

PhilRice Magazine

A quarterly publication of the
Philippine Rice Research Institute



CHRONICLING RICE: A journey with farmers under the new trade system



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ABOUT THE COVER

This issue of the magazine chronicles all our activities, partnerships, and success stories in the course of the mobilization of the Rice Competitiveness Enhancement Fund (RCEF) - Seed and Extension Programs. The RCEF journey has just begun. But the RCEF-flavored success stories of our farmers and lessons we gain excite and inspire us to continue to serve better.



CONTENTS

NEWS	FEATURES
First RTL anniv marked with seed distribution	2 16 Sowing seeds of hope
Training – a must to help rice farmers	3 18 More RCEF harvests to come
PhilRice helps beat COVID-19	4 20 INFOGRAPHICS: RCEF seeds around the Philippines
Farm activities to proceed amid COVID-19 threat	4 22 FEATURE
PalaySikatan: a 6-ha showcase of select varieties	5 22 Meeting the knowledge movers
MOU on PAG-AHON signed	5 24 INFOGRAPHICS: Overcoming a year with the new rice trade system
More RCEF seeds for this 2020 wet season	5 26 PARTNERS IN THE FIELD:
RICE ACROSS THE COUNTRY	6 26 This mayor is an ally
WHAT'S NEW IN RICE RESEARCH	8 28 INFOGRAPHICS: Debunking 10 common field misconceptions
STAFF EXTRAORDINAIRE	10 30 RISE WITH RICE:
EXPERT'S CORNER:	11 30 Being wise beats the odds
Rice sector deregulation and tariffication at last	11 32 VOX POP: Under the new trade system, how can you help rice farmers become more competitive?
INFOGRAPHICS: A menu of interventions	14

Editor-in-Chief: Ronan G. Zagado · **Assistant Editor:** Hanah Hazel Mavi B. Manalo · **Managing Editors:** Mary Grace M. Nidoy · Aldrin G. Castro · **Writers/Photographers:** Zenny G. Awing · Jaymar U. Ballad · Anna Marie F. Bautista · Jayson C. Berto · Allan C. Biwang Jr. · Keesha N. Bornales · Aldrin G. Castro · Donna Cris P. Corpuz · Carlo G. Dacumos · Renz Romyl C. de Joya · Christina A. Frediles · Aileen Shaye C. Fontanilla · Charisma Love B. Gado-Gonzales · Mohamadsaid B. Gandawali · Alan Jay Jacalan · DeeJay Jimenez · Hanah Hazel Mavi B. Manalo · Reuel M. Maramara · John Joward A. Martillana · Mary Grace M. Nidoy · Jonalyn Q. Polipol · Denise Bianca Y. Sadullo · Michael L. Satuito · Julianne A. Suarez · Marelie D. Tangog · Vanessa A. Tingson · V. Bruce J. Tolentino · Ruby Moselle O. Tumanguil · Jessica Bernadette V. Ysulan · **Design/Layout:** Anna Marie F. Bautista · **Illustrations/Graphics:** Zenny G. Awing · Jayson C. Berto · Perry Irish H. Duran · Reuel M. Maramara · **Circulation:** Christina A. Frediles · Teofilo C. Paulino · **Admin. Support:** Derwin J. Villena · **Printing Press:** Innovations Printshoppe, Inc. · **Consulting Editor:** Constante T. Briones · **Editorial Advisers:** John C. De Leon · Karen Eloisa T. Barroga · Eduardo Jimmy P. Quilang · Flordeliza H. Bordey



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Standing firm, staying ahead

On top of its research for development mandate, PhilRice is now entrusted with the additional significant function to help enhance the country's rice competitiveness under its deregulated trade regime. The now one-year-old Rice Tariffication Law commissions the Institute to ensure the availability and accessibility of high-quality inbred seeds to farmers aimed at boosting yield by 10% or more and reducing production cost. Along with seed distribution, the law also orders the Institute to provide extension services that educate farmers on modern rice farming technologies.

Even before initial implementation of the law could take place, the tasks were not without challenges. Negative public opinions proliferated, *palay* prices fell fast and deep, and currently, the COVID-19 global pandemic that required residents to stay home. However, we cannot afford to let these difficulties hamper our operations toward food security. Despite all these odds, we are keeping on our toes and braving to deliver what is needful to help ensure continuous food production.

As of March 15, we have successfully distributed in 57 provinces a total of 1,363,491 20-kg bags of certified seeds to 551,562 farmers with 692,112ha planted for the 2020 dry season cropping. The farmers have been provided with a technical briefing and a production guide leaflet. One batch of the season-long Rice Specialists' Training Course has also been completed to develop a pool of rice specialists who will help train extension workers and provide technical assistance to farmers on the ground.

For the 2020 wet season, our target is to hand over 2.5 million bags to almost 1.2 million farmers nationwide. Extension services, such as training and distribution of information materials, will also be continuously carried out.

Even during the community quarantine period, our personnel found compliant ways as part of the food workforce to go out and deliver and distribute seeds to early-planting farmers in partnership with the recipient local government units. We have also kept our communication lines open to share knowledge and answer public queries concerning rice production through our PhilRice Text Center (0917-111-7423) and Facebook account ([rice.matters](https://www.facebook.com/rice.matters)). Information on rice crop management technologies are also made readily available at www.pinoyrice.com. Technology videos are likewise accessible on YouTube (PhilRiceTV).

This issue of the magazine chronicles all our activities, partnerships, and success stories in the course of the mobilization of the Rice Competitiveness Enhancement Fund (RCEF)- Seed and Extension Programs.

The RCEF journey has just begun. It's no easy task, but the extraordinary support we enjoy from our partners, especially the LGUs, farmer-cooperatives and associations, and DA-RFOs, not to mention the RCEF-flavored success stories of our farmers and lessons we gain excite and inspire us to continue to serve better.

First RTL anniv marked with seed distribution



JAYSON C. BERTO



REUEL M. MARAWARA



ALAN JAY ACALAN

(L) Ceremonial harvesting of the first 2020 dry season produce using RCEF seeds in Manaoag, Pangasinan, marking the first anniversary of the Rice Tariffication Law (RTL), March 5. (R – top) About 600 farmers receive certified inbred seeds from PhilRice. (R – down) Farmers Rogel P. Comesario (2nd from right) and Charlito Villanueva (center) receive knowledge products, drum seeder, and Leaf Color Chart from Senator Cynthia Villar (right), DA Secretary William Dar (2nd from left), and PhilRice Executive Director John De Leon.

More Filipino rice farmers are receiving assistance as PhilRice has begun distributing seeds for wet season planting this year.

The RCEF seed distribution began on March 5, 2020 in Urdaneta City, Pangasinan, marking the first-year anniversary of the Rice Tariffication Law (RTL). The law generates the tariffs used to fund the assistance for farmers directly hit by the birth pains of the reformed rice trade system.

More than 600 farmers from Urdaneta who enlisted under the Registry System on Basic Sectors in Agriculture (RSBSA) received NSIC Rc 216, Rc 160, and Rc 222 seeds from PhilRice.

Agriculture Secretary William Dar, in his speech prior to the distribution, emphasized that through the RCEF program, which will also provide machines, skills training, and credit, Filipino farmers “will become more productive and competitive along with the neighboring rice-producing countries”.

Dar also promoted the department’s battlecry “*Masaganang Ani, Mataas na Kita* (improving farmers’ yield and reducing their production cost).”

Meanwhile, Senate Committee on Agriculture and Food Chair Cynthia Villar, gracing the event, expressed her commitment in helping farmers become more competitive amidst the new trade policy on rice imports.

“This program will be continuously implemented as it is a great help to rice farmers on lowering the production cost and improving the yield,” Villar said while giving hope that she will file a bill that will extend the RCEF program beyond its initial six-year implementation period from 2019 to 2024.

Before the seed distribution, a ceremonial harvesting of the first 2020 dry season produce using RCEF seeds was held in the farm of Rogel Comesario that yielded 7.9t (145 bags at 50kg each) per hectare using NSIC Rc 222 (*full story on page 18*).

Meanwhile, Ruben Aboon, another farmer from the same city, expressed his hopes for a better yield using the RCEF seeds.

“I benefited from the high-quality inbred seeds under the 2019 distribution. I had a better harvest this time than before. With this assistance, I saved big-time because a bag of seeds usually costs more than a thousand pesos,” Aboon said.

He encouraged other farmers to also enlist in the RSBSA to avail of the RCEF-Seed Program.

“This is our chance to lower our costs with the help of the seeds provided by the government, so let’s grab this opportunity,” he said.

Moreover, Jeanette Deniega, also from Urdaneta declared her confidence in the quality of the RCEF seeds.

“I am thankful that we have free seeds and that we are assured of good quality,” she said. • JULIANNE A. SUAREZ

Training - a must to help rice farmers

Secretary Isidro S. Lapeña of the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA) has emphasized the need for training extension workers under the Rice Competitiveness Enhancement Fund (RCEF)-Extension Program.

“Our role is important because when we extend the knowledge we learn from training, we are basically lifting farmers from poverty. If we do that, everything else will follow,” Lapeña said

in a recent activity in Guimba, Nueva Ecija.

During his talk with the all-TESDA participants of the Rice Specialists’ Training Course (RSTC) spearheaded by PhilRice, Lapeña said that with training, extensionists can hone farmers’ skills and help them reduce their farm expenses.

“As farmers are focused on their activities, we need to reach out to them.

TESDA targets to establish provincial training centers within the year to ensure that all areas will receive the proper training support. I’m glad that TESDA and DA are one in helping farmers become competitive,” he said.

Before the RSTC trainees met Lapeña, they introduced proper nutrient management and new high-yielding varieties to more than a hundred farmers from the town’s four barangays participating in the farmers’ field school.

As of October 2019, PhilRice has produced 30 RSTC graduates and 112 farmer-graduates from Llanera and Rizal, Nueva Ecija.

Two RSTC batches have started in Nueva Ecija and Agusan del Norte with 26 and 17 participants, respectively, but were suspended due to the enhanced community quarantine. Two more batches are slated in PhilRice CES and Isabela this year. Training of trainers, led by PhilRice, is also being conducted in 11 batches with more than 200 participants.

After the RSTC, the specialists are expected to primarily support the RCEF extension program by leading the conduct of trainings and other knowledge-sharing and learning activities. They can also help provide technical assistance to farm schools by serving as resource persons. But for this particular TESDA batch, their task is mainly to conduct trainings for farmers, because of the role of their office as stipulated in RA 11203.

PhilRice offers the RSTC to develop a core of rice specialists nationwide. Other training activities, which are part of the RCEF-Rice Extension Services Program (RESP), are implemented in partnership with the Agricultural Training Institute, Philippine Center for Postharvest Development and Mechanization, and TESDA. • DONNA CRIS P. CORPUZ



(Above) TESDA Director-General Isidro Lapeña met with PhilRice officials and Rice Specialists’ Training Course (RSTC) participants to discuss their upcoming activities and plans for the RCEF – RESP. (Below) Trainees from TESDA learn how to identify, assess, and manage major pests and diseases in rice using the Agroecosystems Analysis approach.



PhilRice helps beat COVID-19

As our country starts mass testing to detect coronavirus disease cases, the Institute loaned highly important laboratory equipment to a national testing center, and continues to send out donations to its neighbor communities.

