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NTA gets new Administrator

NEWLY appointed Administrator of the National Tobacco Administration, Dr. Robert L. Seares, formally took over the rein of the government's regulatory agency that oversees the tobacco industry on February 9 in a simple turnover ceremony held at the NTA Central Office in Quezon City. Seares, a former mayor of his hometown Bangued, Abra, received the agency banner from outgoing Administrator Edgardo D. Zaragoza.

Seares, a medical doctor, was sworn into office by Agriculture Secretary Emmanuel F. Piñol on February 6 at the Department of Agriculture Office in Quezon City. He was officially elected and proclaimed as the new NTA Administrator during a meeting of the NTA Governing Board on February 8.

The turn-over ceremony was attended by the agency's senior officials, central office employees, and branch office managers.

In his message, Administrator Seares urged all of them to continue working together as a team. His first 100 days, he said, will be focused on four things: enhancing the organization, continuing programs and planning more programs, taking care of the farmers and their families, and wise and judicious use of resources.

He expected that with his medical background, he will be facing questions about his ability to run the agency. The public may assume that the 72-year-old doctor was irrevocably committed to the anti-smoking advocacy pushed by World

Health Organization and other anti-tobacco groups.

In his message to local leaf buyers during the annual pre-trading orientation seminar in Bauang, La Union, he explained that being in the medical profession will not stop him to help the tobacco farmers earn a good profit of their produce. His appointment as administrator of the tobacco regulatory agency gave him the full responsibility to help the tobacco growers.

"I want to see to it that the lives of the farmers will improve with the help of the agency, and with the support and cooperation of the buyers, and other stakeholders," he said.

Having worked as a local chief executive, he knows full well that the success of an LGU depends on how big the funds it can spend to implement different projects and livelihood programs for the benefits of its constituents. He considers as an unexpected source of blessings the shares of LGUs from the collection of excise

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Outgoing Administrator Edgardo D. Zaragoza hands over the agency banner to Dr. Robert L. Seares during the turnover ceremony. Dr. Seares is the 11th Administrator of the agency since its creation on July 24, 1987.

P3.5-M calamity aid for curing facilities repair

TOBACCO farmers affected by "Lawin" can soon avail of calamity aid under the P3.5-million financial assistance from NTA to help them recover from the damages, particularly on flue-curing barns and air-curing sheds, caused by the super typhoon that hit Luzon in October last year.

NTA has agreed to provide P2,000 for barn repair to each of the 1,750 affected farmers in tobacco-growing provinces.

The financial assistance, upon the request of the provincial branch offices, will be charged against the remaining Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Fund of the NTA for 2016, pursuant to NTA Governing Board Resolution Nos. 594-2016 and 619-2017.

A total of 1,072 tobacco farmers from Ilocos Norte, Ilocos Sur, Abra and La Union will receive P2.144-million for flue-curing barns, while 678 farmers from Pangasinan, Cagayan, and Isabela will receive P1.356-million for air-curing sheds.

The branch offices in the areas conducted on-farm inspections a few

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Department of Agriculture Secretary Emmanuel F. Piñol (left) administers the oath of office to the new Administrator of NTA, Dr. Robert L. Seares. The new Administrator had his wife Sesy G. Seares and their youngest son Robert Victor Seares Jr., mayor of Dolores, Abra, at the ceremony held at the DA Office in Quezon City on February 6. (Photo courtesy of DA)

A Medical Doctor looks after the welfare of the tobacco farmers

THE tobacco industry is one among the strongest pillars of the Philippine economy – contributing more than P90 billion revenue yearly to the national treasury, which the government uses for its health, education, welfare, economic and infrastructure programs all over the country; earning dollars from tobacco export; and, providing livelihood and sustenance to some three million people, including the more than 800,000 farmers and members of their families. As such, it deserves all the support it can get, to be able to carry out programs in pursuance of sustainable growth, to include enabling the tobacco farmers to produce competitive quality leaves, both locally and in the world market, amidst serious challenges resulting from the implementation of anti-tobacco legislation.

As has already been starting to feel the pinch of said legislation pushed by the pro-health group, it is with understandable apprehension that the stakeholders of the tobacco industry meet the appointment of a medical doctor, Dr. Robert L. Seares, who took his oath to protect human life, as the new Administrator of the NTA, the agency that ensures the interplay of the various stakeholders so that the cigarette/cigar smoker can continue with his habit.

However, he assumed the office committed to look after the welfare of the tobacco farmers. That is exactly what the new Administrator wants to focus on despite the campaign against smoking and the discouragement manifested by the tobacco farmers themselves by shifting to other crops or livelihood endeavors. To quote him, “I will work for the welfare of the tobacco farmers, the backbone of the tobacco industry, as long as the industry needs them.”

Barely two weeks from assuming the reins of the NTA, admittedly in need of a deep insight of the tobacco industry in order to be able to face the challenges ahead, he immediately immersed himself in the operations of the agency, especially as his entry coincided with the start of the tobacco trading season in Region 1 and Abra. This enabled him to meet the Branch Office personnel and tobacco buyers and listen to their concerns which also affect the tobacco farmers.

He stressed, “I want to see to it that the lives of the farmers will improve with the help of the agency, and with the support and cooperation of the buyers, and other stakeholders.”

He looks forward to working closely with the LGUs so that their shares from the excise taxes as provided for under RA 7171 and RA 8240 will be spent for livelihood, agro-industrial and infrastructure projects aimed at enhancing the productivity and advancing the welfare of tobacco farmers and their communities.

He exhorted the leaf buyers to be considerate of the farmers’ interests by not charging usurious rates when giving out loans to the tobacco farmers, fair in grading and weighing the tobacco leaves delivered to them and strict in following trading rules and regulations.

In the thick of implementation of 2016-2017 tobacco season yet, this early, preparation has started for programs and projects for our tobacco farmers for the incoming tobacco season 2017-2018. 🍀

Young lawyer is new Deputy Administrator for Operations

LAWYER Mel John I. Verzosa is the new Deputy Administrator for Operations (DAOP) of the National Tobacco Administration.



The DAOP is the assistant chief executive officer and managing head of Operations which include Farm Development, Agricultural and Industrial Research Development and Regulation, and Field Operations. Also under his office are the operations division of the eight provincial branch offices and extension offices of the agency.

