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Cordillera rice off to U.S.

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QUEZON CITY, Sept. 24 -- The Department of Agriculture (DA) led last Friday a ceremonial send-off at the Manila International Container Terminal for U.S.-bound 15 metric tons of organic heirloom rice from the Cordilleras. The annual export is considered "a milestone in government's effort to expand markets for premium varieties and promote the rich cultural heritage attached to it."

"This will help sustain the status of rice terraces as a world heritage treasure," Secretary of Agriculture Proceso Alcala stated, who was represented by Director Marilyn Sta. Catalina of DA's Regional Field Unit-Cordillera Autonomous Region at the send-off, the DA said in a statement.

Director Sta. Catalina said the shipment—worth P870 thousand and composed of ten tons of "mina-angan" variety from Banaue and "hungduan" from Ifugao, and five tons are "ulikan" from Pasil and Lubuagan in Kalinga – were consolidated by Rice Terraces Farmers Cooperative (RTFC), in cooperation with a non-government organization Rice Inc. Eighth Wonder Inc., a US-based NGO that helps market products from the Cordillera's rice terraces, will receive it in California.

"More than profit, we are promoting the rich Cordilleran cultural heritage through this export," said Dir. Sta. Catalina. "These grains represent the best in the Cordilleras, notably the industry and ingenuity of its people, as they are organically grown, and manually harvested and pounded to perfection."

The shipment forms part of the 27.6 metric tons that the Philippines will send this year to the US, bought from 272 farmers from the three provinces. The remaining volume is currently undergoing organic fumigation at a Philippine Rice Institute laboratory in Nueva Ecija, in compliance to strict U.S. sanitary and phytosanitary requisites.

The DA has been facilitating RTFC's export to the U.S. through Eight Wonder Inc. since 2005. To date, shipments of various heirloom varieties—such as Mt. Province's "Mountain Violet" variety, Kalinga's unoy, "jekot" and the "ulikan" red grains as well as for Ifugao's tinawon, "fancy rice" and "diket"—to the U.S. totaled 97 tons, including last year's 24.4 tons valued at P1.3 million.

The DA has embarked on a campaign meant to preserve farming practices in northern Philippine region and expand overseas markets for indigenous rice varieties.

These include the P20 million grant to the Ifugao provincial government to rebuild damaged portions of Batad rice terraces.

The Philippine Rice Research Institute also conducts a DNA fingerprinting of heirloom rice varieties in the country to protect local varieties from adverse claims, notably Cordillera's frequently exported varieties. (da.gov.ph)