Dr. Roel R. Suralta, head of the DA-Crop Biotech Center based at PhilRice, said real time qRT-PCRs (quantitative reverse transcription polymerase chain reaction) machines were provided to the Research Institute for Tropical Medicine (RITM) of the Department of Health.

Recognized as one of the most accurate ways to detect, tract, and study coronavirus by the International Atomic Energy Agency and the Food and Agriculture Organization, real time RT-PCRs can deliver reliable diagnosis in three hours.



Dr. Roel R. Suralta, head of the DA-Crop Biotech Center based at PhilRice, uses the PCR machine to amplify DNA samples from rice.

“Critical devices needed in processing swab samples such as plates, microfuge tubes, and sealing films were also given to RITM,” Suralta said.

Other DA agencies such as the Philippine Carabao Center and the Philippine Center for Postharvest Development and Mechanization also loaned laboratory equipment. The DA-wide initiative was coordinated by Dr. Vivencio Mamaril, director-coordinator of the DA Biotechnology Program Office.

About 2,000kg of milled rice have thus far been distributed to affected

families in Brgy. Maligaya, which hosts PhilRice, and to medical frontliners.

Moreover, PhilRice chemists produced 70% isopropyl alcohol using our own resources and distributed it together with surgical and N95 masks to its nearby communities, and to health and security frontliners. The Institute also loaned a thermal scanner, face masks, and milled rice to the Dr. Paulino J. Garcia Memorial Research and Medical Center in Cabanatuan City.

Maligaya officials and PhilRice teamed up to help eight construction workers from the Visayas and Mindanao who were stranded at the Central Experiment Station due to the Luzon lockdown. • DONNA CRIS P. CORPUZ

Farm activities to proceed amid COVID-19 threat

The Inter-Agency Task Force on Emerging Infectious Diseases has approved the Department of Agriculture’s protocol on ensuring the country’s food supply, which includes allowing healthy farmers to continue field activities.

Amidst the threat of COVID-19, rice and vegetable farmers, farm workers, fisherfolk, and agribusiness personnel shall be exempted from home quarantine based on the DA protocol approved on March 24.

This protocol covers current farm activities, specifically rice harvesting and transportation of grains. Other farm activities such as land preparation, planting, crop maintenance, threshing, drying, milling, sorting, and packaging are also allowed.

“We appeal to the provincial governors, city and municipal mayors to allow their farmers, fishers, and workers in food production, processing, and manufacturing facilities to do their jobs, provided they adhere to the social distancing protocol and follow health and sanitation measures,” agriculture secretary William Dar announced.

Guided by the Protocols on Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ), DA Memorandum Circular No. 9 stresses that rice farmers and other agriculture workers who will be allowed to proceed with farm activities must not exhibit any symptoms of COVID-19, keep the number of field workers at the minimum, follow safety protocols, and observe social or physical distancing.

Interior and Local Government Secretary Eduardo M. Año already advised local government officials and the department’s regional directors and field staff to adhere to prescribed protocols that would ensure “food availability and sufficiency during the COVID-19 crisis”.

In transporting major agricultural commodities, DA issues free food passes to haulers to make them go through checkpoints without unnecessary delays. Applications are online: <http://agribusiness.da.gov.ph/implementation-procedures-related-to-foodlane-accreditation>.

Inquiries on food passes are accommodated thru the helpline: 0917-505-3380. Type FPASS (space) query or CONCERN. • CHARISMA LOVE B. GADO-GONZALES

PalaySikatan: a 6-ha showcase of select varieties

PhilRice is showcasing the performance of certified inbred seeds through the mechanized technology demonstration of nationally and regionally recommended rice varieties established nationwide.

Dubbed as *PalaySikatan*, forty sites with 6-ha contiguous area each, have thus far been selected to promote the mechanized production of the select varieties.

To be managed by seven PhilRice branch stations and the Central Experiment Station, TechnoDemo sites are located in 39 provinces with 41 sites.

Three national varieties – NSIC Rc 222, Rc 216, and Rc 160 – will be promoted

among farm communities. Two regional varieties, one location-specific technology, and newly released inbreds will also be featured for farmers and traders.

PhilRice will provide P30,000/ha for one cropping season to farmer-cooperators. This will cover inputs including seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, and labor expenses for land preparation and transplanting, pulling of seeds, crop care and maintenance, harvesting, and other farm activities.

TechnoDemo is under the RCEF-Seed Program, which is after helping the small-scale Filipino farmers to breeze through the new rice trade system. •

JULIANNE A. SUAREZ

More RCEF seeds for this 2020 wet season

The Rice Competitiveness Enhancement Fund (RCEF) – Seed Program is set to distribute more than 2.5 million bags of high-quality seeds to 1.2 million Filipino rice farmers this 2020 wet season.

This target doubles the 2019 figures on distributed seeds and beneficiaries for the 2020 dry season, the seed program's maiden mobilization.

Seed recipients are farmers listed in the Registry System for Basic Sectors in Agriculture (RSBSA). Their farms should be located in municipalities with rice areas of at least 100ha within the target provinces of the Program.

The quantity of seeds they will receive depends on their farm size and common method of crop establishment in their location. A seeding rate of 40kg/ha is recommended for provinces that transplant. Qualified farmers can receive 1 bag (20kg each) of inbred seeds for every half-hectare of cultivated area up to a maximum of 6 bags for those who have rice fields larger than 2.5ha.

Meanwhile, farmers in provinces that practice the direct seeding method will receive 80kg of seeds/ha: Bataan and Pampanga in Central Luzon; Palawan in MIMAROPA; Aklan, Antique, Capiz, and Iloilo in Western Visayas; North Cotabato, Sarangani, South Cotabato, and Sultan Kudarat in SOCCSKSARGEN; and Maguindanao in BARMM.

“From our baseline surveys, we found that these provinces have at least 80% of farmers who do direct seeding during crop establishment,” Dr. Flordeliza Bordey, PhilRice Deputy Executive Director explained. •

JULIANNE A. SUAREZ



MOU on PAG-AHON signed

The local government of Lupao, Nueva Ecija, Lupao Vegetable Growers Association, and East-West Seed Company (EWSC) signed a memorandum of understanding with DA-PhilRice to boost food production in the said municipality, May 11. Dubbed as Sa Palay at Gulay, may Ani, Hanapbuhay, Oportunidad, at Nutrisyon (PAG-AHON), the project aims to increase the productivity and net income of farmers; help mitigate issues on access to planting materials, food resiliency, and diverse sources of nutrition; showcase rice-vegetables technology and encourage farmers to diversify; and provide seeds or seedlings and production guides to farmers.

The project is part of the Plant, Plant, Plant program of the Department of Agriculture. • REUEL M. MARAMARA

RICEACROSS THE COUNTRY

COMPILED BY: ZENNY G. AWING AND JULIANNE A. SUAREZ



PHILRICE AGUSAN

Agusan distributes seeds in Northern Mindanao

Our Agusan station teamed up with local government units in Northern Mindanao in distributing the Rice Competitiveness Enhancement Fund (RCEF) certified inbred seeds from February 26 through March 26.

This year's early planters in Sinacaban, Jimenez, and Panaon in Misamis Occidental; Alubijid and El Salvador City in Misamis Oriental; and Sultan Naga Dimaporo in Lanao del Norte received 5,283 bags of seeds.

According to Dr. Jasmin J. Reyes, RCEF-PMO branch focal person, the resumption of distribution will depend on the lifting of the restrictions on public mobility on account of the global pandemic.

The succeeding schedules and allocations in the seed distribution for the 2020 wet season planting will hopefully be finalized in May 2020. •

MARELIE D. TANGOG

Batac conducts second batch of RSTC

A second batch of the adapted Rice Specialists' Training Course (RSTC) on the updated *PalayCheck* System has been carried out in our Batac station.

The training designed by Batac station, introduced to agricultural extension workers and local farmer technicians in the Ilocos Region technologies that support sustainable rice production through the Agro-ecosystem Analysis approach.

Five farmers' field school sites were established in Paoay and San Nicolas towns to afford farmers the



PHILRICE BATAC

opportunity to share and collectively analyze their experiences and challenges in rice production.

It is expected that more effective extension services will be offered by the participating government personnel and private individuals after their training. •

DEEJAY JIMENEZ



PHILRICE ISABELA

Isabela launches TechnoDemo sites

The TechnoDemo (Mechanized Technology Demonstration of Nationally and Regionally Recommended Inbred Varieties) site launched on February 7 is in Cabagan, Isabela.

The 6-ha demo showcases mechanized technologies, the *PalayCheck* System, yield trials of newly released inbred rice varieties, and nutrient management



PalayAralan resumes in Bicol

The station continues its commitment to provide farmers and agriculture enthusiasts with information on various rice production technologies. Unlike a traditional and formal rice production training, *PalayAralan* is a non-obligatory, non-formal activity for discussing rice production and related technologies with PhilRice experts, simulating a natural, self-driven learning experience for the participants.

For this session, Engineer Anthony Romeo, discussed the finer points of seed establishment from direct seeding to the advantages of using a mechanical transplanter. Participants were also provided with a demonstration and hands-on experience on the use of a drumseeder as well as the method for preparing seedling trays that are used to load a mechanical transplanter. • MICHAEL L. SATUITO

strategies such as the Rice Crop Manager and Minus-One-Element Technique.

Our Isabela station partners with the DA-RFO 2 and CAR, and provincial and municipal local government units, while the Agricomponent Corporation provides the machines for the technodemo.

The other sites were established in Diffun, Quirino; Lamut, Ifugao; Solana, Cagayan; and Tabuk City, Kalinga under the RCEF-Seed Program. • AILEEN SHAYE C. FONTANILLA

Midsayap serves local executives, farmers

Our Midsayap station conducted a Local Executives' Training to help accelerate the adoption of rice production technologies, February 26-27 in Isulan, Sultan Kudarat.

The training enhanced the knowledge of 25 municipal agricultural extension workers and members of the Barangay DA - Committee on sustainable rice-based technologies.

The training introduced the *PalayCheck* System, including land preparation, crop establishment, and nutrient, water, pest, and harvest management.



Another training on *Palayamanan Plus* was conducted for 33 rice farmers at Renibon, Pigcawayan, North Cotabato, March 3-4.

The teachings focused on upland rice, vermi-composting, and mushroom and livestock production. • MOHAMADSAID B. GANDAWALI



Palawan trainers graduate

Thirty-eight agricultural extension workers, agri-technologists, and rice specialists across Palawan finished the Training of Trainers (TOT) on the production of high-quality inbred rice and seeds, and farm mechanization in Puerto Princesa City, February 28.

The training organized by our Los Baños branch station helped enhance the knowledge and skills of participants on modern seed and rice production and equip them with the necessary skills needed to train farmers in their areas of coverage through the season-long farmers' field school. • RUBY MOSELLE O. TUMANGUIL

TOT begins in Negros

The Training of Trainers (TOT) on the production of high-quality inbred rice and seeds, and farm mechanization for 25 local farmer technicians and agri-technologists of Negros Occidental began on March 9.

Finishers of the said training are expected to educate farmers on rice farming technologies and practices through the farmers' field school.

This is the second batch of farmer-leaders to be trained under the RCEF-Rice Extension Services Program. • VANESSA A. TINGSON



WHAT'S NEW IN RICE RESEARCH

Rice field at Kibungan, Benguet

PhilRice-bred Cordillera varieties released

► DONNA CRIS P. CORPUZ AND ALDRIN G. CASTRO

Our breeders scored high in 2019 as the National Seed Industry Council released 10 of their new varieties.