Atty. Verzosa earned his degree Bachelor of Laws from the San Beda College of Law and passed the Bar Examinations in 2012. After passing the bar, he worked as an associate under the litigation department of a reputable law office in Pasig City.

The 32-year-old lawyer has extensive work experience in the public sector. He was the Acting City Administrator of the City Government of Malabon. Before this, he also served as Municipal Administrator of the Local Government of Tagudin, Ilocos Sur. He lives with his family in Barangay Dardarat in Tagudin, his hometown. He is the third eldest of the six children of the current mayor Roque S. Verzosa and wife Evangeline Ingoy-Verzosa. He is married to Nicole Herrera, also a lawyer, who works at the Department of Labor and Employment.

He was elected Chairman of the Sangguniang Kabataan (SK) and served as Sangguniang Panlalawigan Member from 2002-2007, when he was elected Federated SK Chairman of Ilocos Sur.

Atty. Verzosa joined Administrator Robert L. Seares in a series of meetings and consultations with the employees, and the tobacco traders and farmers in Region 1 and Abra. He said that the outcome of these consultations will have an effect on the directions of the new administration which he assured will be for the benefits of industry stakeholders.

He will also look into alternative uses of tobacco plants other than for smoking purposes. “The sin tax law has made it very difficult to encourage tobacco farmers to plant tobacco as they believe this industry is ‘dying,’ and compounding to this ordeal, is the impending ban on public smoking,” he said.

He assured stakeholders that the agency will never stop looking for other alternatives for tobacco farmers who, according to Administrator Seares are the “the backbone of this industry.” 🍀



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Local buyers warned against pole vaulting

NTA cautioned local leaf buyers, particularly the field representatives (FRs), against pole vaulting or the practice of trading outside the usual farmer-buyer contracts.

The agency raised this warning anew during the series of meetings with local buyers in Region 1 and Abra for the annual pre-trading orientation seminar on trading rules and regulations (TRR) held last February 20 to 22.

Maybelen B. Dictaan, head of the Regulation Department, said that the agency has been receiving reports concerning pole vaulting in the past trading seasons of tobacco, in spite of continuous warning, which is a violation of the Tobacco Marketing Agreement the farmers entered into and noncompliance with the TRR for locally grown leaf tobacco.

She said that pole vaulting is one major cause of the reduction of the volume of contracted tobacco by contracting buyers and the difficulty of loan collections. But this can be solved with close monitoring and proper implementation of rules, she said.

During the meeting in Rosales, Pangasinan, tobacco traders raised their concern about pole vaulting. They suspected that the farmer-cooperators were not delivering to them their whole production of tobacco leaves.

To address the problem on pole vaulting, NTA Administrator Robert L. Seares ordered the licensed buyers to police their ranks against pole vaulting, as he urged the extension workers of NTA to see to it that the farmers deliver all the tobacco produced to the company with whom they have production contracts.

The Administrator reiterated the mandate of the agency to impose the rules and its implementation should be fair to all, without discrimination.

NTA and the buyer firms also identified in the said meetings the causes of pole vaulting, such as lack of monitoring and alleged downgrading of tobacco leaves, and agreed to check the practice in the coming trading season.

Atty. Rohbert A. Ambros, Chief Tobacco Production and Regulation Officer, on his presentations on the prohibitions, violations, penalties and systems of procedures in trading, reminded the leaf buyers to comply with

these trading rules, particularly on pole vaulting, indicating a stricter monitoring by the department on erring FRs and traders. Pole vaulting is an offense punishable by imprisonment from 1 to 3 years and a fine of P30,000 to P50,000.

According to Ambros, buying tobacco from farmers and other authorized sellers outside the contracting trading center is allowed only when the buyer has a waiver or certificate of first refusal from the contracting buyer allowing the contracted farmer to sell his or her tobacco to any other NTA-licensed buyer.

Dictaan noted that the branch offices in the past trading seasons had focused

their effort more on the production, not on regulation. She then challenged the buyers and the extension workers to be strict in the implementation of the rules and regulations to curb pole vaulting. "The new leadership means business," she added.

Dictaan appealed to the field representatives to treat their contract growers fairly, and use the proper documents, particularly Certificates of Purchase and Purchase Invoice Vouchers, in buying leaves. She added that if the issues on pole vaulting and other illegal trading practices persist, it will impact on the reputation of the agency. 🌱



Top: NTA Administrator Robert L. Seares appeals to leaf buyers to strictly follow trading rules and regulations to avoid conflict on the trading floor, during a meeting in Candon City. **Bottom:** Regulation Department Manager Maybelen B. Dictaan gives traders in Pangasinan stern warning against pole vaulting.

N. E. Valdez

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taxes on locally manufactured tobacco, pursuant to Republic Act (RA) 7171 and RA 8240, as amended by RA 10351.

He wants to work closely with the LGUs so that they, too, spend their excise tax funds for livelihood, agro-industrial and infrastructure projects

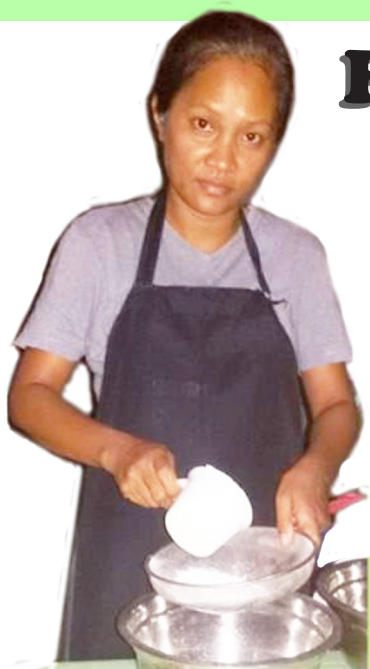
aimed at enhancing the productivity and advancing the welfare of tobacco farmers and their communities.

"LGUs with a bigger share of tobacco are expected to give more for their constituents as they have more funds to spend," he said.

