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Pushing for the Development of CAR Heirloom Rice as Export Crop

Baguio City — Last June and July were busy months for stake holders as they pushed for the development of Cordillera heirloom rice varieties as export commodities in the U.S. market.

Department of Agriculture (DA) Regional Executive Director Cesar Rodriguez said that the Revitalize Indigenous Cordilleran Entrepreneurs (RICE), Inc. and Eighth Wonder, and the partner agencies of these two organizations relentlessly pursued a very hectic schedule to ensure the development and promotion of the heirloom rice as an export crop and high-end agricultural product.

He also said that Mary Hensley and Ma. Victoria Garcia, president of Eighth Wonder and executive director of RICE, Inc., respectively, visited communities in the Cordillera last June to July to conduct trainings and hold meetings with key government agencies.

Since the Regional Kalahi Convergence Group (RKCG-CAR)-with the National Economic Development Authority as its secretariat monitors, conceptualizes, and implements programs and projects on poverty alleviation in Cordillera, the two first held meeting with the group last June 25.

They presented the Cordillera Heirloom Rice Project, a model project aimed to alleviate poverty in the region, to government regional line agency heads and government poverty program focal persons.

After the meeting with the RKCG, Hensley and Garcia shared the project's vision, mission, and accomplishments to rice terraces farmers, LGU agricultural officers, and technicians in a seminar organized by DA's Agricultural Training Institute in La Trinidad, Benguet last June 26.

To develop a brand of high-quality Cordillera heirloom rice, and to promote and maintain such image, it is necessary to institutionalize a production and

marketing quality control system. Thus, RICE, Inc., Eighth Wonder and the LGUs of Ifugao and Kalinga supported the conduct of a quality control seminar for farmers in both provinces from June 28 to July 5. Thirty farmers were trained as quality control inspectors who will process 18 to 20 tons of heirloom rice for export to the USA this year.

Hensley and Garcia also held coordination meetings with national government and international development agencies in Manila to generate support from them for the production and marketing of heirloom rice. They met with the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), Department of Science and Technology (DOST), and National Irrigation Administration (NIA).

Their consultations with NIA led to the drafting of a memorandum of understanding, stipulating items for convergence of activities, roles, commitment, and maximization of resources and support for rice terraces farmers.

They also asked PHILFOODEX to help them develop a packaging for heirloom rice. Towards the end of July, they consulted UNESCO, PhilRice and the Bureau of Postharvest Research and Extension (BPRE) on the development of postharvest machineries needed to process heirloom rice for next year's increased export requirements.

UNESCO issued a check to RICE, Inc. for its fund raising for the development and purchase of postharvest machineries. PhilRice and BPRE will also support them in facilitating inspection, warehousing, fumigation, and shipment of heirloom rice to USA.

Rodriguez commended RICE, Inc. and Eighth Wonder for their support in making Cordillera heirloom rice a profitable commodity. "We need more investors and private development agencies that understand the land and people to promote genuine rural development in Cordillera," he said.

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