovation and technology is teaching and educating innovation and technology to the future leadership of the country," he said at the roundtable.

President Ferdinand R. Marcos, Jr. has said his government aims to create at least three million new jobs through upskilling and reskilling programs.

Last year, he signed the Trabaho Para sa Bayan Act, which sets up an inter-agency council to draft an employment roadmap to improve the quality of jobs available.

National Economic and Development Authority Secretary Arsenio M. Balisacan has said the 10-year jobs masterplan must include plans to allow workers to keep up with emerging technologies such as AI.

In a 2023 report, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) said the Philippines should use education technology to bridge the skills gap or risk job losses due to rapid technological advancements.

"In order to expose the children to the industry (they wish to pursue), you have to show them the road which will lead them to work in this organization," Ms. Kletsel said. — **John Victor D. Ordoñez**

UN sees tourism as means of easing tensions, attracting FDI

THE PHILIPPINES can use tourism to ease tensions with China and attract foreign investment, a United Nations (UN) official said.

"Tourism is a driver of peace. That's why this year we decided to launch UN Tourism for Peace, and basically what we desire is to promote how tourism can open borders, can open up (visitors to) new cultures," UN Tourism Executive Director Natalia Bayona told *BusinessWorld* last week.

The Philippines is currently embroiled with China in a dispute over territorial waters, with

recent flare-ups triggered by the Philippines seeking to fish in traditional fishing grounds and resupplying military outposts in the South China Sea.

She estimated the number of ongoing conflicts at about 60, while possible changes of government via elections also introducing a note of uncertainty in investment decisions.

In March, Philippine foreign direct investment (FDI) net inflows rose 23% year on year to \$686 million, bringing the first-quarter inflows to nearly \$3 billion, according to preliminary

data from the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas.

On June 13, the Department of Foreign Affairs announced stricter rules for visas for Chinese nationals in response to crimes allegedly involving Chinese.

The Department of Tourism said China is the third-largest market in terms of visitors to the Philippines, with a 6.56% share of international arrivals, as of June 1.

Asked what can be done to promote tourism despite the tensions, Ms. Bayona said: "What we are going to do after the regional

commission of Asia-Pacific with the Philippines is that we will start working on education, and we will start working on investment promotion."

She added that UN Tourism also plans to create an academy that will upskill Filipino workers in gastronomy skills.

"We are working to create an economic framework that can help investors to come and invest in the Philippines. Next year, we will be able to launch officially the investment guidelines," Ms. Bayona added. — **Aubrey Rose A. Inosante**

SSIGROUP, Inc

NOTICE OF ANNUAL MEETING OF THE STOCKHOLDERS

Notice is hereby given that the annual meeting of the stockholders of SSI GROUP, INC. for the year 2024 will be held and conducted via virtual meeting on Tuesday, 30 July 2024 at 2:00 P.M. via <https://livenow.ph/ssigroupasm2024>.

The Agenda for the meeting shall be as follows:

1. Call to Order
2. Certification of Notice and Quorum
3. Approval of Minutes of the Annual Meeting held on 21 June 2023
4. Approval of Annual Report for the Year 2023
5. General ratification of all acts of the Board of Directors and management from the date of the last annual meeting up to the date of this meeting
6. Election of Directors for 2024-2025
7. Appointment of External Auditors
8. Other Matters
9. Adjournment

The minutes of the 2023 Annual Meeting of Stockholders is available at the website of the Company, <https://www.ssigroup.com.ph>.

The Board of Directors has fixed the end of trading hours of the Philippine Stock Exchange on 2 July 2024 as the Record Date for the determination of stockholders entitled to notice of and vote at such meeting.

To ensure the safety and welfare of the Company's stockholders, the Company will conduct the meeting virtually. Stockholders may attend the meeting and participate via remote communication and by voting in absentia, or by appointing the Chairman of the meeting as their proxy.

Stockholders who intend to participate and vote in the meeting should register on or before 20 July 2024 via <https://livenow.ph/ssigroupasm2024>. All registrations shall be validated by the Corporate Secretary in coordination with the Stock and Transfer Agent. Successful registrants will receive an e-mail with instructions on how to access an online web address which will allow them to join the meeting and cast votes in absentia or by proxy.

Stockholders who intend to appoint a proxy should submit duly accomplished proxy forms on or before 20 July 2024 at the Office of the Corporate Secretary at 6F Midland Buendia Bldg., 403 Sen. Gil Puyat Ave., Makati City and/or by email to corporatesecretary@gqoc.com.ph.

The procedures for participating in the meeting through remote communication and for casting their votes in absentia are set forth in the Information Statement.

11 June 2024, Makati City.


MA. ALICIA G. PICAZO-SAN JUAN
Corporate Secretary