"We have momentum in funding projects with the release of funds from excise tax, and as there is still a big demand for quality tobacco, we have the opportunity and the potential to create meaningful benefits for our tobacco farmers," he said. 🌱

From bedpan to baking pan

by Felisa R. Aurellano



TOBACCO grower Jennelyn B. Argel was just one of the enthusiastic trainees of the Cake, Bread and Pastry Making course conducted by the Farm Technology and Services Department of the National Tobacco Administration. Now she has become a hardworking and successful pastry seller in their place in Brgy. Pila, Cabugao, Ilocos Sur.

In August 2014, NTA-FTSD conducted Cake, Bread and Pastry Making, one of the Livelihood Training Courses offered free for women and children of tobacco growers. Argel joined 113 other trainees from different tobacco-growing municipalities in Ilocos Norte, Ilocos Sur, Abra, La Union, and Pangasinan.

Argel, 43 years old, was a registered nurse and had worked with a private hospital in her earlier days, and then worked as a factory worker in Taiwan. She went back to Cabugao and put up a *sarisari* store with the capital from her earnings abroad and tilled her one-fourth hectare farm lot for tobacco production. She may not be personally attending to the tobacco crops but she hires manpower in her behalf.



Argel, at work, (top photo) and offering some of her baked products to the author (left), Christopher Cabanog of NTA Vigan, and Luzviminda U. Padayao of FTSD.

When this business-minded lady farmer learned of the livelihood training of the agency, she readily applied and was admitted, hoping to get more opportunities to earn additional income in her household.

Argel and other trainees learned to make affordable cakes, waffles, polvoron among others, through the help of their trainer Dr. Lorma Manuel-Valera of MMSU College of Industrial Technology in her class held at the AgriPinoy facility in Nanguneg, Narvacan, Ilocos Sur.

After her training, Argel applied for the Livelihood Seed Capital provided by the agency for those who want to set up their own business. Among the 33 trainees who applied last year, 12, including Argel, were given the livelihood seed capital.

From the training, Argel started cooking *puto* and banana muffin for the school snacks of her niece. "This was noticed by my niece's teacher," she said. After that, she started receiving massive orders to supply the majority of the school children of Pila Elementary School. The teachers preferred these snacks in compliance with the regulation of foodstuff in the school.

She was granted in June 2016 with the livelihood seed capital assistance amounting to P60,000 from NTA. "With the amount, I was able to purchase an oven, sets of mixing bowls, measuring

instruments, cooking pans and several ingredients," she said.

To come up with a good-tasting pastry product, she followed what her trainer kept on reminding them during the class. "*Saan a mabalin ti patsamba iti panagtempla. Rumbeng a 'sakto latta. Hindi pwede ang pwede na,*" she recalled.

She started supplying the snacks of the school children thrice a week. After a month, the demand increased, and her business operations became daily and her market extended to the Pila Day Care Center.

"I also make hotdog waffle, spaghetti, shanghai, and polvoron alternately so that the customers have a variety of food items to choose from," she said.

She continued, "I am now settled with my livelihood and I hope to level up as opportunities keep on coming. The parents of the school children have started requesting me to make cakes for their special occasions. My *puto* is the all-time favorite of special events."

From her earnings, she paid for the expansion of her *sarisari* store. At present, her store stock of basic household needs have tripled from what she had prior to her pastry-cooking livelihood.

"I am also able to repay regularly

the financial assistance extended me on monthly installment," she said.

Where before she used to hold stethoscope, needles, bedpans, and meds in the hospital, now she holds with pride her muffin pans and other baking utensils as these things have brought her and her family a considerable income.

"Tobacco farming and my food business have brought me to a pedestal where my former nursing profession and my work abroad had failed to bring me," she said.

For this, she is very grateful to NTA Vigan Branch officer-in-charge Faustino O. Taal, and some of his staff, particularly Laurence L. Bueno, TPRO I; Tomasito G. Taloza, Agriculturist II; and Gilbert I. Yadao, Sr. TPRO for giving her the opportunity to take part in the life-changing livelihood training program. 🌱

P3.5-M calamity aid for curing facilities repair... from page 1

days after the typhoon to see the extent of damages on the curing barns and air-curing sheds, including its Rice Wet Season Project, tree seedlings for its Renewable Fuelwood Farm Project, and the seedbeds. Their damage report served as bases for coming up with programs that will enable the tobacco farmers recover from other damages caused by

the calamity.

According to Rex Antonio P. Teoxon, Corporate Planning (CorPlan) Department Manager, the assistance will be released, at one time, upon submission of farmers of the following: certification from CorPlan that the affected farmers are included in the Master List of Registered Tobacco

Farmers, photos of the damaged curing barn/shed, certification from their barangay chairman, certification from the local Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council, and certification/verification report by the assisting extension worker of NTA and certified correct by the Chief Agriculturist of the Branch Office. 🌱



ROBERT L. SEARES, M.D.

PROVIDING A NEW APPROACH TO LEADERSHIP

THE new Administrator of the National Tobacco Administration (NTA) Robert Lizardo Seares is a medical doctor from Abra of the Cordillera Administrative Region.

A Medical Doctor

Since finishing Medicine from the Far Eastern University and passing the Medical Board exam in 1969, Dr. Seares has served the Filipino people and now has more than five decades of service to his name in the medical field. This includes seven years as consultant, one year as chief surgeon and three years as Physician at the Dr. Petronilo V. Seares Memorial Hospital in Bangued, Abra. He also worked at Dolores Medicare and Community Hospital in Dolores, Abra (1979 – 1980) and at St. James Hospital in Vigan City (1998 – 2001).

He was called to higher service in 1980 as Municipal Mayor of Bangued and served for six years. Dr. Seares actually comes from a family of renowned leaders in Abra and to this day, the Seareses are known in Abra as excellent leaders that govern communities towards greatness. This trait is what Dr. Seares hopes to bring to NTA and the tobacco farmers.

He is the second eldest of the 10 children of Dr. Petronilo V. Seares, former Governor of Abra (1965–1971) and Eliza B. Lizardo. Dr. Seares is married to Sesy Guzman Seares, a member of the Sangguniang Bayan of Dolores, Abra. They are blessed with four children, namely, Ronald Seares, Michelle Seares-Umali, Archt. Rachele Seares-Bonalba, and Dolores Mayor Robert Victor G. Seares, Jr.

Colleagues who have worked with the good doctor say he is a strong and

dynamic leader. He sets clear objectives and very focused on his responsibilities.