NSIC 2019 Rc 522H (Mestiso 103), is a hybrid variety released on March 11, 2019 – a product of PhilRice-UP Los Baños collaboration.

The other new varieties are four rainfed (NSIC 2019 Rc 568, Rc 572, Rc 574, and Rc 578); one saline (Rc 558); and 4 cold-tolerant (Rc 560, Rc 563, Rc 564, Rc 566).

The cold-tolerant rices are also known as Cordillera 1, 2, 3, and 4 bred by a team

led by Thelma F. Padolina, now our senior research fellow.

First of its kind

Padolina said these varieties were bred specifically to suit growing conditions in high-elevated areas in the Philippines. Varieties planted in fields 800 meters above sea level need to have tolerance to cold temperatures to produce decent yields. The Cordillera series can thrive in lower than 18.8 degrees Celsius, which is not a comfortable temperature for ordinary rice.

The new varieties also have good eating quality. Based on amylose content, they are comparable to NSIC Rc 160, the now popular aromatic variety also bred by Padolina. The cold-tolerant rices, however, mature longer at 142-145 days.

The Cordillera series have moderate resistance to blast, which is widespread in highly elevated areas. "These are of the indica-japonica cross, meaning they have semi-circular or bold grains. This results in high milling recovery at 70%, compared with the national average of 65%," Padolina explained.



ANNA MARIE F. BAUTISTA

Thelma F. Padolina, principal breeder of the PhilRice-bred Cordillera varieties.

She also shared that their names were decided by a technical working group. Varietal names should also depict the ecosystem that they were made for: *tubigan*, *sahod-ulan*, *salinas*, and *katihan*.

“Since Cordillera is a high-elevated area, we figured out that this name would make it obvious that the varieties are cold-tolerant. For the first time, ‘Cordillera’ was borrowed to popularly identify rice varieties,” the principal breeder who compulsorily retired in 2015 said.

Worth waiting for

Padolina recalled that Cordillera 1, 2, 3, 4 already passed the standards of the National Cooperative Tests in 2010. However, it took some 10 years before these were finally released owing to a shift in research priority, where adverse conditions became less priority.

“I understand that there’s constraint when it comes to budget, so we had to prioritize the major ecosystems in

our country. Our cool-elevated areas are much smaller. Most of them are in the Cordillera region in Luzon and in Bukidnon in Mindanao,” Padolina pointed out.

But she did not abandon her research on cold-tolerant varieties by holding on to her partners and other externally funded projects.

Her Germplasm Utilization for Value-Added (GUVA) collaboration helped her to include materials in the project’s testing site in Benguet, a cool-elevated area.

Padolina also joined the Temperate Rice Research Consortium of the International Rice Research Institute, together with temperate countries such as Turkey, Russia, Egypt, and USA. The germplasms from 23 countries under the consortium, including the Cordillera series, were tested in South Korea, where field screening has automated temperatures.

Under this consortium, our Cordillera series showed comparable performance

to materials from USA, with each group scoring a 5 (moderate cold-tolerant) under the screening temperature of 17 degrees Celsius.

The Cordillera materials then underwent on-farm trials in PhilRice Isabela in 2015-2017, and in Benguet as well.

Gearing for the next step

After their approval, the next step is commercialization. Nucleus and basic seeds of these varieties are now housed at PhilRice.

The varieties are to reckon with Participatory Performance Testing and Validation (PPTV) in target sites by 2021 dry season to customize their adaptability. By that time, breeders would have already ensured the authenticity of the seeds, including those for the PPTV. Breeder and foundation seeds will also be propagated.

“In PPTV, released varieties are tested in farmers’ fields depending upon the requests of the regions,” the seasoned breeder added.

Padolina explained the need to develop cold-tolerant varieties.

“Climate change makes the world a little more challenging than it was before. Varieties no longer excel very long in the field. Based on studies, they need to be replaced every 3-5 years.”

Until now, cool-elevated areas are still not classified under adverse conditions. The focus is on areas with high temperature.

“History has it that the last cool-elevated variety released was NSIC Rc 104. It was made available under JICA, and I was one of the breeders who worked on it,” she added.

Padolina cited pests mutation, technology change, and diversity in environment as to why farmers need location-specific varieties like the Cordillera series. “The thing is, no one can really breed a perfect variety.” •

STAFF EXTRAORDINAIRE

► ALDRIN G. CASTRO



Award-winning fellow

Eng. Alexis Belonio won the 2019 Manila Water Foundation (MWF) Prize for Engineering Excellence. He is also the first Filipino to receive the Rolex Award for Enterprise in 2008. He considers his path as a “calling, not just a career.”

He invented the rice husk-gasifier stove that helps rice-based farm households generate savings by having an alternative to the more expensive use of liquefied petroleum gas.

“Let’s do our part with compassion to help other people,” Belonio suggests to his co-inventors, especially engineers, as they develop new technologies.

Belonio has shared the design of the gasifier stove for free, which helped small manufacturers in the country, Vietnam, and India.

He grew up in the premises of the Central Luzon State University (CLSU), their house strategically located near the College of Engineering.

“Every day, I would wake up seeing banners congratulating engineering students who graduated, received awards, and passed their board exams,” he recalls.

Fast-forward today, Belonio is now one of PhilRice’s award-winning agricultural engineers. The former professor at the Central Philippine University in Iloilo City started in 2012 as consultant to PhilRice for renewable energy. He was then involved with projects on wind pump and bio-ethanol.

ALEXIST T. BELONIO

60, San Rafael, Bulacan
Senior Research Fellow

Rice Engineering and Mechanization Division

ACADEMIC PROFILE

MS in Grain Science - Major in Grain Processing,
Minor in Feed Technology (CLSU 1987)
BS Agricultural Engineering (CLSU 1981)

**Congratulations
to our newly
promoted
staffers!**

Joel A. Ramos

Supervising Science Research Specialist
CES, REMD

Marychelle B. Salvador

Supervising Administrative Officer
CES, FMD

Virginia D. Ompad

Science Research Specialist I
PhilRice Los Baños

EXPERT'S CORNER

Rice sector deregulation and tariffication at last



V. BRUCE J. TOLENTINO

▶ Member, Monetary Board, Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas, former Deputy Director General, International Rice Research Institute (2012-2018), and former Undersecretary, Department of Agriculture, 1986-1993.

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Rice has dominated Philippine food security and agricultural policy for the last century. Highlighting the policy has been government control of rice trade, executed by the parastatal National Food Authority (NFA). Since the early 1980s, many analysts have pointed out the rent-seeking and inefficiencies spawned by the restrictive regulatory regime in the PH rice sector. Some Filipino policymakers did attempt to liberalize the sector, but such efforts failed, until 2019.

Finally, beginning 5 March 2019, the deregulation of rice trade and domestic commerce by cutting down the monopoly powers of the NFA and replacing quantitative restrictions (QR) on rice imports with tariffs was achieved with the passage of Republic Act 11203 or Rice Tariffication Law (RTL).

How was the reform of the Philippine rice sector policy finally achieved, after decades of failed reform efforts?

In the 2011 article titled "Stymied Reforms in Rice Marketing in the Philippines, 1980-2009," Tolentino and Dela Peña discussed the main hindrances to reforming rice policy in general and the role of NFA. The stakeholders who benefit from the existing NFA systems strongly opposed the reform. Those who stand to gain from reform – the consumers who do not buy NFA rice and the rice traders who do not deal with the NFA --- can best be described as passive bystanders, perhaps unaware of how reform may impact them. ▶▶



Moreover, it did not help that the policy-making and program implementation horizon in the country is largely short-term, dictated by the limited terms of elected and appointed officials. Their 3 to 4-year terms encourage patronage politics and officials who favor populist policies and programs that provide immediate benefits although long-term costs may be substantial.

Even with widespread reports of inefficiency and corruption in the NFA up to 2018, there was no political will to drastically redefine the organization. Supervision over NFA was transferred back and forth between the Office of the President (OP) to the DA, hoping the transfers would address the inefficiencies and corruption. In May 2015, NFA was moved from the DA to the Office of the Presidential Assistant for Food Security and Agricultural Modernization, then to the Office of the Executive Secretary in June 2016, and back to the DA in April 2018.

President Rodrigo Duterte came into office in July 2016, and appointed an economic team led by Finance Secretary Carlos Dominguez, who had served as Agriculture Deputy Minister and later Secretary in 1986-1989. He had attempted to reform rice trade policy during his tenure but had been frustrated. In 2016, Dominguez had fresh resolve to reform rice sector policy.

President Duterte's economic team was united in its vision for reform of the rice sector.

Former Secretary Ernesto Pernia of the National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA) wrote in the 2016-2022 update of the Medium-Term Development Plan that the reform of NFA and rice trade was key to the revitalization of the agricultural sector.

Budget Secretary Benjamin Diokno and Trade and Industry Secretary Ramon Lopez also supported such reforms. Governor Nestor Espenilla of the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas (BSP) expressed support for the deregulation of the rice industry as key to macroeconomic management and price stability.

Agri Secretary Emmanuel Piñol was initially resistant to the reform, but the President and the rest of the Cabinet were persuasive regarding the broader economic benefits of the reform. Secretary Pinol embraced the reform as it moved forward to enactment.

Congressional action on the RTL began in 2016. Early supporters included House Speaker Gloria Arroyo, Congressman Arthur Yap, and Senator Ralph Recto. The initial bills focused on merely removing the QR in favor of tariffs and creating a fund from the tariff collections to be used for increasing rice productivity. The final version included the elimination of the NFA's regulatory functions because Senator Franklin Drilon, who authored the GOCC Governance Act of 2011, felt that true QR elimination could not succeed if NFA was to retain regulatory powers.

Finally, Senator Cynthia Villar, the Chair of the Senate Committee on Agriculture

and Food, exerted her considerable persuasive powers to ensure that the Senate as a whole would support the draft bill that was put together under her close stewardship.

It took a unique confluence of events to turn the tide for NFA reform. The lapse of the World Trade Organization (WTO) special treatment of rice, conflicts within the OP and the NFA on importation strategies leading to critically low level of rice stocks and increasing rice prices led to a spike in inflation, united legislative action, and a President who listened to his economic officials were key catalysts for tariffication.

The WTO special treatment lapsed in July 2017. A bid for a third extension would have meant more and bigger concessions to trading partners, not just in rice but also in other products. Thus, the NEDA Board decided in February 2017 that the country will move to tariffify the rice QR and informed the WTO Committee on Agriculture accordingly.

Government missteps in stock management and imports starting in the 2nd semester of 2017 and persisting to 2018 saw the price of rice increasing, with retail in Metro Manila reaching as high as P48 per kilo for well-milled rice in October, 14% higher than the P42/kg in 2017.

It was also clear that NFA management was in crisis. The relationship between the NFA Administrator and the NFA Council had broken down with a public airing of policy differences on major



points including the deadline for first quarter 2018 minimum access volume arrivals, on the timing of 2018 imports, and on the mode of importation. The Administrator announced that the NFA had only 2 days' worth of stocks in February 2018 and wanted to import as soon as possible. The NFA Council did not give the clearance to import until May to protect 2nd quarter *palay* harvests.

Prices for other food items such as fish, meat, fruits, and vegetables also increased substantially as weather issues also affected domestic production. The country's headline inflation rate exceeded the BSP's policy rate range of 2-4%, peaking at 6.7% in September 2018. Year on year, the inflation rate for 2018 was 5.2%, much higher than the 2.9% average for 2017.

