

Banaue Rice Terraces gets P1-M fund for rehab

Posted on **April 24, 2017**

THE DEPARTMENT of Agriculture (DA) has rolled out some P1 million for the development and rehabilitation of the Banaue Rice Terraces.

In a Facebook post published over the weekend, Agriculture Secretary Emmanuel F. Pinol said the agency has turned over the fund to Ifugao Governor Pedro G. Mayam-o to start the move to rehabilitate and develop the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) heritage site.

Mr. Pinol said he instructed the local official to “immediately” operationalize the Cordillera Rice Terraces Rehabilitation and Development Council, a body composed of local farmers, nongovernment organizations and local government units, tasked to draft a comprehensive plan to rehabilitate the 2,000-year-old rice terraces.

Considered as one of the Eight Wonders of the World, the rice terraces is a man-made structure carved out of the sides of the Cordillera mountains, mainly planted to certain rice varieties and vegetables which have been upheld by the mountain’s tribes.

These varieties include one called Heirloom rice or ‘Tinawon,’ derived from the Filipino word ‘taon’ which means ‘year’ as these varieties take nearly a year before it matures for harvest.

“Since the planting system has largely been primitive and organic, the yields from the rice terraces are very low and through the years, with the introduction of the more profitable vegetable farming, many of the terraces were abandoned,” Mr. Pinol said in his Facebook post.

Aside from promoting the marketing of the Heirloom rice, the DA, according to Mr. Pinol, will introduce additional livelihood projects, such as backyard dairy production, for families involved in rice farming in the terraces.

All these while the comprehensive rehabilitation plan is being crafted. The draft is expected to be completed “at the earlier possible time.”

“I intend to present the Master Plan to President (Rodrigo R.) Duterte and ask for sufficient funds, even explore the possibility of foreign funding, to bring back the amazing Cordillera Rice Terraces to its old glory, not only to mystify tourists visiting the region but also to enable the local people to benefit from the blessings of the ingenuity of their forefathers,” Mr. Pinol said in the statement.

“The initial task, however, is to rehabilitate the abandoned rice terraces and this will entail a lot of funds and concerted efforts among the stakeholders,” he added.

To recall, the DA exhausted some P30 million in 2011 for the same aim of recovering the UNESCO Heritage site.

“I have always been endlessly fascinated by the Cordillera Rice Terraces because it is a perfect example of the delicate balance of forest conservation through the ‘Muyong’ which is a protected forest area from where the spring waters which flow to the rice terraces come from and people’s desire to produce enough food for their families,” the DA chief said in his post.

The UNESCO included the Banaue Rice Terraces in its list of world heritage sites in 1995.

After six years, the terraces were placed in UNESCO’s list of world heritage sites in danger amid its worsening condition brought about by urbanization and tourists that disrupt the balance in the site’s environment and traditional practices upheld by the resident indigenous people.

The terraces were declared a national treasure in Presidential Decrees 260 and 1505, signed in 1973 and 1978, respectively.

Republic Act No. 10066 of 2010 or the National Cultural Heritage Law likewise provides for its protection and conservation as one of the national cultural heritage sites. -- **Janina C. Lim**

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