With his lengthy medical background, he will regularly face questions about his ability to run the agency. But Dr. Seares is optimistic about this and does not consider this as a problem, but rather a new approach that the agency needs, especially with the no smoking advocacy slowly gaining ground in the country. After assuming office on February 9, 2017, he took it upon himself to see to it that the lives of the farmers will improve with the help of the agency, and with the support and cooperation of the buyers and other stakeholders. "I will work for the welfare of the tobacco farmers as long as the industry needs them," he emphasized.

According to Dr. Seares, "NTA needs all industry stakeholders, especially the private sector and the LGUs, to help the agency address the issue on quality tobacco production."

Partnering with Stakeholders

During a trip to the tobacco growing provinces in Region 1 and Abra, Dr. Seares observed that a significant portion of lands previously producing tobaccos have evidently been reduced and the farmers have shifted to corn and other crops.

In a meeting with local leaf buyers in Dolores, Abra on February 22, 2017, he exhorted the leaf buyers to be part of the solution, by helping the agency improve the lives of the tobacco growers. He urged them to be considerate of the farmers'

interests by ensuring that the interest rates of their loans are not excessive, and that they be fair with the farmers on proper grading and weighing of their produce, as well as strictly follow the rules and regulations of the trading.

From his experience as Municipal Mayor, he knows that the progress of the municipality depends on the amount of available funds the local government has access to and as such, the Tobacco Excise Tax on locally manufactured Tobacco (pursuant to RA 7171 and RA 8240, as amended by RA 10351), is a big boost to the local government units.

He cites the achievements of the town of Dolores, Abra, currently under the leadership of his youngest son, Robert Victor G. Seares, Jr. The town's share from the tobacco excise tax is small compared to other tobacco-producing LGUs but because it is prudently spent, it has impacted a great deal on the communities leading to various infrastructure and development projects, financial assistance to local growers, and improved capacity of the local government to deliver basic services to their constituents.

Towards a Promising Future

On his first day in Office, he informed the Central Office employees of his plans for the agency: enhancing the organization, continuing beneficial programs and formulating new ones, taking care of the farmers and their

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"I will work for the welfare of the tobacco farmers as long as the industry needs them"



With local officials of Dolores and leaf buyers from Abra; and leaf buyers from Pangasinan (lower photo)

Administrator Seares meets leaf buyers on trading rules

NTA Administrator Robert L. Seares, along with Deputy Administrator for Operations Atty. Mel John I. Verzosa, visited six provincial branches in Region 1 and Abra for the pre-trading Orientation Seminar on Tobacco Trading Rules and Regulations (TRR) for local leaf buyers and field representatives from February 20 to 22.

The annual orientation was spearheaded by a team from the Regulation Department (RD), headed by its Manager Maybelen B. Dictaan, with Division Chiefs Atty. Rohbert A. Ambros and Engr. Alex L. Borje, as lecturers.

This was the first time that the orientation seminar was held in different branch offices, unlike in the past five years where it was held as a one-day event in one venue, at the Candon Branch Office in Candon City.

The top officials and RD team first met with the local leaf buyers and field representatives in Pangasinan and La Union Branches on February 20, Candon and Vigan Branches on February 21, then Ilocos Norte and Abra Branches on February 22.

The six-branch three-day seminar was attended by a total of 182 tobacco traders with the following breakdown per branch: Pangasinan, 27; La Union, 23; Candon, 48; Vigan, 38; Ilocos Norte, 30; and Abra, 16.

The annual orientation seminar is a prerequisite for applications for licenses or permits to buy or redry leaf tobacco, and Certificate of Authority to purchase tobacco to the tobacco traders, trading center operators and field representatives.

Farmers, as backbone of the industry

In all the branch offices, Administrator Seares appealed to the local buyers for their help in giving the farmers the profit they deserve in producing tobacco. He reminded the local buyers to comply with the trading rules and regulations and to be fair with the tobacco farmers in weighing, grading and paying for their produce, to avoid any conflict and misunderstanding on the trading floor.

"Everything should be properly documented, through the Certificate of Purchase or Purchase Invoice Vouchers (PIVs)," he said, adding that this will be an important factor in the computation of tax shares through RA 7171 and RA 8240.

"If you need something to discuss with us or other concerns, feel free to go to my office and we'll talk," he added.

Administrator Seares, in his message to local buyers in Candon City, reiterated the mission of the agency which is to uplift the lives of the tobacco farmers. He considers the tobacco farmers as the backbone of the tobacco industry.

The Administrator reacted to a comment of a trader in Vigan Branch on "survival" for the tobacco industry, saying that this will depend on the tobacco growers. "The farmers must be content in their farming ventures, meaning their effort must be profitable," he explained. He added, "Without the farmers, the industry will not survive."

RD Manager Dictaan discussed the levelling of expectations of the buyers and NTA through change of attitude towards the industry, the commitment and compliance of all stakeholders, including the NTA to perform their obligations under the rules and regulations.

In La Union, Dictaan echoed the rallying slogan of the Duterte Administration against corruption and illegal activities. "Change is coming," she said. "The rules and regulations should not be taken for granted, because the agency is now giving more teeth to its

regulatory functions," she stressed.

In Candon City, Dictaan cited a part of the NTA hymn which goes "*kaayusan ng kalakalan sa industriya, aming buong pusong iingatan*" to emphasize the regulatory function of the agency, and the strict implementation of the trading rules and regulations for orderly and fair trading operations.

In Vigan City, Dictaan noted that the branch offices in the past trading seasons had focused their effort more on the production, not on regulation. "Improper or lack of documentation has been a problem every trading season," she said.

Lectures and open forum

Per slides presented by Dictaan in the different branch offices, there is a notable decrease of tobacco production for the past four years in Region 1, or from 35.9-M kilos in 2013 to 21.8-M kilos in 2016 (acceptances) for Virginia; and from 13.1-M kilos in 2013 to 8-M kilos in 2016 (acceptances) for Burley and Native. While the number of trading centers decreased to only 29 in 2016 (from 39 in 2013), the number of field representatives (FRs) continues to increase for the past four years, or from 153 in 2013 to 297 in 2016.



MEETING WITH THE ADMINISTRATOR

ADMINISTRATOR Seares and Atty. Verzosa took advantage of the three-day seminar to mingle with the staff of the branch offices, and had the chance to know them better and discussed some of their concerns.

