



## Sugar industry calls for curbs on artificial-sweetener imports

THE Department of Agriculture (DA) said the sugar industry is lobbying for curbs on artificial sweeteners because they are crowding out domestically produced sugar from the market.

"We have received a manifesto asking the government to regulate the import and use of artificial sweeteners and other sugar

substitutes. (We) will surely work on this, as this is an extraneous force affecting the demand for locally produced sugar," Agriculture Secretary Francisco P. Tiu Laurel, Jr. was quoted as saying in a statement.

The DA said a policy framework was initiated together with the Sugar Regulatory Adminis-

tration (SRA) to closely monitor imports of sugar substitutes and to better understand their impact on the market.

SRA Administrator Pablo Luis S. Azcona has flagged a sharp rise in imports of artificial sweeteners and sugar substitutes, which he said are equivalent to more than 500,000 metric tons of raw sugar.

He said these substitutes have diluted demand for domestically produced sugar and contributed to weak prices.

Mr. Laurel has said the Department of Health may also be asked to review the public health implications of widespread use of intense sweetening agents. — **Vonn Andrei E. Villamiel**

## Rice retail price down, meat up in mid-January

THE retail price of rice declined year on year in mid-January, while meat and *galunggong* (round scad) prices increased, according to the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA).

During the Jan. 15-17 period, which the PSA calls the second phase of January, the national average retail price of regular milled rice declined 9.56% year on year to P43.52 per kilo.

The second-phase price was higher than the P43.13-per-kilo average during the first phase of January (Jan. 1-5) and the P42.10 average a month earlier.

The highest average retail price of regular-milled rice in the second phase was recorded in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao at P50.06 per kilo, down 0.72% from a year earlier.

The lowest retail price of regular milled rice was reported in the Cagayan Valley

at P36.70 per kilo, down 13.5% from a year earlier.

Meanwhile, the retail price of bone-in fresh pork averaged P314.04 per kilo in the second phase of January, up 1.5% from a year earlier. The national average declined from the P315.44 per kilo recorded in the first phase of January and P314.72 a month earlier.

The retail price of dressed chicken averaged P213.35 per kilo in the second phase of January, up 1% from a year earlier. The average retail price for the period was lower than the P213.72 per kilo recorded during the first phase of January, but higher than the P212.40 a month earlier.

*Galunggong* prices rose 11.32% year on year to P251.35 per kilo in the second phase of January. The average price of the staple fish declined from P252.75 in the first phase of January and increased from P249.11 a month earlier. — **Vonn Andrei E. Vilamiel**

## PHL banana exports estimated to have grown 26% in 2025

PHILIPPINE BANANA exports likely surged by more than a quarter in 2025, helping make the country the world's number two exporter, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

In a market review, the FAO said that preliminary data indicate that exports of Philippine bananas likely grew 25.6% to 2.93 million metric tons (MMT) in 2025.

Ecuador likely remained the world's biggest banana exporter in 2025, with shipments projected at 6.41 MMT. Costa Rica, which was the second-largest banana exporter last year, likely slipped to fifth place, with shipments projected to decline 17% to 1.96 MMT.

According to the FAO, the rebound in Philippine exports was the result of favorable weather as well as a recovery from setbacks caused by disease in recent years.

In 2024, banana exports amounted to 2.33 MMT, slipping from 2.35 MMT a year earlier after infestations of Fusarium wilt, a soil-borne fungal disease that blocks a banana plant's vascular system and deprives it of nutrients and moisture.

The FAO said the Philippines, the biggest banana exporter in Asia, also benefited from renewed investments in production.

Industry sources reported that substantial investments had been made in boosting the production of bananas in Cagayan Valley, including through the provision of organic fertilizer and other inputs by the Department of Agriculture (DA), the FAO said.

The FAO also reported stronger demand from major Asian markets in 2025, helping support the Philippine export rebound.

Banana imports by China, one of the world's largest buyers, were estimated to have increased

17.02% to 2.04 MMT in 2025, with shipments from the Philippines expanding in the double digits during the first nine months.

Imports by Japan likely rose, with shipments projected to have grown 1.44% to 1.06 MMT in 2025. The Philippines accounts for around 75% to 80% of Japan's total banana imports.

Agriculture Secretary Francisco P. Tiu Laurel, Jr. said he recently met with his Japanese counterpart to negotiate lower tariffs on Philippine bananas shipped to Japan.

He said the DA is seeking amendments to the Japan-Philippines Economic Partnership Agreement (JPEPA), under which Japan imposes seasonal tariffs on Philippine bananas.

Under JPEPA, bananas shipped from the Philippines face an 8% tariff between October and March and a duty of 18% between April and September. Mr. Laurel said the government is pushing to

lower the duties to a fixed rate of between 5% and 8%.

"We requested a lower, flat rate to help our banana sector. This is because other countries like Vietnam, Thailand, and Mexico are already moving toward zero tariffs," Mr. Laurel told reporters at a briefing.

He said the tariff negotiations are meant to serve as a temporary measure to keep Philippine bananas competitive, while the country works toward securing zero duties through its application for accession to the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP).

The CPTPP is a free trade agreement among Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, the UK, and Vietnam. It provides for more liberalized trade, including zero tariffs on a wide range of goods. — **Vonn Andrei E. Vilamiel**

## China cuts proposed tariffs in EU dairy probe

PARIS — China has reduced proposed tariffs on certain dairy products from the European Union (EU) as it concludes an anti-subsidy investigation widely seen as retaliation for EU levies on Chinese electric cars, two European industry associations said.

