

Highland rice varieties target global markets

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LA TRINIDAD, Benguet -- More indigenous rice varieties of the Cordillera are expected to be shipped abroad this year to meet the growing demand for traditional and native staples in the international market.

The Cordillera Heirloom Rice Project (CHRP), which brought Kalinga's unoy and Ifugao's tinawon rice varieties to the United States two years ago, plans to export seven highland rice varieties from Mountain Province.

The Department of Agriculture and the National Irrigation Administration (NIA) in the Cordillera are ecstatic that the CHRP has considered the production of the following heirloom types from Mountain Province: senyora red, senyora white, kintoman, siniola, ginulot or unkil, korel and ghumlike.

These varieties grow in the rice fields of Besao, Sagada, Bontoc, Bauko, Natonin and Sadanga towns.

A nongovernment organization that has led the shipment of heirloom rice to the United States, the Revitalized Indigenous Cordilleran Entrepreneurs Inc. (RICE), encouraged the cultivation of the seven varieties after these were certified to have passed product standards required for export.

The RICE is leading the CHRP project in a bid to make native rice world-class, give more income to the Igorot farmers, and help conserve the region's rice terraces.

It has gained momentum in marketing the unoy and tinawon varieties in the United States, in collaboration with the Montana-based Eighth Wonder Inc., which serves as its marketing arm.

Abraham Akilit, NIA Cordillera director, said 30 varieties were considered by the RICE for export, but only seven stood out in terms of quality, yield and taste. Surviving varieties

"They are called heirloom rice since their varieties have survived more than 50 years of cultivation," he said in a recent press forum.

Akilit said the addition of seven varieties could boost the RICE's quota to export 40 to 50 metric tons of heirloom rice this year.

The yield of heirloom rice varieties pales in comparison with the commercial or hybrid rice varieties commonly grown in the country, he said. Indigenous rice varieties usually yield 40 to 50 cavans per hectare, while hybrid rice yields close to 80 cavans.

“But at P50 a kilogram, or P2,500 per cavan, heirloom rice definitely beats the P1,200 per cavan cost of hybrid rice,” Akilit said.

Ma. Victoria Garcia, RICE executive director, was quoted in the Agri Cordillera, a DA publication as saying that the organization exported 8.9 MT of heirloom rice in 2006. In October last year, the group shipped 17 MT.

“The foreign market is astonishing. The demand would really revitalize heirloom rice production,” Akilit said.

Buoyed by the success of the local varieties, the DA, Bureau of Plant Industry, NIA and the Bureau of Post Harvest Research and Extension have committed support for the production of more heirloom rice varieties.

To satisfy the growing demand, Akilit said farmers should be encouraged to widen their plantation areas devoted to indigenous rice.

Previous shipments came from highland farmers whose fields were only 200 square meters in average size.

Akilit lamented that only Mountain Province, Kalinga and Ifugao had cashed in on heirloom rice production. Benguet, Abra and Apayao can host farmlands devoted to traditional rice varieties but this all depends on the policy commitment of local officials, he said.

The NIA has been supporting the native rice production program since it boosts the reputation of the Cordillera rice terraces as “the most watershed friendly farming technology,” Akilit said.

“The native varieties are organically raised since no chemical farm inputs are used. Planting them also encourages farmers to compost local plants as sources of fertilizer.”

But the best advantage is that the rice terraces where traditional varieties are cultivated are found between rivers and forests. This setup, Akilit said, made the rice fields a buffer zone that enhanced watershed protection.

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