Engr. Borje, in his presentation on trading rules and regulations, requirements and proper implementation, emphasized on 4Ps for the effective enforcement of the Trading Rules and Regulations (TRR), namely: Proper Weighing, Proper Grading, Proper Documentation, and Prompt Payment.

Atty. Rohbert A. Ambros discussed on the prohibitions, violations, penalties and systems of procedures in trading.

Atty. Verzosa said that the agency is taking new policy directions, but this will be based on the guidelines to be formulated by the new set of NTA Governing Board. He promised that such directions will be for the benefits of all industry stakeholders.

During the open forum in La Union, a buyer requested for a consideration for another buyer who failed to file an application of certificate of authority (COA) to purchase because of circumstances beyond her control. The deadline for filing of application was on February 15. This was immediately acted upon by Administrator Seares, who announced to the delight of the participants, that the deadline of application for COA for field representatives in this year's trading season was moved to February 28.

The local government of Dolores, Abra, hosted the orientation for the Abra Branch. Mayor Robert Victor G. Seares Jr. welcomed the guests and participants, including the 16 field representatives who are officially registered for the orientation. Also in attendance were the NTA scholars under the Abra Branch.

Mayor Seares, youngest of the four children of Administrator Seares, expressed optimism about the future of agriculture, including tobacco production in the country, because one of the marching orders of President Duterte is to look after the welfare of the farmers. According to the mayor, the share of Dolores from the excise tax of tobacco under RA 7171 has provided funds for different infrastructure and development programs of the municipality.

Issuance of Licenses and Authority

As of February 28, the RD, in compliance with the Rules and Regulations on the trading of locally grown leaf tobacco, issued licenses to 31 trading centers, 15 of them for Virginia type in Ilocos Sur, Ilocos Norte, and La Union, including General Santos City in Mindanao.

The agency also issued Certificate of Authority to Purchase to 221 field representatives, Permit to Purchase to 11 wholesale tobacco dealers, and Permit to Redry to four redrying plants.

Also in compliance with the existing Rules and Regulations on the Exportation and Importation of Unmanufactured/ Manufactured Tobacco, RD has issued 26 Licenses/Authority to Export, 36 Licenses/Authority to Import, four Authority to Transship tobacco products, and 18 Accreditations to Manufacturers. (Neyo E. Valdez) 📷



PANGASINAN BRANCH, Rosales, Pangasinan



LA UNION BRANCH, Bauang, La Union



CANDON BRANCH, Candon City



VIGAN BRANCH, Bantay, Ilocos Sur



ILOCOS NORTE BRANCH//FTSD, Batac City, Ilocos Norte

LGU executives told to give more aid to farmers thru excise tax shares

WITH tobacco-growing municipalities and provinces receiving millions of pesos of funds from excise tax shares of tobacco, NTA Administrator Robert L. Seares appealed to local executives to give more assistance to the tobacco farmers.

During a series of meetings with tobacco traders in Region 1 and Abra in February, the Administrator stressed that tobacco farmers contribute a handsome share to the coffers of their LGUs through Republic Act (RA) 7171.

"So it is right that local officials recognize their endeavor through financial support," he said.

The Administrator, who is a former mayor of Bangued, Abra, reiterated the mission of the agency which is to uplift the lives of the tobacco farmers and he wanted the LGUs to have a big part and be committed to this mission.

In his first day of office, Administrator Seares revealed his plans to work closely with the LGUs in promoting the effective utilization of the funds for the purposes provided by law, to enhance the productivity and advancing the welfare of tobacco farmers and their communities.

He cited the achievements of local government units which have impacted a great deal on the communities leading to various infrastructure and development projects, financial assistance to local growers and improved capacity of the local government to deliver basic services to their constituents.

A total of P10.69 billion were released in 2016 to tobacco-producing LGUs nationwide, out of the 2013 tax collections.

Under RA 7171, LGUs producing Virginia tobacco are entitled to 15 percent of national tax collections. Thirty percent of this share is divided among the beneficiary provinces; 40% to the component cities and municipalities of said provinces (provided that 50% be divided equally among all the municipalities and cities of the beneficiary province and 50% to be divided according to the volume of tobacco production of tobacco-producing cities and municipalities); and 30% to the



Administrator Seares and Deputy Administrator Verzosa listen to a farmer during an on-site dialog with tobacco growers in Salucag, Dolores, Abra.

component cities and municipalities.

For RA 8240, LGUs producing Burley and native tobacco also receive a share of 15 percent of the incremental revenue. Of this share, 10 percent will go to beneficiary provinces and 90 percent to the component cities and municipalities based on the volume of tobacco production.

Per DBM guidelines, the amounts are earmarked for cooperative, livelihood, agro-industrial and infrastructure projects aimed at enhancing the productivity and advancing the welfare of tobacco farmers. The amount shall help improve the capacity of the LGUs to deliver basic services for their constituents.

According to the Administrator, with all the help the LGUs are getting from the tobacco industry, through the support of NTA and leaf buyers, there is always that motivation for the local executives to exert effort to increase the quality and quantity of tobacco in their area.

He wanted to impress in the minds of LGU executives that helping tobacco farmers produce quality tobacco, redound to their benefit.

"Therefore I appeal to the local mayors and governors to work with the agency in the production of quality tobacco," he said.

The Administrator also asked the LGUs to devote more resources to agricultural activities. "They should commit to use the biggest portion of their excise tax fund to agriculture activities, such as provision of farm implements, production assistance, and conduct of livelihood training programs," he said.

"We are all stakeholders of this industry," he stressed, "so we have to help one another, but give our best effort for the farmers, being the backbone of the industry."

The farmers must be content, meaning their effort must be profitable, he explained. Otherwise, he added, they cannot be encouraged to plant the crop.

"Without the farmers, the industry will not survive. As long as we have farmers planting tobacco, we have to protect their interest," he stressed.

The Administrator also assured the mayors and governors that NTA is their partner in helping the farmers and their communities. NTA has its own share of projects, such as the irrigation support project in collaboration with LGUs, production assistance, and livelihood programs that help local tillers and their families. 🌱



ABRA BRANCH, photo taken in Dolores, Abra

PROVIDING A NEW... from page 1

families, and the wise and judicious use of the NTA's resources.