In final tariffs communicated to the European side, China is

proposing additional duties of up to 11.7%, compared with a maximum rate of 42.7% in provisional duties announced in December, the European Dairy Association (EDA) and Euco-lait told Reuters. Many of the companies would be subject to a 9.5% rate, they said.

The European Commission and the Chinese Ministry of Com-

merce could not be immediately reached outside working hours.

The dairy probe covers products including cream and cheese and follows scrutiny of brandy and pork.

Reduced rates would make it difficult for EU products to compete in China, Alexander Anton, the EDA's secretary general said.

"It's a success but you're still out of the game," he said.

China imported \$589 million of EU dairy products covered by the current investigation in 2024.

Higher tariffs on EU imports could favor other foreign suppliers like New Zealand. It could also bring relief for Chinese producers grappling with a glut of milk and falling prices against a backdrop of sluggish demand.

— **Reuters**



## PEZA to push for increased powers, faster proclamations of ecozones

By Justine Irish D. Tabilo

Senior Reporter

THE Philippine Economic Zone Authority (PEZA) is seeking amendments to the PEZA law and studying ways to speed up the proclamation of economic zones (ecozones).

PEZA Director General Tereso O. Panga added that the target for

ecozone proclamations this year is 30.

"We are hoping that the process will be a lot faster in terms of proclamation, because we really need to accelerate the entry of investments. Maybe that is something we need to work on with Executive Secretary Ralph G. Recto," he told reporters last week.

"I am sure he will be pro-

ecozone development. I am sure

he will help us speed up the process," he added.

So far, two ecozones have been proclaimed by President Ferdinand R. Marcos, Jr. in 2026. These are the expansion of the First Industrial Township-Special Economic Zone in Tanauan City, Batangas and a new information technology park in Iloilo City.

This year, Mr. Panga said 15 more ecozones are in the pipeline for proclamation by the President.

Meanwhile, he said PEZA is looking to restore authority and powers previously exercised by PEZA by amending the PEZA law.

"These are the things that we need to reinstate for a more empowered authority," he said.

In particular, PEZA wants to restore its power to issue fire safety inspection certificates and certificates of origin, create a mechanism that can expedite the proclamation process, and

gain the power to venture into various types of economic zones.

PEZA is also looking to strengthen the organization by adding more deputy directors-general.

"It is a 30-year-old law, so it is high time that we revisit the provisions, align it with global standards, and modernize the way we do business in the PEZA zones so that we can accelerate the entry of more investors in the Philippines," he said.

For 2026, PEZA is hoping to approve P300 billion worth of investment pledges, which if borne out would be 15% higher than its approvals in 2025, a growth projection it described as "conservative."

"P300 billion is the fighting target. We have made some adjustments because if you look at our average growth rates, it is about 23% yearly," he said.

## Port cargo volume exceeds 2025 target

THE Philippine Ports Authority (PPA) said it exceeded its 2025 target with 307.64 million metric tons (MMT) of cargo throughput for the year, up 6.3%.

Citing preliminary data, foreign cargo volume rose 4.62% to 193.10 MMT, while domestic cargo rose 9.27% to 114.55 MMT.

Last year, PPA container ports served 8.57 million twenty-foot equivalent units (TEUs), up 9.81%.

PPA fell short of its 2025 passenger traffic target of 85.41 million,

recording 82.42 million passengers, up 4.58%.

In the fourth quarter, PPA logged cargo throughput of 74.43 MMT, up 4.36% from a year earlier.

The port regulator logged container throughput of 2.18 million TEUs, up 3.31%. Passenger traffic in the fourth quarter was 19.32 million, up 5.46%.

For 2026, the PPA said it is expecting cargo volume to grow 4.03% to 320.94 MMT, driven mainly by foreign cargo.

The PPA said foreign cargo volume is expected to rise 4.28% to 202.73 MMT. Domestic cargo volume is seen rising 3.61% to 118.22 MMT.

Container throughput is forecast to increase 3.94% to 8.88 million TEUs. For this year, passenger traffic is expected to grow 5.78% to 87.26 million.

The PPA said it remains optimistic about cargo and passenger traffic growth due to continued investment in port upgrades. — **Ashley Erika O. Jose**

## Multi-year rule eased for routine service renewals

THE Department of Budget and Management (DBM) said government agencies no longer need to obtain a multi-year contractual authority (MYCA) to renew routine services repeatedly procured over the past three years.

In a Jan. 29 circular, Acting Budget Secretary Rolando U. Toledo said amendments to the MYCA rules now exempt "regular and recurring services" such as janitorial, security, and maintenance contracts.

It said the eased rules are aligned with Section 18 of Republic Act No. 12009, the National Government Pro-

curement Act, and its implementing rules and regulations.

However, he noted that the DBM may still issue a MYCA for regular and recurring contracts under "justifiable circumstances" on case-by-case basis with sufficient justification.

Services covered by the MYCA exemption include janitorial, security, telecommunications, drinking water supply, office space rentals, venue and equipment leases, as well as fuel fleet cards, water distribution, and electricity services.

In addition, Mr. Toledo said agencies are required to conduct annual re-

views to assess market conditions and renegotiate contract prices if costs fall.

Renewals must also be backed by performance evaluations to ensure service providers deliver satisfactorily, instead of undertaking another procurement process.

"NGAs (National Government agencies) shall also ensure that the annual funding requirements for regular and recurring services intended for renewal are appropriately reflected in their budget proposals to be submitted to DBM for the applicable fiscal years," it said. — **Aubrey Rose A. Inosante**

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