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Expanding Export Market May Help Unoy Rice Survive in Cordillera

Tabuk, Kalinga - The foreign market for Kalinga Province's red rice or unoy is expanding. Local farmers here in coordination with Revitalized Indigenous Cordillera Entrepreneurs (RICE), Inc., have sustained the exportation of unoy, starting from an export of 700 kilograms to Montana, USA early last year to third shipment of 6 metric tons in the last quarter.

Assistant Provincial Agriculturist Julie Aclam said that the Montana, USA market will need about 10 metric tons of unoy rice or any available supply this year. Slow Foundation, a European foundation based in Tuscany, Italy, also eyes unoy rice for marketing in Europe. Aclam said that this foundation, which is dedicated to the preservation of traditional foods, has sent a representative to Kalinga Province to work out their requirements with unoy farmers. Aclam is also the provincial unoy rice program focal person.

Aside from Europe and Hong Kong, China is also a potential market. It has a religious organization offering to sell unoy rice to its members and to other consumers in this former crown colony on a monthly basis. The demand in the Hong Kong market is also huge and it cannot be met in the immediate future, Aclam said.

The news on expanding foreign market for unoy rice may have encouraged more local farmers to once again produce this centuries-old rice crop. However, with more farmers shifting to unoy production, the problem on seed availability will definitely hinder production and market expansion.

Unoy, an aromatic indigenous rice variety, is grown following culture-bound production practices in the Kalinga highlands. Most of the lowland rice paddies in the province have long been allotted for the production of high-yielding rice varieties and lately, some areas were converted to hybrid rice paddies.

Many, however, are unfamiliar - especially the youth and educated villagers with the culture of growing unoy rice until last year. That was before the first export

shipment of unoy when the old folks attended to the production of this rice crop. Like in other poor villages of the region, the young prefer to migrate to the cities to work. If the young would go back to farming, they would utilize the land using modern practices including crop varieties.

In the hinterland villages where the old ways have prevailed, rice is a staple food. It is grown naturally twice a year - without employing chemical fertilizers and pesticides - in terraced rice paddies or in the villagers' traditional swidden farm lots. The first crop is grown from August to February and the second crop is grown from March to July.

Aclam reported that a total of 528 farmers are engaged in the production and exportation of unoy rice to Montana, USA. Now, because of the interest generated by the crop's export market, several municipal unoy rice farmers associations were organized. "We can determine the exact number of unoy farmers later this month in a meeting that seeks to organize a provincial federation of unoy growers association," she added.

The estimated potential area for unoy rice paddies in Kalinga is 8,000 hectares situated in the highland areas of Tinglayan, Lubuagan, Pasil, Tanudan, Pinukpuk, and Tabuk. Aclam explained that there are many farmers in these municipalities who want to grow unoy but lack seeds [and] this is a major problem.

A decade ago, there's an abundant supply of unoy rice seeds. In the highlands, true-to-type vigorous quality seeds are always available because farmers have preserved their seed selection methods. The responsibility of seed selection belongs to women folk who acquired their expertise through experience. Through this, they were able to build a reputation for being skilled seed selectors.

With the Department of Agriculture's Central Cordillera Agricultural Program, Pola Mendoza, a rice expert, noted in her book entitled *Workable Rice Production Technologies in the Cordilleras* that the seed selection process that women folk followed is similar to breeder seed production. This traditional seed selection expertise of women enabled farmers to have control over their seeds and made 304 indigenous rice varieties available in the region which survived for centuries.

The increased demand for unoy rice grown in the traditional way will force highland rice growers in Kalinga to take a second look on traditional rice production practices, not only to save rice terraces but to earn bigger income as well.

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