Dr. Seares came on board at this time when significant challenges, such as anti-smoking campaigns and related legal frameworks, are as strong as ever. He echoes however what his predecessors have been saying, that the tobacco industry in the country has a very promising future, that is, if good tobacco quality is sustained.

He said that the LGUs are raking in funds with every release of the tobacco excise tax. "We have to realize this remarkable opportunity and create meaningful benefits for our tobacco farmers. Let us embrace our responsibility in becoming partners for change for the entire nation." (Jason Ryan Celeste / LGU - Dolores, Abra) 🌱

MOST people think of agriculture as soils, crops and livestock, but to Elmerante A. Ginez, agriculture is more than food production. Having worked in the government in all of his employment after college, he considers his job as a licensed agricultural engineer as a public service.

Fulfillment in farm work

As Agriculturist I of NTA Cagayan Branch, he is tasked to bring the government support closer to the people, through various projects and programs of the agency.

He was first assigned as an agriculturist at the Regional Agricultural Engineering Group of the Department of Agriculture in Region 2, then transferred to NTA Cagayan Branch Office in 2008.

This 43-year-old agriculturist said that young Filipinos of today's generation have low regard of farming, and most of them are trying their best to escape from agricultural work because they think that they always get soiled working in the farm and get their skin burnt under the scorching sun.

"They must appreciate the work of a farmer as among the most respectable, because the primary purpose of agriculture is to produce the food we eat," he said. "Everyone is affected by what the farmers are doing."

Engr. Ginez comes from a family of farmers in Quirino, Isabela and he finds agricultural job as fulfilling. He is married to Noemi Bulaitan with whom he has two children.

He admits though that he wanted to take a forestry or an accounting course before he entered college, but it was the love of farming that made him decide to take Bachelor of Science in Agricultural Engineering in Isabela State University in Echague, Isabela. He graduated in 1996 and passed the Agricultural Engineering Licensure Exam in the same year.

He travels from his residence in Tuguegarao City, to reach farmers in



Engr. Ginez, at work in the office and in the farm (right photo)

his assigned areas in the municipalities of Alcala, Gattaran, Lasam and Baggao. He guides, assists, and teaches the tobacco farmers in producing quality tobacco. He sees to it that farmers follow the Package of Technology to achieve the highest grade of the leaves for better profit to the farmer. He also helps his farmers in every way he can.

However, there are times when farmers who could not pay back the production assistance given them appeal that they be given a consideration. Engr. Ginez understands their situation so he accommodates them, but at times he has to explain that his failure to collect may affect his performance target as far as repayment of production assistance is concerned.

He is not merely a fieldworker, as he also works on the computer on paperworks related to his job. The most difficult part of his work is crossing a river 18 times and encountering rugged terrains just to reach far-flung areas, such as those farms in Tanglagan,



Gattaran. He encounters many challenges traveling to the remote areas not only on the condition of the roads but also the people he mingles with. It is more difficult travelling to these areas during inclement weather.

He has been with NTA Cagayan for nine years now, and his diligence and hardwork have earned him recognition. He was awarded Outstanding Extension Worker in 2015 for having his farmer-cooperator win the Outstanding Tobacco Grower of the Year, National Level, for Burley Improved category during Crop Year 2014-2015. Before this, he won the same award for two consecutive years, CY 2011-2012 and CY 2013-2014, for assisting two of his farmers win the provincial level of TGY of the same leaf category.

His advice to his fellow extension workers: "Work hard even if nobody appreciates your work because God is there and He always loves the good things you've done to others." (Neyo E. Valdez) 🌱

Ilocos Norte Branch cites top Rice 2016 collectors

NTA Ilocos Norte Branch awarded certificates of recognition to eight extension workers who have shown outstanding performance in recovering the financial assistance they extended to their farmer cooperators under the Rice 2016 component of the Integrated Farming and Other Income Generating Activities Projects (IFOIGAP).

The certificates were awarded by Ilocos Norte Branch Manager Mario E. Corpuz, assisted by Alexis B. Jamias, Project Coordinator for IFOIGAP-Rice project, during a simple ceremony held at the Branch Training Room in Batac City on February 22.

According to Manager Corpuz, the extension workers were able to

collect and remit the demandable 100% collection from the said project.

The awardees were Engr. Jesusa D. Calano, Tobacco Production and Regulation Officer (TPRO) III; Rommel Calautit, Agriculturist I; and Crisanta D. Agloco, Precilla L. Lagadon, Milagros C. Magcaleng, Filipinas Q. Ganir, Concepcion R. Quiocho, and Rosemarie T. Soriano (all TPRO I).

OIC for Operations Division

Alexis B. Jamias, Supervising Tobacco Production Division Chief, was designated Officer in Charge (OIC) of the Operations Division of Ilocos Norte Branch. He replaced Chief Agriculturist Candelario P. Copruz who retired from service in February. The designation



From left: Branch Manager Mario E. Corpuz, newly designated OIC of Operations Division Alex B. Jamias, and two of the awardees Engr. Jesusa D. Calano and Concepcion R. Quiocho. **D.D. Pagdilao**

effective February 3, 2017 was signed by outgoing Administrator Edgardo D. Zaragoza, upon the recommendation of Branch Manager Mario E. Corpuz. 🌱

-- Divina D. Pagdilao

Ilocos Norte Branch takes NTRM elimination seriously

by Divina D. Pagdilao



Tobacco farmers wrap tobacco seedlings with flour sacks when they transport them from the seedbed to the planting area.

THE total elimination of NTRMs (non-tobacco related materials) in cured tobacco is a major concern of extension workers who are assisting tobacco farmers in tobacco production.

As stated in the Manual for Tobacco Production 2016 published by the National Tobacco Administration (NTA), it is important to address this issue, because the presence of NTRMs may jeopardize the integrity and quality of the tobacco.

NTRMs are anything that are NOT tobacco and tobacco must be 100% free from these contaminants.

Thus, seminars conducted by the NTA Ilocos Norte Branch and other departments of the agency, orientation seminars of Buyer Firms, and reading materials on tobacco production always include the topic on how to eliminate NTRMs in tobacco.

