

Aquaculture expected to post 8 percent growth

by RIZA T. OLCHONDRAN
Inquirer.net

AQUACULTURE is expected to post the highest growth rate among agriculture sub-sectors this year at 8.2 percent, the Department of Agriculture said.

Following aquaculture are banana at 6.2 percent, poultry at 5.4 percent, and municipal fisheries at 4.7 percent, the department said.

With nearly all available rice land already utilized, the rice sub-sector may post a 4.4 percent growth this year. The department said this would still be higher than the average annual global growth in rice production of only about 2.5 percent.

The department said the overall growth rate of the agriculture sector would be about four percent, to be driven by a seven-point blueprint focused on infrastructure programs for the farm and fisheries sectors.

The department has been particularly optimistic about mariculture—the raising of aquatic animals in saltwater.

Department officials last month toured Asian investors in key provinces, including southern Samal Island, to encourage them to put up hatcheries and post-harvest facilities like chillers and ports.

Also last month, the department announced the opening of a new marine finfish hatchery in the southern province of Misamis Occidental through the joint efforts of the provincial government, the Australian government and the Southeast Asia Fisheries Development Center.

The P8.8-million hatchery was built through a joint partnership with the Australian government through the Philippines-Australia Local Sustainability (PALS) program, which allocated P5.56 million for the project.

The Misamis Occidental provincial government shouldered the P2.44-million counterpart fund to complete the hatchery, the department said. ■

CHEd: 200 colleges seeking tuition hike

Only 66 won't increase their fees

by PHILIP TUBEZA
Inquirer.net

ONLY 200 tertiary schools are pursuing petitions for a tuition hike this coming school year after the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) convinced 66 schools to reconsider increasing their fees, CHED acting executive director Julito Vitriolo said.

Vitriolo said that the remaining schools have until April 1 to submit the supporting documents for their petitions. Among those who withdrew were four state universities and colleges.

"They withdrew after President Macapagal-Arroyo's appeal and of course, they're already using public funds," Vitriolo said.

"So, our problem now are the private schools and we are not yet sure if all these 200 schools would have increases because, if they fail to submit the required documents, then they won't be allowed to implement a tuition hike," Vitriolo added.

He said CHED regional offices would review all the documents that these schools submit to determine if they conducted consultations and if the proposed tuition hikes were.

Vitriolo added that there were no tertiary school from the Central and Eastern Visayas regions asking for an increase.

CHED chair Emmanuel Angeles has been going around the country to convince schools to impose a freeze on tuition fee hikes this year because of the current financial crisis and appeals from parents.

However, Angeles also admitted that if the schools met all the CHED requirements for a tuition hike, the agency would not be able to stop them from increasing their fees.

Vitriolo said the remaining

200 schools were asking for an "average increase of nine percent" in their tuition.

"Some are asking for a three-percent hike while the others want a nine-percent increase. We will look into this to determine if they're justified," he said.

Vitriolo added that CHED would continue to try to convince the remaining 200 schools to withdraw their petitions because of the current global financial crisis.

"We are still trying to talk them out of it and remind them about their social responsibility. Four or five years ago, there were more than 400 schools asking for an increase and now we have only 200. We are showing them this trend," Vitriolo said.

He said some schools are also hesitant to increase tuition because the financial crisis is expected to reduce the number of enrollments this year and hiking their fees could further bring down their enrollment figures.

Vitriolo said CHED would strictly enforce its guidelines on tuition hikes, particularly the requirement that school administrators should consult all the major stakeholders, including students, before implementing any increases.

Vitriolo said that schools that intend to raise their tuition are also required to show that the proceeds from previous increases reached their intended beneficiaries.

"We should see where they used it. Under our rules, 70 percent of proceeds from a tuition hike should go to the faculty, 20 percent to improvements in the school, and 10 percent to the school owner," he said. ■

RP consulate in Frankfurt opens

MANILA—A new Philippine consulate in Frankfurt, Germany is now open to serve Filipinos living in the German federal states of Hesse, North Rhine Westphalia, Thuringia, Baden-Württemberg, Rhineland Palatinate and Saarland.

The Department of Foreign Affairs on Wednesday said the Consulate General of the Philippines will start consular service operations at its temporary premises on Friedrichstrasse 10-12.

The new Consulate General replaces the Philippine Embassy's extension office in

Bonn that was closed late last year, pursuant to the DFA's rationalization program.

Other German federal states are being served by the Philippine Embassy in Berlin and the Consulate General in Hamburg.

Consul General Romeo Manalo, a career diplomat who heads the newly established post, recently met with leaders of Filipino community organizations in the run up to the opening to assure them of the government's commitment to the welfare of overseas Filipinos.

In his report to the DFA, Manalo said the Filipinos expressed their satisfaction over

Manila's decision to establish a Consulate General in Frankfurt, Germany's commercial and financial hub.

He said the sentiments of Filipino community leaders were echoed by Philippine exhibitors who recently participated in two trade fairs in Frankfurt.

The Philippines and Germany formalized relations in April 1955 and opened their respective embassies in each other's capital the year thereafter.

After the reunification of Germany, the Philippine Embassy transferred to Berlin. (Inquirer.net)

Bolante challenges Gordon to debate

by FELIPE V. CELINO
Inquirer.net

FORMER Agriculture Undersecretary Jocelyn "Joc-joc" Bolante challenged Sen. Richard Gordon to a public debate on the Senate Blue Ribbon Committee report on the so-called fertilizer scam.

"If Gordon truly believes his report, he should take advantage of this debate to gain the much needed exposure," Bolante told the Capiz media during a press conference.