Economic managers who had long been advocating for rice import tariffication for food security and economic efficiency, but never got the support of the DA, found the opportunity to convince the President of its merits when the conflicts between the NFA Administrator and Council highlighted key policy issues on rice importation and the resultant rice price increases became a significant driver of inflation.

Further, the BSP released a series of statements and analyses indicating that "supply-side factors", particularly spikes in oil and rice prices explained the rapid rise in inflation in 2018. The BSP thus joined in the calls for reforms in rice industry management.

On 14 February 2019, after a last meeting with petitioners against tariffication, the President demonstrated his commitment to tariffication by signing the bill into law that took full effect on 5 March 2019.

Today, in April 2020, RTL has been just over a year in implementation. The transition process is underway, with emerging gainers and losers. So far, the clearest gainers are Filipino consumers, who are now enjoying significantly lower and less volatile domestic rice prices. Overall, inflation has fallen to historically low levels, with annual inflation measured at a historically low 0.8% in October 2019! At the moment, the losers due to rice tariffication are generally the rice farmers. Farmgate prices for fresh and unmilled *palay* have fallen significantly, faster and deeper than milled rice prices.

Many farmers have yet to experience the liberalized policy regime in full, and the production side of the rice industry has yet to adjust to the new regime. Traders and millers have had more flexibility to adjust to it. Recognizing the adjustment difficulties among farmers, our government is now mobilizing catch-up adjustment and transition support measures for the most badly affected farmers, including cash payments, highly subsidized loans, and grants of seeds, farm machinery, and training support.

On the milled rice and trading side, prior to the enactment of RTL, the only entity authorized to engage in international trade was the NFA. No other entities, public nor private, had the authority – and thus the experience, contracts, and operational supply chains in international rice trade. It will take a year or two – two to four planting cycles, for the transition in trade to be substantially in place.

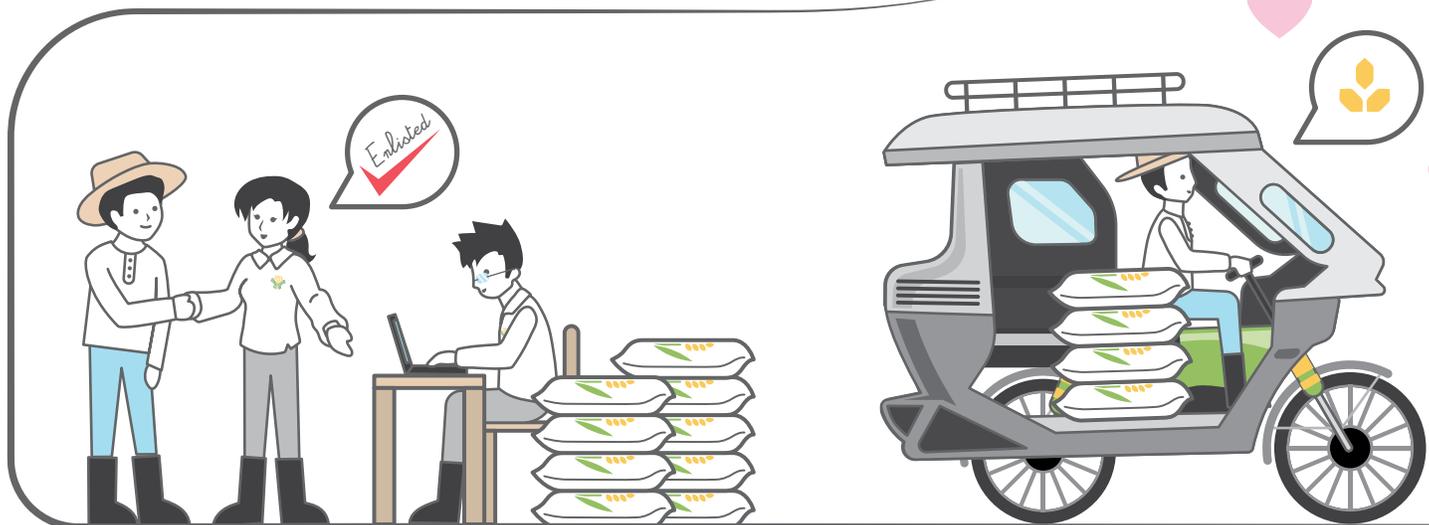
On the farm production side, exposure to international trade will change the competitive context of the rice industry. Those rice farmers who are uncompetitive will shift to other crops or take up other occupations or livelihoods. The competitive ones will take up the slack, particularly if farm consolidation and operational sizes of farms is allowed to grow, thereby enabling mechanization. Under RTL, the domestic industry will remain protected by a relatively high tariff wall of 35-40%.

Tariffication and liberalization also provides the opportunity for government to direct the substantial resources heretofore wasted in price support through the NFA toward those aspects that truly matter for the competitiveness and sustainability of our rice industry – support for productivity and resilience. There continues to be some resistance to the reforms – but such resistance is increasingly muted as the reforms take root and their overall benefits to food security, farm competitiveness, and economic growth emerge. •

A menu of interventions

WRITTEN BY ALLAN C. BIWANG, JR.; INFOGRAPHICS BY: PERRY IRISH H. DURAN
SUBJECT MATTER SPECIALISTS: LEA D. ABAOAG, KAREN ELOISA T. BARROGA, AND FLODELIZA H. BORDEY

After enacting the Rice Tariffication Law (RTL) in February 2019, what did the government do to help our rice farmers?



Registered thousands of rice farmers

To ensure the legitimacy of farmer-beneficiaries, DA, and PhilRice worked shoulder-to-shoulder with 715 LGUs that led the updating of the Registry System for Basic Sectors in Agriculture (RSBSA).

RSBSA registration will continue to cover all farmers.

"Prior to seed distribution schedules, we conducted simultaneous registration in 20 barangays within 10 days. In this case, we had no big problem during seed distribution unlike in other municipalities."

– Danilo Imus, Balungao, Pangasinan Municipal Agriculturist

Distributed a million bags of certified seeds

Under the maiden implementation of the RCEF-Seed Program, 1.3 million bags of certified inbred seeds were distributed to more than half-a-million farmers in 57 rice-producing provinces from October 2019 to March 15, 2020. Despite the current difficulties in public mobility, PhilRice targets to distribute 2.51 million bags of seeds for the 2020 wet season, and 1.67 million bags for the 2021 dry season.

"PhilRice commits to continue reaching out to more farmers to provide them certified seeds as an intervention to help increase yield and reduce cost amid the implementation of the RTL."

- Dr. Flordeliza Bordey, Deputy Executive Director for Special Concerns, PhilRice



More rice experts/trainers and farmers across the country

Under the RCEF-Extension Program, the Agricultural Training Institute in partnership with PhilRice, Philippine Center for Postharvest Development and Mechanization (PHilMech), and Technical Skills and Development Authority (TESDA), have trained 138 rice specialists, 2,322 trainers, and 14,376 farmers. To accommodate more farmer-learners, ATI led the establishment of 41 new farm schools in addition to 345 existing learning sites.

"We will conduct farmers' field schools in Bicol for enrollees to compare the results of their practices with the technologies we learned from the Rice Specialists' Training Course (RSTC). Knowing their current nutrient management approaches, I am sure they will achieve higher yield."

- Roberto C. Mendoza, RSTC trainee



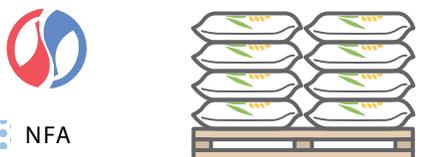
Cash assistance

- └ Rice Farmer Financial Assistance (RFFA)
 - P1.44 billion downloaded by Landbank for 288,755 farmer-beneficiaries at P5,000 each in 33 provinces most affected by low *palay* prices.
- └ Expanded Survival and Recovery Assistance (SURE Aid) Program
 - Made available P2.34 billion total credit fund to 156,033 rice farmers (P15,000 each)
- └ Expanded Rice Credit Assistance (ERCA)
 - Development Bank of the Philippines granted P500 million credit line to Isabela cooperative with more than 2,500 farmer-beneficiaries.



PHilMech

- └ Validated 944 farmer cooperatives and associations as recipients of farm machines



NFA

- └ Procured 732,572 metric tons of dried *palay* from 137,528 farmers worth P14.45 billion. For 2020, NFA projects a P14 billion total procurement capacity as it will employ the buy- and-sell scheme to accommodate more local produce at a higher price.



DSWD

- └ P31 billion approved budget to procure dry *palay* from farmers, to be distributed to *Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino* Program beneficiaries instead of cash transfers.

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<https://www.philstar.com/business/2020/01/13/1984218/government-spend-p53-billion-buy-palay-farmers>
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Sowing seeds of hope

▶ ANNA MARIE F. BAUTISTA

When rice farmers ‘cried’ at the unacceptable palay prices in 2019, Ronald Aceret of Bacarra, Ilocos Norte ‘shed tears’ with them. He figured it wasn’t the best season in his long-lived farming career.

“The price was low, and so was my harvest. Deduct the fertilizers, pesticides, labor, and other farm expenses, there was almost nothing left for me to count. I was just grateful and consoled that we still had rice on our table,” the 43-year-old farmer recalls.

On the other side of his fence, there was farming hobbyist Lourdes Ibañez who was silently saddened by her fellow farmer’s predicament. The 83-year-old grandmother was somehow relieved that she has children to support her farm activities and that she processes her produce before selling it.

“Some of my children provide for my fertilizer needs, so I still have something for my other farm inputs. In exchange, I give them and their families two sacks of milled rice each time I harvest,” she opens up.

Ronald and Lourdes continued farming despite their struggles. It was their identity, not just their bread and butter, like the remaining residents of Bacarra whose main source of livelihood is farming, rice as their main crop. They could only pray for intervention.

Answered prayer

Behind their groans, PhilRice and their local government unit were already collaborating for the maiden implementation of the Rice Competitiveness Enhancement Fund (RCEF) – Seed Program. It aims to provide free certified inbred rice seeds to qualified farmers to help them increase their yield and cut on cost for a bonus.



RCEF gave me a free bag of certified NSIC Rc 222 seeds. During the [technical] briefing, I learned the importance of proper land leveling and growing of rice seedlings before planting. Although there was a lot of work as I followed the recommendations, I realized it was worth it because I achieved good results.

- RONALD ACERET



I already harvested 55 sacks from the half-hectare portion of my farm. I think I can double that, even higher, when the harvesting is finally completed.

- LOURDES IBAÑEZ

The Bacarra Municipal Agriculture Office facilitated the farmers' enlistment to the Registry System for Basic Sectors in Agriculture, a masterlist of farmers who are qualified to benefit from the intervention.

They also liaised with the presidents of every farmers' association in the target areas. One of them was *Zanjera Camangaan*, an irrigators' association composed of Bacarra farmers, including Ronald and Lourdes.

"Our president, Ferdinand Butac, was quick to relay the information to us so we did not delay," Lola Lourdes is eager.

Unlike her and Ronald, the other members of the group did not respond positively. Ferdinand noted that some did not bother because they found the process tedious. He did not push these members further. At least he got 10 people who were willing to be supported.

It did not take long for the interested members to spread the most-awaited good news.