The extension workers also conduct regular visits to the farmers and their farms as a follow-up activity on the topics discussed during these meetings and seminars.

“The campaign for NTRM-free tobacco should cover the whole

production process, from seedling handling to post-harvest and trading,” Branch Manager Mario E. Corpuz said in one of these seminars last year.

“Clean your workplace,” is an oft-repeated reminder to tobacco growers at the start of tobacco season.

During the growing period, the field should be free from synthetic materials (Category 1A) like styrofoams, nylon strings/netting, rubber, plastics, leathers, and cigarette butts. Aside from the synthetic materials, other forms of NTRM are natural, artificial and organic materials, such as tobacco parts (suckers, stems and stalks), grass/weeds, wood/bamboo chips, paper, insects, bird feather, food/fruit residues, sand/pebbles, stringing/packaging materials from abaca, maguey, jute or cotton.

Farmers in Ilocos Norte are becoming responsive and cooperative in this endeavor. With the frequent visits of the branch extension workers and the

motivation of the senior staff headed by Manager Corpuz, weeding of the dikes in tobacco areas is now more seriously done to minimize growth of weeds. Reminders to pick up snack wrappers, bottles and other unwanted materials which were left unattended in the tobacco farms are stressed during the frequent visitation by the extension workers.

The Branch Office also keeps on reminding the farmers to use cheesecloth or jute sacks and other non-fibrous, non-treated biodegradable materials as leaf wraps during harvesting, hauling, and transport. Woven plastic sacks as leaf wrap should not be used during hauling and transport of leaves.

Farmers are also advised to have a clean working area during sorting, sticking, poling, and baling of tobacco. Only buri mat, bamboo slats, C-48 cartons, cheese cloth and jute sacks can be used as matting during sticking, stripping, sorting, and baling.

Delivery of produce without NTRMs is one of the guidelines of Good Agricultural Practices (GAP). These GAP guidelines have been emphasized to the tobacco farmers during the briefing on the Tobacco Contract Growing System before the start of the tobacco season.

And during trading, tobacco buyers are very strict on NTRMs. Tobacco leaves that were already graded and classified can still be subjected to rigid NTRM test.

In previous years, some farmers whose products were caught with NTRM, were obliged to clean their tobacco within the premises of the buyer firms before these will be accepted or bought.

Lastly, absence of NTRMs in tobacco leaves is also one of the criteria of the Tobacco Grower of the Year contest. The TGY evaluators are strict on this, because after all, the purpose of the contest is to encourage the farmers to produce quality tobacco. 🌱



(L-R) Faustino O. Taal (OIC, Vigan), Engr. Cesar G. Sambrana (Manager, Pangasinan), Mario E. Corpuz (Manager, Ilocos Norte), Dr. Roberto R. Bonoan (Manager, Industrial Research Department), Imelda N. Riñen (OIC, FTSD), Esmeralda G. Valera (Manager, Abra), Estrella G. De Peralta (Manager, Candon), Emma Beth B. Fantastico (Chief Agriculturist, La Union), Dr. Corazon R. Riazonda (Manager, Cagayan), Herman C. Torres (Manager, Isabela), and Vivien F. Ferarez, Supply Officer II.

GPS for geo-tagging

THE National Tobacco Administration distributed the initial 13 units of Global Positioning System (GPS) Garmin Oregon 650 model to the branch offices during the Agency Planning and Budget Conference at NTA Central Office in Quezon City last February 3. The branch managers or their representatives received the unit from Vivien F. Ferarez, Supply Officer II.

The GPS units are helpful in geo-tagging of project sites of the agency and soil mapping procedures and having the photos show up particular location maps.

Before the distribution of the units, Carlito Gallardo of GPS equipment supplier De Leon Import Export Corporation, gave a brief orientation to the officials on the proper use and installation of the unit. 🌱

Combine Harvester a boon to rice production

by Engr. Potenciano H. Apilado

DURING harvesting of rice, grains are wasted due to lack of manpower and the occurrence of calamities, like typhoon, which is very disappointing. Farmers affected by such situation often turn to the government, local or national level, for assistance. But, if ever assistance were provided, these do not come immediately as expected. Life then turns difficult for the farmers due to production losses.

It is true that natural calamities cannot be prevented from occurring but its effect can be avoided or reduced if enough manpower is available. It is observed that most harvestable rice remain unharvested because workers prefer jobs in road constructions, thereby neglecting the crop until calamities like typhoon comes.

Among the possible means of solving the problem of lack of manpower is the utilization of a mechanized method of harvesting. The use of mechanized

harvester called Combine Harvester should be considered. The model DC-70 with 70hp diesel engine at speed of 1.85 meter/second, could harvest rice grains faster and reduce harvesting expenses as it requires minimal work force. A seven-hour operation of the machine could harvest 225 cavans at 55 kilos per cavan (fresh weight).

Farmers involved in the NTA Rice Project could find the Combine Harvester beneficial, if only these machines are

provided to them. Chances for repayment of their production loans are much higher since delay in harvesting due to lack of manpower is minimized.

The drawbacks in the use of these machines include the high cost of the unit and the displacement of workers. However, the benefits derived are greater than its negative effects. It is like a bitter pill that is difficult to swallow but a good cure of the disease.

The government through its agencies such as the Department of Agriculture and NTA could be of great help in the procurement of the Combine Harvester for the farmers. If only the local government, the recipients of tobacco excise tax and tobacco fund, could spare some amount to purchase the said machine, then the tobacco-rice farmers would find farming really beneficial and very rewarding. They will also feel the benefits and appreciate the relevance of the laws that give them benefits through excise tax of locally manufactured tobacco (Republic Act Nos. 7171 and 8240) and the Tobacco Fund under RA 4155. 🌱



Farmer Isagani Manzano hired DC-70 Combine Harvester to harvest rice in his farm in Sengngat, Sudipen, La Union.

NTA La Union

Top officials hold agency plan and budget meeting

NTA conducted an Agency Plan and Budget Conference for its managers and senior officers from the branch offices, department managers, project officers and other focal persons for planning to discuss and agree on the NTA CY 2018 Plan and Budget Plan/Priorities.

The one-day meeting, facilitated by Corporate Planning (CorPlan) Department Manager Rex Antonio P. Teoxon and staff, was held at the NTA Central Office Training Room in Quezon City last February 3.