Bolante again denied involvement in the P728-million fertilizer fund scam even as he asked fellow Capiznos not to be judgmental.

Bolante also urged the senators to revisit the established facts and evidence.

He said a dispassionate examination of the evidence and facts would reveal that he was innocent of the charges and accusations being hurled against him.

Bolante maintained that the executive summary of the Blue Ribbon Committee report showed that the conclusion reached by the committee was a mere summary of the accusations and devoid of factual basis.

Bolante noted that there was no documentary evidence presented or discussed to support the accusations contained in the report.

"Such serious accusations should, under the law, be at least backed up by evidence," he added.

Bolante explained that the P728 million was intended not only for fertilizers but also for farm inputs and implements.

Bolante said he was never involved in the procurement of farm inputs and implements since his role was merely to transfer the funds to the DA regional field units, which were tasked to administer the fund.

During the hearing on the fertilizer scam, he also said that his office was involved only in the preparation of the list of project proponents based on the pending requests accumulated in the past years.

He also noted that of the six bank accounts, allegedly in his name, that remained opened, only four were his, while the two others were those of his uncle's scholarship and charity fund.

Bolante said that the Commission on Audit had fully accounted for every centavo of the P728 million, adding that nothing went to his bank accounts.

He again denied having known Senate witnesses Marites Aytona and Jose Barredo, as well as businessman Jimmy Paule.

Bolante said the statements of the three at the Senate hearing also showed that he had no participation in the so-called fertilizer fund scam. ■

Zubiri files bill pushing for homeowners' rights

by CHRISTINA MENDEZ
Philstar.com

Senate Majority Leader Juan Miguel Zubiri has filed a bill to push for the rights of homeowners and enable them to participate in all matters relating to their home and immediate community whether or not they are members of the homeowners' association.

In a sponsorship speech Zubiri delivered last Mar. 2 entitled *Magna Carta for Homeowners*, he stressed the right of a homeowner not to join the association but to still enjoy the basic services and facilities provided by the association subject to payment of necessary fees and other pertinent charges.

Under Senate Bill 3106, the basic rights of non-member homeowners will be recognized, such as the right to enjoy basic community services which homeowner members enjoy.

The proposed Magna Carta will also put to rest the issue of jurisdiction of homeowners' associations, including their intra- and inter-association controversies, by placing homeowners' associations under the Housing and Land Use Regulatory Board (HLURB). ■

Senators slam Villar's 'P1B' boast

by CHRISTINE AVENDANO
Inquirer.net

SENATORS believed to be running in next year's presidential race slammed declared presidential candidate Sen. Manuel Villar Jr. for telling, in effect, that the presidential race would be decided by those who can raise more campaign money.

Senators Panfilo Lacson, Manuel "Mar" Roxas II, Francis Escudero and Richard Gordon disagreed that money would determine the winner of the presidential polls in 2010.

Villar was quoted the other day as saying that while many will announce their presidential bid, "in the end, there will be just a few who will remain."

"If you can't even raise one billion pesos, why even run?" Villar said.

"Money is not the only measure of winnability in a presidential race. Arrogance will not bring you sure victory either," Lacson said in a text message.

"More importantly, money cannot determine qualification and competence to serve as a leader of the country," he added.

But Lacson said the bigger question was "where and how did you earn your P1 bil-



Sen. Manuel Villar

lion, and how do you intend to recover it when you win?"

Roxas, on the other hand, said Villar's statements only showed how the senator "sees the people, on what he valued more."

For Roxas, people will elect the next president by the platform of his government, his service and track record.

"Filipinos cannot be bought. They will choose a leader who can provide good government," said Roxas, who is president of the Liberal Party and a scion of the moneyed Araneta and Roxas clans.

Asked how much he would spend for his election, Roxas joked a mere P2, "just enough to buy Chocnut (a local brand of chocolate candy)."

Also saying money was not

that matters in an election, Escudero said it would be the people and not money that would elect a president.

Escudero, who belongs to the National People's Coalition of kingmaker and tycoon Eduardo "Danding" Cojuangco, said he also did not agree that only the rich could run in elections and those without money had no right to run.

He said that the Constitution had only provided five requirements for a person to run for president and that did not include an impressive Statement of Assets and Liabilities.

Gordon, for his part, called Villar's statement as "arrogant."

"*Aba'y hindi tama yan na sasabihin mong kung wala kang isang bilyon, bakit pang-mayaman lang ba? Edi ilagay na natin sila Lucio Tan, sila Danding Cojuangco, yun na lang ang pwedeng mag-presidente* [It's not right to say that only those with billions can run, why, only the rich can run? Then, let's have Lucio Tan and Danding Cojuangco for president]," Gordon said.

He said Villar only managed to insult the poor as he reminded that the latter was a former Senate president who "claims to have been poor before." ■

"I'm not saying this because I may be a candidate, all I'm saying is I am against this concept *na pag nasa survey ka, panalo ka na; pag ikaw ay may pera, panalo ka na; kung may partido ka, panalo ka na; kung wala kang partido lalo kang talo* [that when you are in surveys, you'll win; when you are moneyed, you'll win; if you have a political party, you'll win; when you are not in one, you'll lose]," he said.

Like Lacson, Gordon then asked how Villar would recover the P1 billion money he has if he wins.

Admitting though that Villar's statement did not sound good, Senate Minority Leader Aquilino Pimentel Jr., nevertheless, said financial independence was a "plus" factor for presidential candidates.

Pimentel said that Villar was probably just being "candid" as he agreed that a presidential candidate would indeed need P1 billion to launch his campaign.

For Pimentel, Villar's statement was a "warning to those without money not to sell their souls to vested interest" lest they end up "falling to a debt trap." ■

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