On November 9, 2019, Lourdes, Ronald, and their fellow *Zanjera* associates went to the old gasoline station in the nearby barangay where the RCEF seed distribution was positioned. Though they had to wait for a few hours to get their allocation, they were not disappointed at the end of that day.

Reaping fruits

On March 9, 2020 exactly four months later, Lourdes was all smiles when a tricycle carrying sacks of freshly milled rice maneuvered through her gate. She pulled one sack, untied it, and scooped a handful of grains. They were still warm and probably vibrating on her fingertips.

"It just came out from the milling machine!" the grand lady announces.

Not too long ago, she was only pulling two bags of certified seeds of NSIC Rc 358, which she acquired from the seed distribution. Now, she is looking at the fruits of those seeds, which she diligently planted in her one-hectare rice area. In a few hours, she will cook some of it and will treat herself to a rich meal.

"This is the first batch of my produce. I already harvested 55 sacks from the half-hectare portion of my farm. I think I can double that, even higher, when the harvesting is finally completed," Lourdes crosses her fingers.

She could now imagine pocketing and bringing home a considerable income as soon as she sells her milled rice.

"The grains look good. I can sell this as milled rice at P2,000 per cavan," she is optimistic.

Joining her, Ronald was also celebrating not just for Lola Lourdes but also for

himself. It was his first time in several years to harvest more than 65 sacks of *palay* in his half hectare. He believed it was because of the RCEF seeds he received. Before, he could only harvest 45 sacks. Ronald contented himself with either replanting his own produce or exchanging seeds with other farmers.

"RCEF gave me a free bag of certified Rc 222 seeds. During the [technical] briefing, I learned the importance of proper land leveling and growing of rice seedlings before planting. Although there was a lot of work as I followed the recommendations, I realized it was worth it because I achieved good results," he beams.

Ronald was also gratified because the free seeds allowed him to save more money. He decided to use the savings to buy other farm inputs like fertilizer.

He remembered having been a participant in the Plant-Now-Pay-Later Program of the DA.

"I was glad because I benefitted from that project. But the RCEF support was way better because I didn't have to pay later," Ronald compares.

Better days

William Ulep, the municipal agriculturist, believes that most of the RCEF-Seed Program beneficiaries in Bacarra are motivated like Lourdes and Ronald.

He said the program supplemented their local seed requirements. There were 1,241 farmers cultivating a total land area of 1,202.5ha who were blessed by RCEF. William hopes that more farmers will receive high-quality seeds for free in the coming seasons. He also found the program's process systematic. He even thinks of adopting it in their similarly situated programs.

Meanwhile, Lourdes was still marveling at her freshly milled grains. When she raised her head, she wore a photogenic smile.

"Thank you for helping us. Thank you for giving it free and on time. Thank you for showing that you still care for us," Lola Lourdes could not conceal her gratitude.

Don't mention it grandma! •

More RCEF harvests to come

► MARY GRACE M. NIDOY

Rogel Comesario's farm in Manaoag, Pangasinan was the center of attention on March 5, 2020 as the first Rice Competitiveness Enhancement Fund (RCEF) produce was ceremonially harvested (*see related story on page 2*).

High-ranking national and regional government personalities graced the ceremony, engendering a virtual barrio-fiesta mood. The roaring combine harvester blended well with the output of the drum-and-lyre corps, and the loud speakers further intensified the noisy but pleasing rendition. It was musical democracy at its best.

It will be recalled that the first-ever RCEF seed distribution was done in late October 2019 in Pangasinan. The big province turned out to be the epicenter of the novel Seed Program, which, as of March 15, 2020, has distributed over 1.36 million bags of seeds to more than half million farmers nationwide. The appreciative Comesario, 38, tells us how he treated his RCEF seeds and how these helped him limit his production cost to the minimum.

NSIC Rc 222

The memories of the March 5 event were still vivid in the corners of Rogel's mind.



"Everything happened so fast. Still, I was happy my farm was chosen as site of the ceremonial harvesting, and our barangay was proud of us," he recalls.

A little more than 4 months ago, the college-educated farmer braved the long queue of seed distribution. Before this, he enlisted himself to the Registry System for Basic Sectors in Agriculture (RSBSA).

"The registration was a bit fast since not all barangays had to go on the same day during the distribution," he appreciates the strategy.

When he reached the verification area, he uttered "Rc 222" – the variety of his choice and one of three nationally recommended varieties under the RCEF-Seed Program.

"I knew it yields high," Rogel is certain.

His first seed distribution experience ended with him taking home two bags of high-quality seeds at 20kg each and a folded leaflet titled *Gabay sa makabagong pagpapalayan*.

"The leaflet had everything we needed from land preparation to harvesting. It served as our guide and I think it's a big help for farmers who are new to rice production," he says.

When it comes to sowing seeds, water is Rogel's priority. It is a good thing that irrigation water is available for free in his area. He then transplanted the seedlings after 21 days following the recommendations he read from the leaflet. He admits that the way he managed his farm was based on the *PalayCheck* System.

As the Rc 222 seedlings grew on his 1-ha farm, he noticed that they were unlike other varieties, describing them as "pure" and "full". The crop stand was also strong and sturdy and "not like the others that looked soft".

"Walang halo!" he exclaims. Rogel also observed that they were slightly tolerant to rice bacterial blight.

Savings and profit

The free seeds helped Rogel save P1,500 – the cost that he used to pay for a 40kg bag of seeds, and P2,000 for the free irrigation.

"I always follow the recommended seeding rate and I noticed that it is more than enough because I would even collect excess seedlings after planting," the father of three shares.

He says other farmers would even use three bags of seeds at 50kg each per hectare, thereby spending more than necessary.

With Rc 222, Rogel harvested 145 bags at 55-60kg each (fresh *palay*) or 7.9t/ha. Before, he used to harvest 5-6t/ha. He then sold it at P18.50/kg – a much better price than the P12-14/kg rate in 2019.

Second time's a charm

After the ceremonial harvesting at his farm, Rogel once again lined up during the seed distribution for 2020 wet season planting and received two bags of Rc 222 anew.

He has yet to plant the seeds, but he vows to share what he has learned to his fellow farmers.

"As an agriculture graduate and a member of the agriculture committee in our barangay council, I want to convince my fellow farmers to follow the recommended seeding rate," the Kagawad asserts.

He sees this advice as crucial in terms of lowering production cost while achieving higher yield.

The Pangasinan State University alumnus also suggests to program implementers to make the seed distribution in tune with the planting calendar of a certain area.

"Germination rate is important that is why it would be good if the farmer-beneficiaries would get the free seeds at the right time," he recommends.

Frontliners

As he readies for the wet season crop, the country joins the whole world in battling a global pandemic called COVID-19. It has become more challenging for our farmers like Rogel to produce food.

"We are lucky to have been given the certificate allowing us to continue farm activities," he says thankfully.

As a silver lining, calls for local government units (LGU) to buy *palay* directly from farmers have resonated.

"It is a good idea so long as the LGUs will buy our produce at a better price than the traders," he rationalizes.

Despite the uncertain times, there is no reason to doubt our farmers' resiliency. As the seed program moves to its second season of implementation, Rogel Comesario is hopeful that his first harvest from RCEF seeds won't be his last. •

The leaflet had everything we needed from land preparation to harvesting. It served as our guide and I think it's a big help for farmers who are new to rice production.

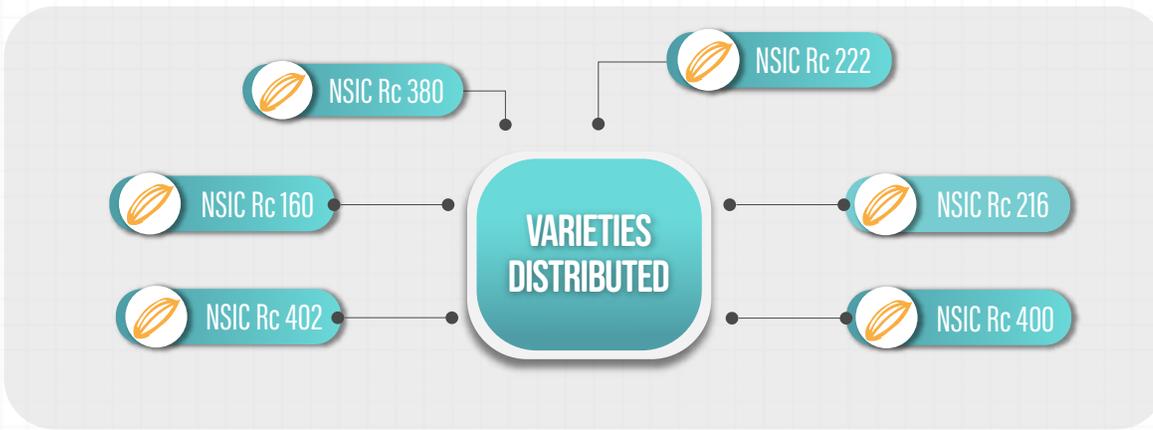
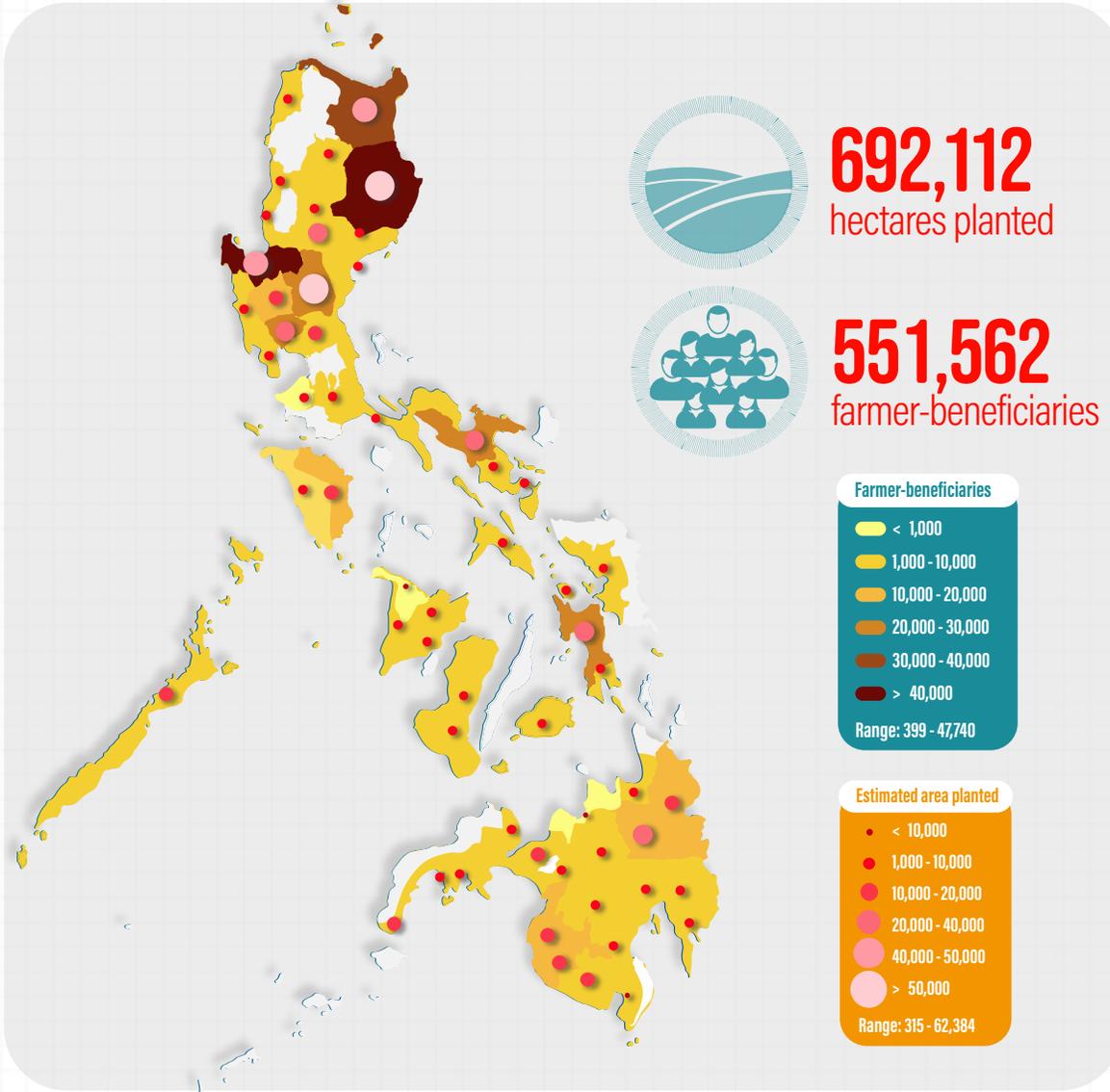
- ROGEL COMESARIO

