

[Home](#) » [Baguio](#) » [Local News](#)

Cordillera expands heirloom rice exports to US



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By JM Agreda

Monday, September 30, 2013

HEIRLOOM rice varieties from the Cordillera are now going to reach more areas in the United States.

The Department of Agriculture led the ceremonial send-off of some 15 metric tons of organic heirloom rice from the Cordilleras at the Manila International Container Terminal last September 20 as part of the government and private sector's efforts to increase exports of locally and traditionally grown rice.

DA regional director Marilyn Sta. Catalina, who represented Secretary Proceso Alcala in the send-off, expressed the initial export is "a milestone in the government's effort to expand markets for premium varieties and promote the rich cultural heritage attached to it."

Aside from increasing profit for heirloom rice farmers, the director in her speech at the send-off said the export "will also help sustain the status of rice terraces as a world heritage treasure."

The shipment worth P870,000 is composed of 10 tons of "Mina-angan" variety from Banaue and "Hungduan" variety from Ifugao, and five tons are "Ulikan" varieties from Pasil and Lubuagan in Kalinga.

The volume was consolidated by Rice Terraces Farmer's Cooperative in cooperation with Rice Inc. Eighth Wonder, Inc, a non-government organization led by Mary Hensley and based in the US helping market products from the Cordillera's rice terraces.

"More than profit, we are promoting the rich Cordilleran cultural heritage through this export," Sta. Catalina said in her speech.

The CAR director stressed the grains represent the best in the Cordillera region, 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 to the United States this year, bought from 272 farmers from the three provinces.

The remaining volume is currently undergoing organic fumigation at a Philippine Rice Research Institute laboratory in Nueva Ecija, in compliance to strict US sanitary and phytosanitary requisites.

DA has been facilitating RTFC's export to the US through Eight Wonder Inc. since 2005.

To date, shipments of various heirloom varieties to the US – such as Mt. Province's "Mountain Violet" variety, Kalinga's Unoy, "Jekot" and the "Ulikan" red grains and the Ifugao's Tinawon, "fancy rice" and "diket" – totaled 97 tons, including last year's 24.4 tons valued at P1.3 million.

To assist the upland farmers, DA also embarked on a campaign seeking to preserve farming practices in the Cordillera and expand overseas markets for indigenous rice varieties.

These include a P20-million grant awarded to the Ifugao provincial government, allotted to rebuild damaged portions of the Batad rice terraces.

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