

Zamboanga del Sur pitches tie-up with Agriculture dep't to fast-track farm roads

THE Department of Agriculture (DA) said it has been approached by Zamboanga del Sur on a partnership to fast-track farm-to-market road (FMR) projects in the province.

Agriculture Secretary Francisco P. Tiu Laurel, Jr. said in a statement that he is "looking favorably" at the request of Zamboanga del Sur Governor Divina Grace C. Yu to jointly implement the province's 26 further FMR projects.

The roads, which have a combined budget of P370 million, are set to be built in 21 municipalities, including Pagadian City.

"Local government units (LGUs) coming forward to help the DA fast-track farm-to-market road projects are a welcome development. We need all the support we can get to build infrastructure that opens access, lowers production costs, raises farmer incomes, and delivers real de-

velopment in the countryside," Mr. Laurel said.

The DA took over FMR projects from the Department of Public Works and Highways (DPWH) this year. However, the department may still construct roads in partnership with the DPWH, LGUs or private entities via public-private partnerships.

The FMR program has been allocated P33 billion in this year's budget, which will fund the construction of over 1,600 roads.

Ms. Yu was quoted as saying in the statement that the proposed partnership will strengthen oversight while accelerating project delivery.

"This collaboration will reinforce transparency and accountability, while ensuring the efficient and timely completion of FMR projects that improve accessibility and advance the welfare of our farmers," she said in a letter to the DA. — **Vonn Andrei E. Villamie**

Domestic preference for molasses expected to boost sugar industry

SUGAR PRODUCERS said the requirement that molasses users prioritize domestically produced supplies over imports will boost farmer profits and improve competition among importers.

"We are very elated with this development. We have been asking for this from many administrations. They always favored the big alcohol distillers. It is about time they give the profits to the farmers," Manuel R. Lamata, president of the United Sugar Producers Federation of the Philippines, told *BusinessWorld* via Viber, referring to an order by the Sugar Regulatory Administration (SRA).

The SRA's Molasses Order (MO) No. 2, which took effect on Jan. 8, requires traders and importers to purchase domestically produced molasses before importing.

The industry group described the policy as a long-overdue step to strengthen demand for domestic molasses, which has suffered from weak prices amid excess supply.

The SRA reported that the average millgate price of domestically produced molasses was P7,110.46 per metric ton in December, down 56.31% from a year earlier.

Mr. Lamata said the new rules could give farmers greater bargaining power while forcing importers to compete for import privileges.

"This order will surely bring prices up because they have to compete with each other for the right to import. Hopefully, the government will permanently implement this," Mr. Lamata said.

The Philippine Sugar Millers Association (PSMA) has expressed support for the policy, which "strengthens domestic value

chains and safeguards downstream industries," according to PSMA President Terence S. Uygongco.

MO 2 allows importers and traders to import one kilo of molasses for every three kilos they buy from Philippine producers.

Mr. Lamata said the scheme is "more than fair," noting that importers have been bringing in volumes far exceeding domestic production.

"They have been importing more molasses than we can produce. Let them buy local first; when all that is exhausted, then they can import," he said.

Domestic molasses purchased by prospective importers must be withdrawn from sugar mills or storage tanks within a month of approval. Compliance will be monitored through weekly reports and on-site verification by the SRA.

The SRA said that the moratorium on molasses imports will be in effect until March and may be extended depending on domestic inventory levels. — **Vonn Andrei E. Villamie**



FREEPIK

Invasive mussel species deemed viable ingredient in poultry, animal feed

AN INVASIVE mussel species spreading in Philippine waters could serve as an alternative ingredient for poultry and aquaculture feed, according to a study by Mindanao State University at Naawan.

The study, funded by the Department of Science and Technology's Philippine Council for Agriculture, Aquatic and Natural Resources Research and Development (PCAARRD), examined the use of *Mytilus galloprovincialis*, a non-indigenous

mussel species, as dry feed for broiler chickens and wet feed for mangrove crabs.

Native to Central and South America, *M. galloprovincialis* is believed to have entered Philippine waters through ballast water in ships.

Also known as charru or black mussel, the species spreads rapidly, forming dense populations that disrupt marine ecosystems and cause biofouling in aquaculture and fishing operations.

In a statement, PCAARRD said laboratory analysis showed that *M. galloprovincialis* contains high levels of protein and minerals. Mussel meat recorded up to 77.68% crude protein, while unshucked mussels contained 33.56%.

Processed mussel shells also contained about 33.43% calcium, a nutrient used in poultry feed formulations, the council said.