RCEF SEEDS AROUND THE PHILIPPINES

INFOGRAPHICS BY: ZENNY G. AWING
 SUBJECT MATTER SPECIALISTS:
 FLODELIZA H. BORDEY, PhD;
 ROSELEEN M. CAPIROSO

Provinces Covered

- REGION I**
Ilocos Norte
Ilocos Sur
La Union
Pangasinan
- REGION II**
Cagayan
Isabela
Nueva Vizcaya
Quirino
- REGION III**
Tarlac
Zambales
Pampanga
Bataan
Aurora
Bulacan
Nueva Ecija
- REGION IVA**
Cavite
Laguna
Quezon
- REGION IVB**
Occidental Mindoro
Oriental Mindoro
Palawan
- REGION V**
Albay
Camarines Sur
Masbate
Sorsogon
- REGION VI**
Aklan
Antique
Capiz
Iloilo
Negros Occidental



Under the Rice Tariffication Law (RTL), PhilRice and its partner-agencies went all out to implement the Rice Competitiveness Enhancement Fund (RCEF) - Seed Program to make our rice farmers more competitive. As we celebrate the first anniversary of RTL, let's travel through the 57 provinces that benefited from RCEF seeds. (Data as of March 15, 2020)

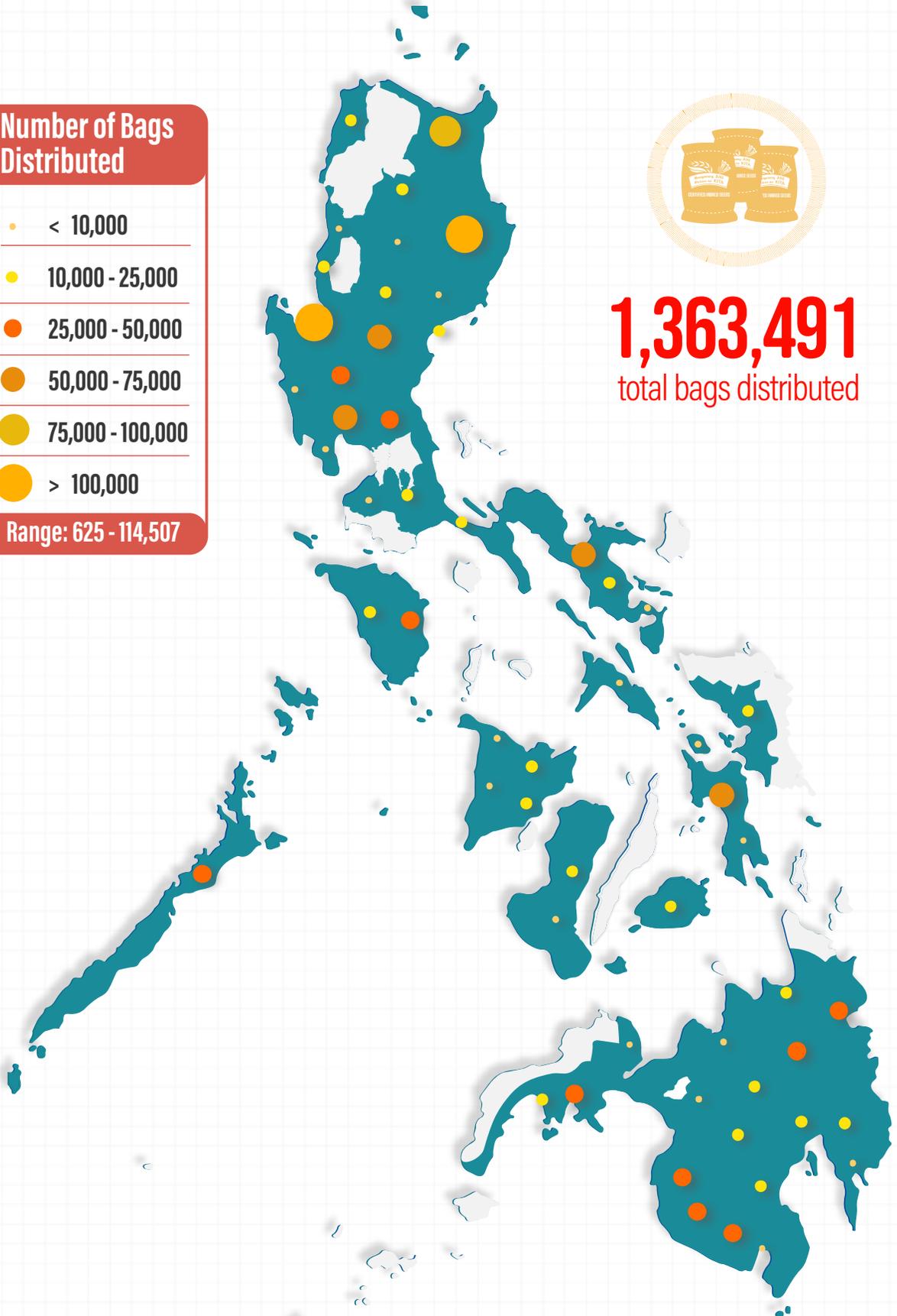
Number of Bags Distributed



Range: 625 - 114,507



1,363,491
total bags distributed



REGION VII

Bohol
Negros Oriental

REGION VIII

Biliran
Leyte
Southern Samar
Western Samar

REGION IX

Zamboanga del Sur
Zamboanga Sibugay

REGION X

Bukidnon
Lanao del Norte
Misamis Occidental
Misamis Oriental

REGION XI

Davao de Oro
Davao del Norte
Davao del Sur
Davao Oriental

REGION XII

Cotabato
Sarangani
South Cotabato
Sultan Kudarat

REGION XIII

Agusan del Norte
Agusan del Sur
Surigao del Sur

BARMM

Lanao del Sur
Maguindanao

CAR

Ifugao
Kalinga



Meeting the knowledge movers

► HANAH HAZEL MAVI B. MANALO

While we move our seeds, we also move knowledge as well as people especially the farmers.

To complement the seed distribution pursuits being waged across the country, PhilRice, together with ATI, PHilMech, and TESDA, is also multiplying its efforts to implement the Rice Competitiveness Enhancement Fund (RCEF) extension initiatives such as the conduct of the Rice Specialists' Training Course (RSTC).

Lea dR. Abaoag, head of the Technology Management and Services Division, said RSTC is designed to develop the technical competence of the participants in rice and rice-based production technologies, specifically in diagnosing and managing field problems based on the concepts and principles of the *PalayCheck* and *Palayamanan* Systems. As a modified season-long course, the trainees will have to complete three modules through a period of 90 days.

Abaoag said the first batch of the RCEF-RSTC began in April 2019, finally producing 30 graduates from ATI regional centers and selected DA-RFOs. Meet some of the knowledge movers from this batch.



Dax Gabriel D. Morfe, 35
Assistant Seed Coordinator
DA-RFO 8
Jaro, Leyte

For Morfe, sharing his knowledge with farmers gives deeper meaning to his whole RSTC experience.

He said it is their responsibility as graduates to make knowledge flow from experts, such as those from PhilRice, to farmers making it favorable too for the farmers to also share their knowledge with their fellow food producers in their community.

Morfe confessed that before his RSTC involvement, his knowledge on rice was forgettable. He timidly recalled that when he went to a field to assess and validate a certain pest incident, all he could do was to photograph the damage, as he couldn't confidently give any recommendation. But, after completing the RSTC, he said he can now credibly answer and elaborate on farmers' queries.

From the training, he also realized that mere possession of technical knowledge does not make a rice specialist effective. He said one has to be passionate about helping rice farmers. Morfe has thought of dedicating his best time to sharing his knowledge to them.

In fact, he had led a recent training for new seed growers who were thankful that they learned new practices on pest, harvest, and post-harvest management. The future seed growers realized that excessive spraying of pesticides is not cost-efficient, and that timely and proper harvest and post-harvest management can maintain the viability and quality of the seeds.

With a heart full of hope, he looked forward to training more farmers to become seed growers. "In this way, I can help address my region's problem on lack of seeds owing to the limited number of seed growers," Dax Morfe concluded.



Junalyn F. Palco, 28
Training Assistant
ATI-Regional Training Center 8
Albuera, Leyte

The conduct of RSTC is very important to increase the number of experts to cater to more farmers and extension workers, Palco said. Apart from having more hearts and minds to reach more farmers, the course helps rice specialists like them become competent and self-believing knowledge bearers owing to the new rice production technologies and practices that PhilRice and other experts impart to them.

Palco said that educating the farmers is a responsibility she shares with PhilRice and other agencies to help them increase their yield and reduce their production cost, to keep their loyalty to rice farming. Additionally, she is challenged to ensure that her knowledge and skills on rice production are regularly updated. With this, she intends to purchase or lease a portion of a rice field where she can apply her learnings from RSTC to better understand rice farming and the farmers, as well. She wants to be a "deep penetration agent", so to speak, to outsmart her "enemies".

"When a farmer-trainee expresses his or her intention to adopt a technology

in the farm, this affirms what we profess as RSTC graduates," Palco enunciated.

She vividly recalled that the farmers they trained appreciated the lesson on modified *dapog*. To her surprise, one farmer approached her and told her he would actually use this technology in his farm. They believe that this technology is useful and practical to them as it is less laborious to do.

Added to modified *dapog*, her trainees also appreciated the Minus-One-Element Technique app as it provides them with a recommended fertilizer rate that has scientific basis. Some farmers also said they are considering to shift to highly mechanized farming as this reduces labor cost. They also enjoyed the experience of operating farm machines. One farmer was so thankful he finally learned how to properly operate a tractor during the training even though the machine had long been available in his area. He was excited to brandish his new skill among his fellow farmers.

"These compliments and appreciation straight from the farmers keep us going," Junalyn Palco said with a smile as though she was about to click a selfie. •

Overcoming

a year with the new rice trade system

WRITTEN AND ILLUSTRATED BY: REUEL M. MARAMARA
SUBJECT MATTER SPECIALIST: ALICE B. MATAIA



Palay prices dropped but now stabilizing

The farmgate price of dry palay (excluding fancy rice) has been dropping since the last quarter of 2018. In September 2019, it dropped by P7.29/kg compared to P22.04/kg of the same month in 2018. In addition to a freer market, this can be attributed to factors such as postharvest handling and typhoons that adversely affected the quality of harvested palay.

