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Domoguen: Promoting and developing the Cordillera's heirloom rice industry

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THE recession in the USA is affecting the Cordillera in a specific way.

Mary Hensley, President of Eighth Wonder Inc. recently wrote to say that the situation is hindering her market development efforts for the Cordillera heirloom rice there in many ways.

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Economic recessions make people hold on to their hard earned cash. They spend money selectively and only when necessary. In the USA, that translates to extra effort and expenses for the promotion of new products like heirloom rice in traditional markets even if only temporarily. But Mary says she is not about to give up her commitments with our heirloom

rice growers, knowing how things stand here. This year, she borrowed money to cover additional expenses for promotion, transport and storage," she said.

Mary thought of developing an export market for the heirloom rice when her tour as a US Peace Corp volunteer ended in the early 2000s. Returning to her home country, she enrolled and finished a Masters Degree on Business Management with the objective of fulfilling that new found mission. What she had in mind is not focused only in the marketing of heirloom rice. In coordination with a US University, a feasibility study was undertaken. Among others, the study recommended the identification of an appropriate NGO and the formation of federated farmer cooperatives as primary stakeholders and partners with Eighth Wonder Inc. The stakeholders



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will have to develop and implement a value chain strategy for the Cordillera heirloom rice to ensure a responsible, sustainable and beneficial operation for the joint enterprise.



Rice Inc., the local counterpart of Eighth Wonder Inc. along with the federated heirloom rice producers' cooperatives of Kalinga, Ifugao and Mountain Province are responsible in the heirloom rice value chain development and its implementation. The endeavor adheres to local and international good agricultural production practices and standards, and acceptable postharvest practices that includes transport, storage, packaging and packing. With a view to expand market and production, both sides of the enterprise must agree to do their roles role to survive and equally benefit from their endeavors.

For its part, Eighth Wonder Inc. dutifully fulfilled its roles of promoting the good qualities and characteristics of heirloom rice in the US market. It packaged the product well with appropriate labels and information on food content and quality derived from a series of tests undertaken with food experts and chefs; cooking recommendations; and, dissemination of taste sampling results among chefs of restaurants and hotels in US newspapers.

The Eighth Wonder Inc. subsidized the enterprise' market development and operations in the US as well as that of RICE, Inc. and the local cooperatives in terms of organizational meetings, consultations and trainings related to production, processing and other activities related to sourcing, transport, storage and shipping. It also paid for the development and set-up of processing equipment designed to ease the burden of producers in the milling of their produce. Aside from paying the procured rice, Eighth Wonder, Inc. also fulfilled its part in distributing patronage benefits to the members of the federated cooperatives annually. Just late last year, Eighth Wonder Inc. also paid for the round trip expenses including accommodation and other fees of eight heirloom rice farmers from the Cordillera who attended a weeklong conference organized by the Slow Food Foundation in Italy.

The Rice Inc. facilitated local operations, coordinated with LGUs, and government agencies. It oversaw the strict implementation of standard that would ensure that efforts and money will not be wasted because exported products are rejected. Rice Inc. and the local cooperatives are responsible in educating and instilling discipline by their members to comply with given standards. This is a tall order, given that local farmers are new to this kind of operation. In the traditional production and marketing of rice, all that a farmer does are limited to harvesting, drying, threshing, milling, and packing. They then sell their produce in sacks without worrying about moisture contents, sanitation procedures, impurities and degrees of milling that a perceptive market and international standards demands.

For all intents and purposes, the accomplishments of the Rice Inc. and Eighth Wonder, Inc. in promoting and developing the potentials of heirloom rice for the local and export market require fair judgment and support by the Cordillera citizenry most of all, and other Filipinos too. They brought back to relevance a disappearing heirloom legacy whose benefits impacts on the health and well-being of the international and local communities. Their operations and accomplishments bring new insight on rural development; and, sustaining the rice terraces and watersheds, all critical concerns to quality existence in our highland region. I will tell you my basis for these claims next week.

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