



# PHILIPPINE TOBACCO NEWS

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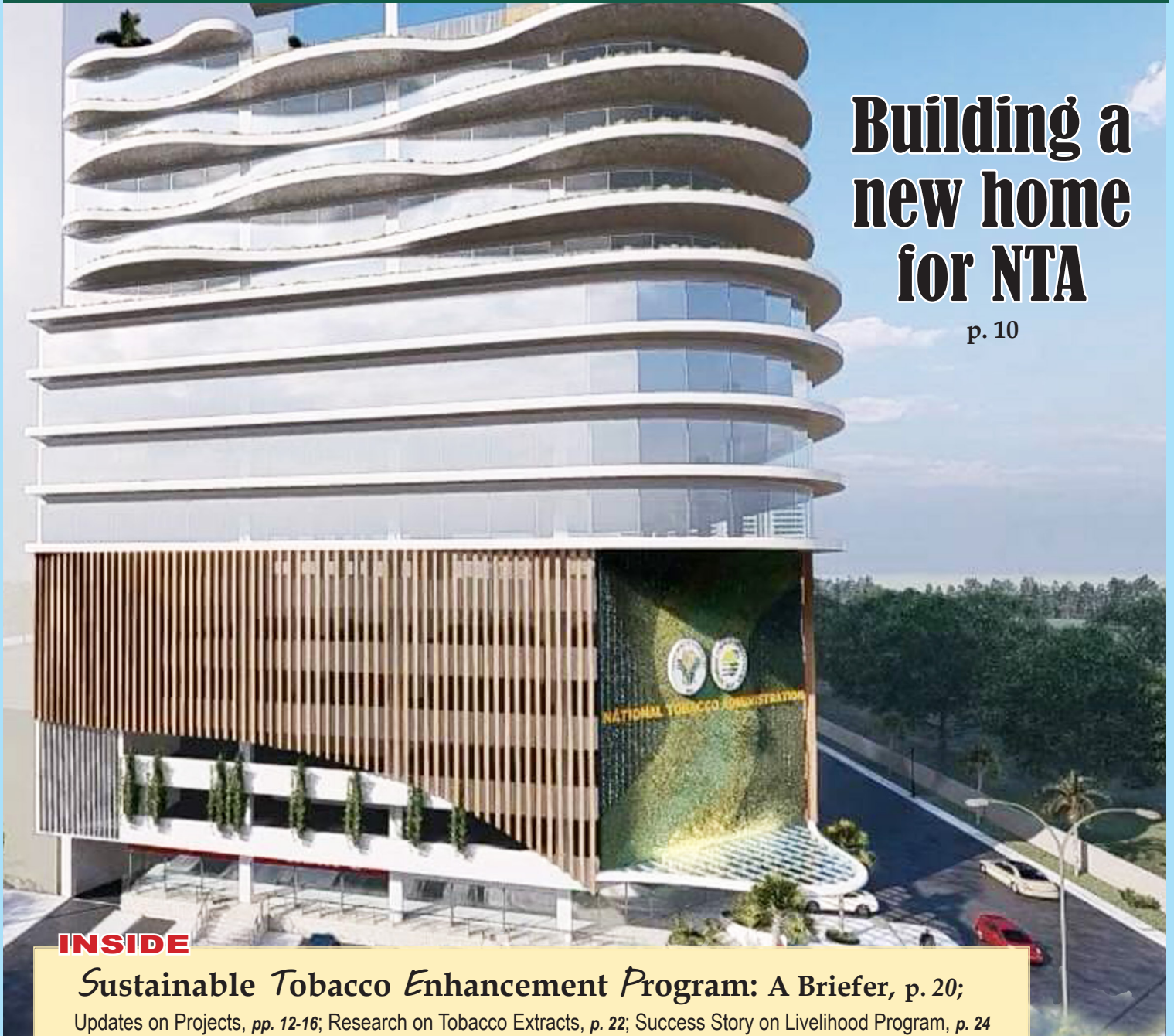
A QUARTERLY PUBLICATION OF THE NATIONAL TOBACCO ADMINISTRATION

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April - June 2021

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## **ROBERT VICTOR G. SEARES JR.** *Administrator/CEO*

*On his First Year Anniversary as Administrator/CEO of NTA, June 22, 2021*

To the industry stakeholders and my NTA family:

When on this same day a year ago I accepted the challenge to lead the National Tobacco Administration as its Administrator and Chief Executive Officer, I was full of pride to take over the agency that my father, the late NTA Administrator Dr. Robert L. Seares, had served with so much dedication and laudable accomplishments.