However, the weekly farmgate price of dry palay gradually increased starting in the first week of November 2019 from P15.44/kg to P16.04/kg in the last week of February 2020. This is seen to further improve as the government continues to implement more programs for farmers, such as palay price support at P19/kg from the National Food Authority.



Lower prices of milled rice

The rise in volume of cheap rice imports increased the domestic rice supply pulling down rice retail prices in favor of rice consumers. This immediately happened after RTL took effect. In February 2020, the retail price of well-milled rice (WMR) dropped to P41.08/kg. Regular-milled rice (RMR) followed the same path downhill with retail price at P36.14/kg. Compared to the same period last year, these mean savings at P3.29/kg for WMR and P3.67/kg for RMR. This is the lowest recorded price of RMR since the P35.78/kg in November 2013.

It's February 2020. A mother was all smiles when she got home from the market. The price of the kind of rice she always buys has dropped from P39.81/kg in the same month last year to P36.14/kg allowing her more savings to spend for other household needs. Her son told her it was because the country has replaced import limits on rice with tariffs, thus increasing rice supply in the market.

Her farmer husband hesitantly recalls that a year ago the unfamiliar news on more rice imports almost tore him apart. It was February 14, 2019, the day Republic Act 11203 also known

as the Rice Tariffication Law (RTL) was signed. For a time, it was as if all his dreams crashed into pieces as he listened carefully to television trying to grasp what it would mean for rice farmers like him—drop in palay prices.

For 28 years now, tilling his 1.42-hectare rice farm has provided most of his household's income to feed his family and send his children to school. All he ever wanted was bountiful harvest and higher income to keep farming. But he understands the government is left with no choice but approve the law or face economic penalties from other countries. Now with a new rice trade system, he knew he had to level up his farming – increase yield and lower production cost to compete with cheap imported rice.

Like the farmer, many others were worried making RTL one of the hottest issues in agriculture and prompted certain sectors to oppose its implementation. On the far side, many burdens were eased as it continuously pulled down prices of milled rice benefiting consumers including other rice farmers who also buy rice. Let us look at what the figures say a year after the implementation of RTL.



More choices

Generally classified as premium, well-milled, and regular-milled, affordable high-quality rices are now available depending on consumer budget and preferences. Buyers can even choose from either imported or local rice.



Lower inflation

Inflation determines the price of goods and purchasing value of money. Low inflation rates not only favor consumers but also encourage people to spend or invest, which is generally good for the economy. Since the passing of RTL, the decline in rice retail prices has contributed greatly on trimming down inflation. In February 2020, rice contributed a negative 6.3% lowering the headline inflation to 2.6% compared to 3.8% in the same period in 2019. This means families had more savings on rice expenditure, including some rice farmers who buy rice, to spend on other goods.

Like other reforms, RTL has its own birth pains. In time, its purpose will be served that would benefit all players in the rice industry, eventually the whole country.

Source of data: Philippine Statistics Authority (Philippine Inflation Rate [infographics], OpenSTAT, and Weekly Farmgate, Wholesale and Retail Prices of Palay, Rice and Corn)

This mayor is an ally



► CHRISTINA A. FREDILES

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Consider farming a business enterprise – this has been PhilRice’s “gospel” to Filipino farmers. The Institute believes that they can help the country compete with neighboring nations if they produce more, lessen their production cost, and sell their produce at a competitive price. This can be accomplished with the help of local government units and other partner-entities.

One of PhilRice’s allies is Maria Theresa Rodriguez-Peralta, the first lady mayor of Balungao, Pangasinan in 200 years. The public servant and economist shares her thoughts on her administration’s programs and how the LGU of Balungao helps farmers become competitive.

Can you tell us what led you to become a public servant and Mayor of Balungao?

My husband and in-laws influenced me to be a public servant. I decided to run in 2019 to continue what my husband had started. Before I became mayor, I used to volunteer for Red Cross and some charitable institutions. I was also busy taking care of our businesses on construction, trucking, equipment rental, school, testing center, and rice farming.

Working on the ground, I’ve realized that I could do more if I serve in the local government. I wanted to help, especially the rice farmers. I wanted them to earn more since they are the ones who feed us.

What agri programs have you implemented in your municipality so far?

To end up big, you need to start with small steps. To help lessen the cost in farming, we’ve offered free trucking services. I even allow our personal trucks to be used by my fellow Balungao farmers. All they have to do is to let us know when they will need the trucks so that we can have them scheduled. No charges, not even for gasoline.

We’ve also supported the development of a small water-impounding project so that our farmers can have adequate water supply to irrigate their farmlands.

In addition, we fully support the implementation of the Rice Competitiveness Enhancement Fund (RCEF) programs in Balungao. We’ve developed a mechanism for ease of certified seed distribution. Before the distribution, we went to different barangays and had our farmers listed in the Registry System for Basic Sectors in Agriculture to ensure that they will all avail of the free seeds.

We have also come up with an information campaign explaining to the farmers the objectives of rice tariffication and the importance of valuing government grants in order to make them more competitive through RCEF. Regular seminars are offered by the municipal agriculture office.

How do you plan to help achieve the goals of the DA in the rice industry and lead Balungao farmers into being more competitive?

The most difficult part was arresting the threat that farmers will just sell their farmlands.

We will let farmers realize that farming is business. Let us teach them how to compute their expenses so that they will know how to deal with traders. In fact, we give our farmers daily price advisories so they can bargain better with traders.

With regard to technology promotion, I believe that there is no single scientific way on how to approach our farmers. What is important is we let them feel how much we value them through constant dialogue. We can't impose on them what to do but we can give them options on how to increase their yield, lessen their production cost, and sell their produce at a competitive price.

What will you do to help Balungao farmers become competitive under rice tariffication?

First, we let them understand what's rice tariffication and why we need to implement it. It's like explaining to them why there is Jollibee even if there are local food places in the community. If farmers will recognize the need to compete with imported rice then they will strive to make their produce stand out from all the rest.

Also, we are strengthening the literacy program here in Balungao especially in the field of agriculture. If we come to think of it, the future of agriculture is a fully mechanized farm. Before this happens, our farmers should be prepared for it.

What do you think are the roles of local government units in terms of helping farmers approximate the competition?

Let our farmers feel that they can count on us! This is the perfect time to let them know that we are doing our best to help them become successful agripreneurs. Let us give them the technical know-how's of farming and put value in what they do.

We expand the economic opportunities of our farmers here by teaming up with the DOLE, DTI, and DA of course.

While waiting for the *palay* harvest, we can initiate livelihood programs for farmers such as cosmetology, haircutting, or small business like negosyo carts. We are also coordinating with the DSWD to beef-up the pantawid program of our government through the procurement of rice.

Let us connect the dots on how we can better serve our farmers.

What lessons or tips can you offer to your fellow local government officials on helping our farmers?

I am sure that my fellow officials have their own strategies. It would be best if we learn to share because their strategies might work for others as well. Let us remember that no matter how small our ideas are, they could actually portray the bigger picture.

Let our farmers realize that the national government is here to support them. Whatever tax that the government is getting either from Filipinos or imported rice will also benefit the farmers through programs. •



Let our farmers feel that they can count on us! This is the perfect time to let them know that we are doing our best to help them become successful agripreneurs. Let us give them the technical know-how's of farming and put value in what they do.

- MARIA THERESSA RODRIGUEZ-PERALTA



Debunking 10 COMMON FIELD MISCONCEPTIONS

► WRITTEN BY: DONNA CRIS P. CORPUZ; INFOGRAPHICS BY: JAYSON C. BERTO
SUBJECT MATTER SPECIALISTS: MARVIN J. MANALANG, FREDERICK M. SALUDEZ,
GLENN Y. ILAR, AND JOHN C. DE LEON

MYTHS

Continuous use of inorganic fertilizer makes the soil acidic.



Pesticides can control Rice Tungro Virus (RTV) in the field.



Rice plants in **excessive water** grow faster and healthier.



High seeding rates ensure bountiful harvest.



FACTS

Studies show that this doesn't happen, especially if the **field is irrigated**. The water in the field balances the elements that would make the soil acidic.

No specific pesticide can control RTV outright. Insecticides do control the high incidence of insect pests that carry RTV.

Rice plants grow faster and healthier in a moderately irrigated field. With just **enough water**, the stem of the rice plant becomes sturdy and air can freely penetrate the soil. During the vegetative stage, water level in the field should be shallow at only 5-7cm.

At 20cm x 20cm planting distance, a 1-ha farm will have 250,000 hills. A **40-kg bag of high-quality seeds** has more than 1 million grains. Hence, it is more than enough for transplanting method even with 2-3 seedlings per hill.

MYTHS

Adding fungicide during the first fertilizer application will lower pest infestation.



Foliar fertilizer helps achieve higher yield.



Lady beetles are harmful insects.



Rice seeds can be stored for **more than a year**.



Any variety is suited for all areas and ecosystems in the Philippines.



Seeds harvested from **hybrid rice** can be planted repeatedly.



FACTS

Doing so will only add up to farmers' production cost. Pest control is done only when there is a certain **sign of infestation or infection**.

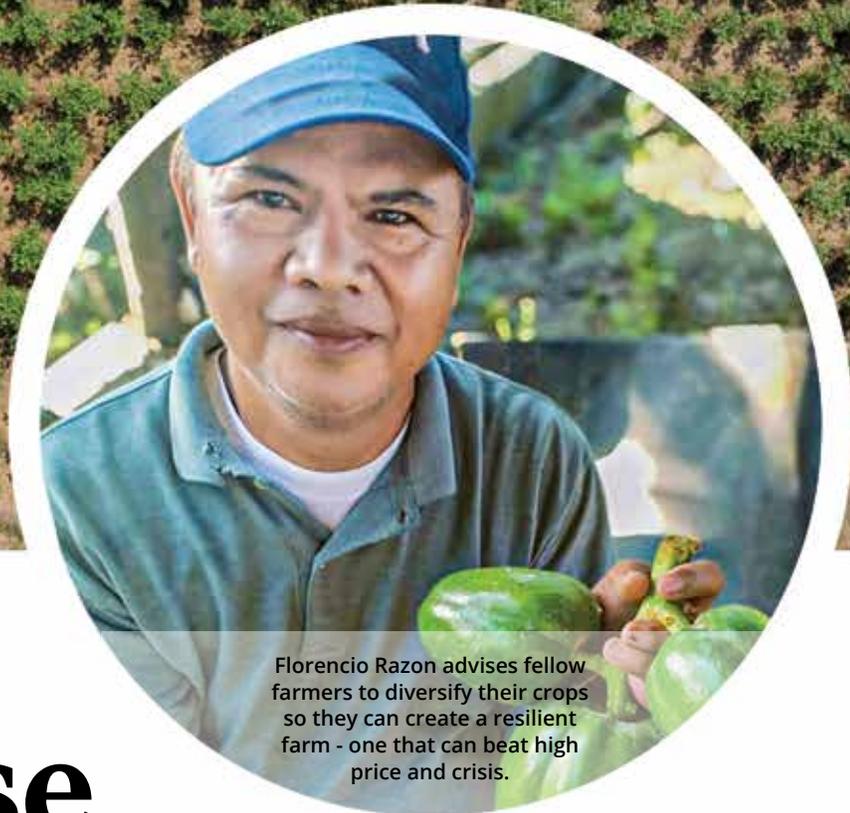
If you want to add micronutrients to the rice plant, using foliar spray is recommended. However, if the **right amount of nutrients** from granular fertilizers is already achieved, then there is no need for foliar fertilizer.

