NFA pilot-testing 1-ton palay bagging system

THE National Food Authority (NFA) has launched a pilot program to bag palay (unmilled rice) in 1-ton sacks, saying the measure is designed to reduce storage costs and optimize warehouse capacity.

"This is part of our broader effort to upgrade NFA's storage capacity at minimal cost to the government," according to Agriculture Secretary Francisco P. Tiu Laurel, Jr., who also chairs the NFA Council. "By maximizing existing warehouse space, we can procure more palay from farmers and help address post-harvest losses," he was quoted as saying in a Department of Agriculture (DA) statement.

According to NFA Administrator Larry Lacson, the pilot test will begin in at least three warehouses. "This trial will provide us with critical data to determine whether the technology is viable for broader implementation," he said.

Some of the NFA's over 300 warehouses are undergoing upgrades to accommodate larger volumes of palay and milled rice, and possibly corn if legislative amendments are passed.

The 1-ton bagging system is touted to reduce reducing storage and transport costs, with airtight bags helping preserve grain quality. It also simplifies segregation of grain types, enhances pest control, and reduces pressure on storage infrastructure.

Mr. Lacson estimates that the new system could boost warehouse capacity by up to 30%.

"There will also be savings in manpower, fumigation, and sack costs," he added.

The NFA currently spends around P15 per printed sack and an additional cost per bag for labor. At full capacity, an NFA warehouse with maximum of eight piles can store up to 55,440 bags of 50-kg grain.

English winemakers counting on exports as warm weather improves growing conditions

WEST CHILTINGTON, England/OSLO — English winemakers are betting that surging exports can sustain their once novelty product after domestic sales growth slowed, hoping for a boost from Britain's warmest summer on record this year as climate change optimized conditions.

Days before pickers started to harvest this year's crop, sparkling wine from southern England beat french champagne to win one of the industry's most prestigious awards, lifting its prospects in markets like Norway, Japan and China.

Foreign sales have become more important as a subdued economy at home weighs on demand for a premium product. International producers are snapping up the country's increasingly attractive land to produce wine to sell home and abroad.

"Export is where the real growth is in the coming period," said Brad Greatrix, senior winemaker at Nyetimber, the English company which became the first non-French winner of the International Wine Challenge sparkling wine award in September.

English wineries started to emerge in the 1990s as adventurous landowners took advantage of warmer summers. Now, on chalky slopes across southern England, vines are being planted on land once used for crops, apple orchards and golf courses.

Since 2000, English wine production has risen by an average 7% per year, and is set to keep growing after land dedicated to vines jumped by 30% between 2020 and 2024.

However, while British demand has driven growth so far, last year sparkling wine sales — which at 6.2-million bottles accounted for 70% of total wine sales — were flat, down from 11% growth the previous year. In September, Chapel Down, Britain's biggest wine producer, cancelled plans to build a new winery.

Nicola Bates, chief executive officer of industry body WineGB, said steady sales were an achievement when restaurants and bars were struggling, and when champagne shipments to Britain fell 13% last year.

For many consumers English fizz is a luxury product, with the biggest brands Chapel Down and Nyetimber costing 30 pounds ($40) and 42 pounds respectively per bottle, similar to Champagnes.

With more vines being planted, Mr. Bates said, "we need to be growing sales at a faster pace for mid- to long-term health."

Though some winemakers will not sell this year's prized vintage for several years, exports are a bright spot they hope to build on. Export volumes grew 35% to account for 9% of total sales of English wine in 2024, and Bates said she was targeting doubling that figure by 2030.

Norway tops the list of buyers by volume. Its imports of English sparkling wine jumped to 111,639 liters last year from 451 liters in 2015, according to its wine monopoly, the single state body allowed to import wine and spirits.

That growth is far ahead of rises from other countries, said Arnt Egil Nordlien, the monopoly's head of product.

Aleksander Iversen, a sommelier at Brasserie Coucou in Oslo, says Norwegians are open-minded and curious about wine. Some customers specifically request English wines while others discover it on recommendation.

"Most are surprised by the quality, they often remark that it rivals top Champagne, but with its own unique character," he said.

This year, English vineyards have experienced "almost perfect growing season conditions," said Alistair Nesbitt, chief executive at Vinescapes, a viticulture consultancy.

The average temperature in southern England during the spring to autumn grape growing season has increased by 1 to 1.5 degrees Celsius over the last 40 to 50 years, he said, but it's not always straightforward.

Climate change means more unpredictable weather events and that is also affecting England. Persistent wet weather in 2024, for example, hit the grape harvest, cutting production by half compared to the previous year.

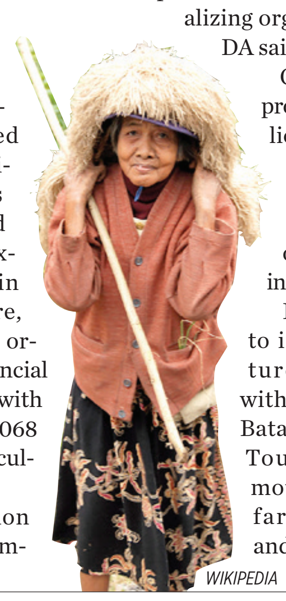
While climate change means more variability for wine producers globally, Mr. Nesbitt said cooler climates like England have the advantage over areas in southern Europe, which are being hit by more frequent droughts and heatwaves.

Wine producers from the US, France and Australia started buying English land around a decade ago, with french champagne house Taittinger acquiring a site in 2015 and California's Jackson Family Wines establishing a presence in 2023. — ***Reuters***

Batanes designated as organic farming province

THE Department of Agriculture (DA) has designated Batanes as a center for organic farming, which it expects to boost farm incomes and position the province as an agro-tourism destination.

Agriculture Secretary Francisco P. Tiu Laurel, Jr. said in a statement that he signed an administrative order on Oct. 8, recognizing Batanes as "organic by default."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Batanes has 13,208.90 hectares of agricultural land, largely remained untouched by synthetic chemicals. The province's 4,126 farmers and 35 cooperatives exclusively engage in organic agriculture, supported by local ordinances and provincial legislation aligned with Republic Act No. 10068 or the Organic Agriculture Act of 2010.

"This designation affirms Batanes' commitment to sustainable farming that ensures food security, protects the environment, and empowers communities," Mr. Laurel said. He added that the recognition paves the way for increased technical, financial, and market support for the province.

The municipalities of Basco, Uyugan, Sabtang, Ivana, Itbayat, and Mahatao have passed ordinances institutionalizing organic farming, the DA said.

Organic crops in the province include garlic, sweet potatoes, onions, and beef cattle are gaining in market value outside the province, the DA said.

Batanes is seeking to integrate agriculture with tourism with projects like the Batanes Resort Agro-Tourism Site promoting eco-friendly farming practices and Ivatan culture.