

Rising rice costs seen good for terraces

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BAGUIO CITY – Increasing world prices of rice are good for farmers tilling the centuries-old rice terraces of Ifugao and Kalinga, agriculture officials said here on Tuesday.

Organic indigenous rice grown by these farmers have penetrated the American market due to the business efforts of a former US Peace Corps volunteer, said Virginia Tapat, program coordinator of the Department of Agriculture's (DA) Ginintuang Masaganang Ani (GMA).

The value of the grains produced by the terraces only goes as high as P50 a kilo in domestic markets, but its export value should have tripled by now based on the new global mark-up for the staple, she said.

“For a few years now, farmers (have been exporting) their indigenous rice and spending their profits buying cheaper rice for their consumption,” she said.

President Macapagal-Arroyo said global warming had reduced harvests in most rice-producing countries and the high oil prices had hurt rice distribution.

She said the country was not experiencing a shortage, even though the \$200 price tag abroad for a ton of rice had increased to \$700.

The Cordillera is expected to produce 191,000 metric tons of rice by June, Tapat said, to address the increasing demand.

This is a 4.8-percent increase for Kalinga, Abra and Apayao, which produce the biggest volume of rice in the Cordillera, Tapat said, but their capacity to produce more rice is hampered by the environment and terrain.

Many farmlands there are rain-fed, which means their planting and irrigation cycles are attuned to a different season compared to lowland rice paddies, Tapat said.

But the government is looking closely at the region's indigenous organic varieties because of the opportunities that the world demand has opened for these produce.

Unoy, a special variety of red rice, was sold for \$5 (P208.40) a kilo in Montana, when it was introduced there by the Revitalized Indigenous Cordillera

Entrepreneurs (RICE), which a Filipino businesswoman set up in tandem with Mary Hensley.

Hensley was a Peace Corps volunteer who was assigned to Kalinga in the 1970s. She set up Eighth Wonder, a Montana-based organic food supplier, which markets unoy from Kalinga and tinawon from the Ifugao terraces as cereals that are harvested and pounded into grain by hand.

The RICE federated many farmers' groups of these provinces to help sustain their annual export quotas.

The increasing rice prices should also encourage younger farmers to return to the terraces, which have been classified in the World Heritage List as one of its most endangered sites, Tapat said.

The preservation of the terraces requires farmers to revive their ancestral mountain rice farms, said Ifugao Gov. Teodoro Baguilat Jr.

He said most of the terraces had been abandoned because many young Ifugao no longer find them economically viable.

Only a few tons of tinawon and unoy reach the US markets.

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