Feeding trials showed that mussel meat can partially replace fishmeal in

broiler diets at inclusion levels ranging from 6% to 15% without affecting growth or health performance.

In mangrove crabs, the trial subjects also recorded higher weight gain, improved survival rates, and increased reproduction. The study showed that a 15-day fattening cycle for mangrove crabs generated higher returns than a longer 60-day cycle.

PCAARRD said the findings of the study could guide feed formulation strat-

egies while helping manage the spread of the invasive mussel.

"A cost-benefit analysis showed that mussel meal inclusion could reduce reliance on expensive fishmeal ... Farmers can therefore reduce feeding costs by integrating *M. galloprovincialis* into their feed formulations, while managing the uncontrollable spread of this invasive species," the council said. — **Vonn Andrei E. Villamie**

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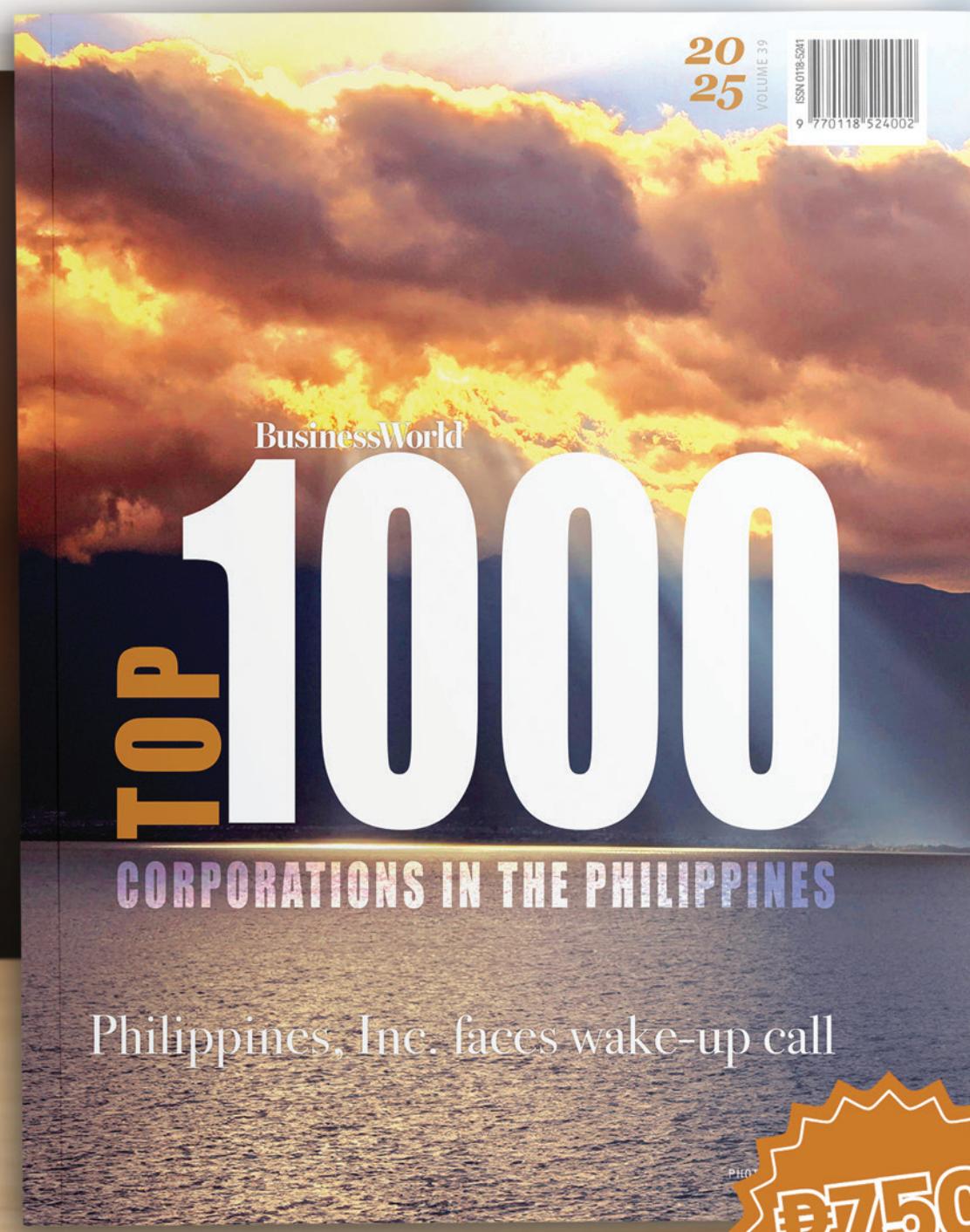


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