

## **Cordillera farmers to gain from high world prices of rice**

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BAGUIO CITY, Philippines -- Increasing world prices for rice would be good for farmers tilling the centuries-old rice terraces of Ifugao and the ancient paddies of Kalinga, agriculture officials said here on Tuesday.

Organic indigenous rice grown by these farmers has penetrated the American market due to the business efforts of a former United States Peace Corps volunteer, according to Virginia Tapat, program coordinator of the DA's Ginintuang Masaganang Ani (GMA, Golden Bountiful Harvest).

The value of the grains produced by the terraces only went as high as P50 a kilogram 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 export their indigenous rice and spend their profits buying cheaper rice for their consumption," she said.

President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo said global warming reduced harvests in most rice-producing countries and the high oil prices affected 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, according to Tapat, to address the increasing demand.

She said production in Kalinga, Abra and Apayao, the three provinces producing the biggest volumes of rice in the Cordillera, would increase by 4.8 percent. Environment and terrain, she said, have been the only hurdles in rice production in these provinces. Many farmlands in these provinces are rain-fed, which means their planting and irrigation cycles are attuned to a different season compared to lowland rice paddies, according to Tapat.

But the government is looking closely at the region's indigenous organic varieties because of the opportunities the world demand has opened for these produce. Unoy, a special variety of red rice, was sold for \$5 (P208.40) a kilogram 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 required farmers to revive their ancestral mountain rice farms, said Ifugao Governor Teodoro Baguilat Jr.

He said most of the terraces were abandoned because many young Ifugaos no longer found them economically viable.

Tinawon rice, grown in Ifugao, would take six to seven months to grow before farmers could harvest them, said Tapat.

Consequently, only a few tons of tinawon and unoy reach the US markets.

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