Teoxon discussed the CY 2018 Plan and Budget Priorities of the agency in relation to the plans and budget from 2017, and various requirements.

He reminded the participants that under the current Administration, the validity of the allocated budget, or the Special Account in the General Fund, is only one year. "There will no longer be forwarding of the unused fund to the succeeding year," he said.

Fortuna C. Benosa, Division Chief III of CorPlan, presented the plan and budget execution of CY 2017 (Agency Corporate Operating Budget). She said that the projects subsidized by the government are required to be posted on the = websites of the agencies that

implement them.

Priscilla S. Esguerra, Management Information System Division Chief, presented the CY 2017 Performance Agreement Negotiation with the Governance Commission for GOCCs (GCG), including Performance Accomplishment and 2017 Targets.

According to Esguerra, NTA has scored more than 90% for the past three years (2013-2015) in the Performance Scorecard of the GCG, which qualified the employees for performance bonus. "The NTA score for 2016 is still undergoing evaluation," she said.

Teoxon expected that the agency will continue to score high in the parameters set by GCG, such as Social Impact (or sustained viable tobacco industry), Customers/Stakeholders, Internal Process, Learning and Growth, and Financial Stewardship.

Atty. Everin F. Molina, outgoing Deputy Administrator for Support

Services, urged the officers to have an extensive assessment of the plans made for the past years, and assess the different programs and projects implemented and their impact on the tobacco farmers.

The meeting was a continuation of the Strategic Planning Workshop by the same participants held at the NTA Central Office in Quezon City last December.

Discussions centered on the targets of the branch offices for the average yield per hectare and the average net income of farmers per hectare. Last cropping season, the average yield of farmers per hectare was 2,371 kilos and the average farmer's income per hectare was P67,207.

After the workshop, the branch and department managers completed the required data for the Medium-Term Plan and Roadmap and Agency Plan and Budget Proposal for 2018. 🌱

-- Perla C. Manzon

Tuguegarao tobacco growers receive aid

TUGUEGARAO Mayor Jefferson P. Soriano handed out financial assistance to some 557 registered tobacco farmers in the city. The distribution was held during a meeting of the members of the Tuguegarao Tobacco Producers Cooperative with local officials, held at Gosi Norte, Brgy. Hall, Tuguegarao City last January 9.

Also present during the awarding of checks were NTA Cagayan headed by Branch Manager Dr. Corazon R. Riazonda, the barangay officials of Gosi Norte, and other local officials of Tuguegarao City.

According to Manager Riazonda, the fund for the financial assistance came from the town's share of the 2013 excise tax collection of the national government for producers of native and Burley tobacco pursuant to Republic Act (RA) 8240, as amended by RA 10351.

Tuguegarao received from said excise tax a total of P7.629-million, released in 2016. According to Mayor Soriano, the fund will be used for various infrastructure projects and assistance programs that benefit the farmers, such as the distribution of tractor units and production loan for qualified farmers.

For the current crop year 2016-2017, there are 40 farmer-cooperators in Tuguegarao, representing a total of 15.91 hectares of tobacco farms in five barangays of the city. (Gilbert A. Taguam)



Lilia Abellanosa (left), Agriculturist II, of Tuguegarao City assists a farmer grower as he signs his name to the list of beneficiaries of financial assistance as Mayor Soriano (center) looks on. With the mayor are (from left) Vice Mayor Bienvenido De Guzman, City Councilor Danny Baccay, Branch Manager Dr. Corazon R. Riazonda, and City Agriculturist Dr. Evangeline Calubaquib.

"Oras ni Mannalon ti Tabako" starts broadcast in Region 2

THE "Oras ni Mannalon iti Tabako" (OMT) Radio Program of NTA started its weekly broadcast on January 24, at the DWDA 105.3 MHZ FM Radyo Pangkaunlaran in Tuguegarao City.

OMT Cagayan, anchored by Gilbert A. Taguam, Chief Agriculturist of NTA Cagayan, is aired every Tuesday from 4:00 to 5:00 p.m..

DWDA, the educational radio station of the Department of Agriculture, Regional Field Office No. 02 (DA-RFO 02) launched last November 2016, offered the time slot to NTA Cagayan Branch free of charge.

The radio program in Cagayan branch office was launched in 1993, and aired at the defunct DZTG. The program, however, was terminated in 1998 due to lack of funds. OMT for Cagayan found a new home at DWPE "Radio ng Bayan" but still it did not go far because of

financial constraints.

"OMT returned to regular broadcast, thanks to the accommodation of DA Region 2 headed by Dir. Lucrecio Alviar, at the DWDA "Radio Kaunlaran" of DA in Tuguegarao City," Cagayan Branch Manager Dr. Corazon R. Riazonda said.

This is the first broadcast of OMT Cagayan since 1998.

The OMT radio program, one of the components of the NTA's Communication Support Program, is aired during the tobacco season every year.

The interaction with the farmers through the broadcast is a big help in upgrading their knowledge and



competencies in quality production.

OMT is also being aired weekly at DZVV Vigan (Saturday, 12:30 to 1:00 p.m.), DZTP-Candon (Monday, 12:00 to 12:30 p.m.), DZPA Abra (Sunday, 7:00 to 7:15 p.m.); and twice monthly at DZVR Laoag (Saturday, 12:30 to 1:00 p.m.), DZSO La Union (Saturday, 12:30 to 1:00 p.m.), and DZRD Dagupan (Friday, 11:30 to 12:00 noon).



AGRICULTURE Secretary Emmanuel A. Piñol with the other Members of the NTA Governing Board, flash President Rodrigo Duterte's trademark fist gesture (L-R: Dir. Pedro J. Mendiola Jr., Dir. Rodolfo F. Salanga, NTA Administrator and Vice-Chairman Robert L. Seares, Sec. Piñol, and newly appointed Directors Wilfredo C. Martinez and Teofilo R. Quintal). Secretary Piñol, as Chairman of the Board, presided the first Committee Meeting of the Board, held at the DA Office in Quezon City on February 27. Other Member of the Board, not in attendance, is newly appointed Director Nestor C. Casela. Also present during the board meeting was Board Secretary-designate Atty. Rohbert A. Ambros.

Jo Reddish Barriga