They are **beneficial as they prey** on the eggs and larvae of harmful insects. Lady beetles propagate during the flowering stage and they eat the excess pollen produced by plants. Insecticides are harmful to beneficial insects like lady beetles.

It is better to **plant rice seeds as soon as possible** to retain their optimum quality. The germination rate of seeds stored for more than 6 months diminishes especially if these are not kept properly.

Many NSIC varieties are **ecosystem- and location-specific**, although there are nationally recommended such as NSIC Rc 222, 216, and 160 for irrigated lowland. A variety will suit a specific location depending on its ecosystem, region or province, and planting season.

While farmers growing ordinary rice varieties can use the grain they harvested from their existing crop as seeds for planting the following season, **hybrid rice seed must be new every season**. Otherwise, the resulting crop will not be uniform in height and in maturity leading to a 40-60% decrease in yield. Hybrid vigor, which increases yield, is only confined in the first generation.



Florencio Razon advises fellow farmers to diversify their crops so they can create a resilient farm - one that can beat high price and crisis.

Being wise beats the odds

► CHARISMA LOVE B. GADO-GONZALES

Nothing can bring down a farmer who uses his kukote (common sense).

Florencio Razon of Brgy. Marelo, Gapan City, Nueva Ecija briskly strives through the two most difficult chapters in his life as a farmer – the birth pains of Rice Tariffication Law (RTL) and the global

battle against the unseen COVID-19. Amidst uncertainties and fear, he is hopeful and confident.

“Kayang-kaya naming mga magsasaka ito basta maging wais lang (We can overcome these challenges by being wise)! By being wise, we become resilient,” Renz, to his family and friends, said.

Professionally farming for 16 years, the 59-year-old organic rice grower explained that a wise farmer treats farming as an enterprise, avails himself of government agricultural services, and improves his/her skills.

Outwitting RTL effects

Under the ill effects of RTL late last year, when farmgate prices of *palay* fell to P13/kg or lower, Renz had his produce milled and sold to canteens and consumers at P38/kg – a price that is admittedly quite a steal for organic rice. He marketed his produce in as far as Cavite, which is about 135km away from Gapan, to profit from the best price.

He also outsmarted the low *palay* prices through integrated and diversified farming. In his 1-ha farm, other than rice, he planted lemongrass, banana, squash, pepper, string beans, and other vegetables in 2,000sqm, which earned him P30,000 or more additional income.

“It’s good to diversify. I sell the organic vegetables while waiting for the rice harvest,” Renz said.

Renz, who took farming seriously beginning in 2004 while managing his hypertension, also revealed that going organic had helped him reduce farm expenses. From the usual P20,000 expenses on inorganic fertilizers and chemicals, he only shells out half or less of this amount on nutrient management. Now on his third year of organic rice farming, he said that he produces *palay* at P10/kg.

“I advocate organic farming for good health. Having more farm savings is just a bonus. A windfall, which helped me cope with the last cropping season’s low prices,” he calculated.

Despite good income from rice, Renz admitted that farmers need government support for them to remain resilient agripreneurs. This is why he registered in the Registry System for Basic Sectors in Agriculture (RSBSA) to avail of benefits under the Rice Competitiveness Enhancement Fund, which is generated from the tariffs on rice imports and used for farmers’ welfare. However, he emphasized that even before enlisting in the RSBSA, he had already received assistance from the Department of Agriculture through subsidized high-quality hybrid seeds, training, and loans.

Braving SARS-CoV-2

A day after his 10-day training on climate resiliency and farm business school in Pampanga, they were advised to travel back to their provinces immediately in time for the implementation of the Luzon-wide Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ), a strategy to prevent the rapid spread of the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) that causes the disease called COVID-19.

Although already a seasoned farmer having been immersed in farming through his grandfather way back in his childhood, he values training as source of modern ways of improving his practices. He had participated in training courses on soil amelioration, vegetable farming, and being a local farm technician.

“Training helped me become a resilient farmer. When I applied techniques used in soil amelioration, I realized that when we feed the soil, the soil will feed us. Now that we’re on quarantine, many fields in our community are already idle. The fields are dried up and farmers are left with almost nothing. But because our soil is good, my farm is still green; and because we diversify, we still have our vegetables,” he elaborated.

Under ECQ, marketing is quite a challenge as he has to pass through four checkpoints before reaching the next town to sell his fresh, organic produce.

“Situation is tough; police may not allow me to pass. But I have to try. I had suffered health problems; so, in this critical time, the more that I’m driven for these vegetables to reach the consumers as access to these will increase their chances against the disease through a variety of nutritious foods,” he stressed.

Doing the right things

Other than having good produce to market, a wise farmer, based on his experience, also needs to improve operations, especially that his farm is

being developed as a learning site for fellow growers.

Working on a limited capital, he loaned P50,000 with P1,500 interest for 6 months from a rural bank. The loan, which came with free crop insurance, was used for inputs such as vegetable seedlings, organic fertilizers, farm machine rentals, irrigation costs; and development and improvement of farm infrastructure such as vermicomposting beds. He has more dreams for his farm, though – its own deep well pump, own electricity source, and multi-purpose tillers.

A wise farmer, he said, must also view partnership as vital in agripreneurship. He is open for collaborations with agriculture and research institutions in showcasing the technologies he had adopted and in developing his farm. He also joined the Parcutela Multipurpose Cooperative, which provides 20% discount on farm machines rental like the 4-wheel tractor. The discount, he said, is useful with the current economy going down.

Musing over, wisely

In just seven months, Renz’ fellow farmers had been in a roller-coaster ride trying to cope with unprecedented economic and social effects brought about by RTL and a global pandemic, which end is not yet within sight. But Renz remains calm, focused, like the lotus in a muddy pond.

“There’s still hope in agriculture despite farming becoming more complex. Let’s be wise, let’s be resilient. And in time, when all farmers are entrepreneurs, have access to agricultural services, and are skilled, our country would be food-secure, its supply not easily shaken by distressful times,” Florencio Razon makes a fearless forecast. •

VOX POP

UNDER THE NEW TRADE SYSTEM, HOW CAN YOU HELP RICE FARMERS BECOME MORE COMPETITIVE?

COMPILED BY: ALLAN C. BIWANG JR.,
AND JOHN JOWARD A. MARTILLANA

*Crowdsourced through PhilRice Facebook page and Text Center



We allotted P15 million for *palay* procurement this year. To determine soil nutrients and recommend appropriate fertilizer application, the Provincial Agriculture Office will now require farmer-beneficiaries to submit soil samples for analysis. Farmers' cultural management will likewise be required to assess and determine best practices across locations for possible replication. The program is not only about providing relief, but also caring for and taking good care of those who toil the land to provide food on our table.

Governor Reynaldo S. Tamayo, Jr., South Cotabato

Even before RCEF, we were already providing inbred seeds to farmers. We allocated P4.5 million this year for 3000 bags of certified seeds. With simplified processing and receiving of government aid, we assure our farmers that they can easily claim the seeds. We make sure that farmer-beneficiaries attend training and technology demonstration every cropping season. On top of that, we assist farmers in crop insurance registration.

Mayor Cipriano Violago, San Rafael, Bulacan





In response to low buying prices of *palay* in 2019, we launched the Cash Assistance Program for Rice amounting to P22 million with 22,000 farmer-beneficiaries and an additional P8.1 million for fertilizer assistance. This 2020, we prioritized the rice sector with P85 million budget to sustain our previous programs and cover more beneficiaries. Aside from seeds and fertilizers, 15 units of solar-powered irrigation system will be installed across Cotabato province. We hope to sustain our status as one of the top 10 rice-producing provinces in the coming years.

Governor Nancy A. Catamco, North Cotabato

We allotted funds for the Agricultural Development Officer of the Community or AgRiDoc training to enhance the skills of our selected rice technician. He will soon lead a program to boost rice production in our municipality. We also have this demo farm for farmer-learners and distribution of free certified rice seeds. Through our partnership with the Agricultural Training Institute and Philippine Coconut Authority, we have this Climate-Resilient Agriculture and Community Project in which we provide training and other sources of income aside from rice farming for our farmers and beneficiaries.

Mayor Eliseo R. Ruzol, Sr., General Nakar, Quezon Province



The city government acknowledges the need to reduce the production cost of farmers through mechanization and less chemical use. Under the Climate-Resilient Farmers' Field School, a season-long training, farmers are educated on fertilizer management using natural farming systems (Korean technology), integrated pest management, and farm mechanization.

We have set up a soils laboratory where our farmers could easily have their soils tested for proper fertilizer recommendations.

We also poured support to our farmers' groups to improve the rice value chain.

Mayor Richard I. Gomez, Ormoc City



PHILRICE CENTRAL EXPERIMENT STATION Maligaya, Science City of Muñoz, 3119 Nueva Ecija
Tel: (44) 456-0277 • Direct line/Telefax: (44) 456-0354

BRANCH STATIONS:

PhilRice Batac, MMSU Campus, Batac City, 2906 Ilocos Norte; Telefax: (77) 772-0654; 670-1867; Tel: 677-1508 Email: batac.station@philrice.gov.ph

PhilRice Isabela, Malasin, San Mateo, 3318 Isabela; Mobile: 0908-875-7955; 0927-437-7769; Email: isabela.station@philrice.gov.ph

PhilRice Los Baños, UPLB Campus, College, 4030 Laguna; Tel: (49) 536-8620; 501-1917; Mobile: 0920-911-1420; Email: losbanos.station@philrice.gov.ph

PhilRice Bicol, Batang Ligao City, 4504 Albay; Tel: (52) 284-4860; Mobile: 0918-946-7439; Email: bicol.station@philrice.gov.ph

PhilRice Negros, Cansilayan, Murcia, 6129 Negros Occidental; Mobile: 0949-194-2307; 0927-462-4026; Email: negros.station@philrice.gov.ph

PhilRice Agusan, Basilisa, RTRomualdez, 8611 Agusan del Norte; Telefax: (85) 343-0768; Tel: 343-0534; 343-0778; Email: agusan.station@philrice.gov.ph

PhilRice Midsayap, Bual Norte, Midsayap, 9410 North Cotabato; Telefax: (64) 229-8178; 229-7241 to 43 Email: midsayap.station@philrice.gov.ph

SATELLITE STATIONS:

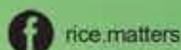
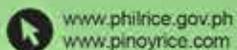
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Samar Satellite Station, UEP Campus, Catarman, 6400 Northern Samar • Mobile: 0948-754-5994; 0929-188-5438

Zamboanga Satellite Station, WMSU Campus, San Ramon, 7000 Zamboanga City • Mobile: 0910-645-9323; 0975-526-0306

PhilRice Field Office, CMU Campus, Maramag, 8714 Bukidnon; Mobile: 0916-367-6086; 0909-822-9813

Liaison Office, 3rd Flor. ATI Bldg, Elliptical Road, Diliman, Quezon City; Tel/Fax: (02) 920-5129



With or without a global pandemic, our
farmers ensure that we are food-secure.
Thank you to our lifetime heroes!