The agency's mandate to improve the lives of our farmers and the industry's multi-billion contribution in excise taxes to the national government also provided me the right motivation and inspiration to preside over this agency amidst critical challenges from the deadly COVID-19 pandemic.

The industry roadmap which was initiated during my father's term has given me the task not only to set up the directions of the agency for the next five years, but also to institute reforms that will sustain the industry, along with its contribution to the national economy.

I have been inspired to work with our managers and industry leaders who have solid grasp of the realities of our tobacco industry as well as clear vision about where it should go. This was manifested during the formulation of the Sustainable Tobacco Enhancement Program (STEP), the five-year development program that contains the short- and long-term strategies to keep the Philippine tobacco industry sustainable.

NTA has aligned its roadmap with the eight paradigms in agriculture by Secretary William D. Dar. We continue working with the Department of Agriculture under its new One-DA Reform Agenda, bannered by the 18 Key Strategies, which include farm clustering, diversification, and farm mechanization that are highlighted in our industry roadmap.

We have improved our operations and program implementation to become more responsive to existing and emerging industry issues, especially under the "new normal." With our accomplishments in providing financial and facility assistance and other interventions to increase farmers' income and productivity, we continue ensuring that every tobacco grower should enjoy the fruits of his or her labor.

Finally I am very proud of the performance of the men and women of NTA during the past year and the way they rise to the challenge even in the face of adversity.

To our staff and the rest of our industry stakeholders we dedicate this new tagline for the NTA for the coming years: "*Natatangi at Tapat na Adhikain.*" This focuses primarily on excellent service and good governance in pursuing major programs and activities and pave the way for sustainable tobacco industry.

With professionalism, dedication, and courage of our staff, driven by the new tagline, I can really say our road ahead is not an insurmountable one.

*Maraming salamat!*



**One year in office.** NTA Administrator/CEO Robert Victor G. Seares Jr. attends his seventh Regular Meeting of the NTA Governing Board on June 29, or exactly a year after he was elected by the same Board as Administrator and Vice Chairman. Among the agenda in the meeting were the approval of the P1.3 Billion NTA Agency Plan and Budget for CY 2022; improvement on the documentation, reporting, and certification of tobacco production of local government units; and confirmation of promotional/original appointments to vacant plantilla positions. The meeting was presided via virtual teleconferencing by DA Secretary and Board Chairman William D. Dar. (Arman Anga-angan)

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## EDITORIAL

### What the industry needs now

**L**ONG before the coronavirus pandemic hit the country, the plan has already been set to utilize the Tobacco Fund to modernize and industrialize the tobacco industry as NTA aims to improve yield and revenue of tobacco growers.

The Tobacco Fund, credited to the NTA's Special Account under the General Fund (SAGF) created under Republic Act No. 4155, has reached P83.6 billion by the end of 2020. That fund, just to state the obvious, came from tobacco production in the country.

NTA has been receiving a portion of the fund, or an average of about P430 million annually for the past three years, for its operational expenses and capital outlay for its tobacco contract growing projects and curing barn assistance.

The agency is eyeing to spend P26.7 billion of the fund to finance projects under its five-year Sustainable Tobacco Enhancement Program (STEP).

Block Farming, a centerpiece program under the roadmap, will require P5 billion annually for farm mechanization, seed distribution, credit facilities, and skills development of tobacco growers. The rest of the budget will finance the programs under the core functions of the agency--Technology Assistance, Extension and Production Support Services; Industrial Research, Regulatory Services, and Institutional Development.

To get the program done, the agency needs leveraging of the abundant resources from the tobacco industry, which generates an average of P106 billion annual revenue from the collection of tobacco excise taxes. This, in fact, is not a request for budget, it will just be asking from the Department of Budget and Management to give back what is due or what is earned by the tobacco industry for the benefit of the tobacco growers and their communities.

The agency also targets to utilize the Tobacco Fund for the construction of a new Central Office building—the price tag is P1.275 billion—to replace the old, time-worn office building in Quezon City. The design and engineering planning work have been underway before the pandemic. The construction of the 15-story office building with rentable commercial facilities, including parking areas, is not inexpensive, but it is a reasonable (as income-generating facility) and attractive goal (better services).

The STEP and the new office building were initiated during the time in the agency of the late Administrator Dr. Robert L. Seares. The vision and optimism of Dr. Seares for a better home for the employees and higher yield and income for the farmers actually jumpstarted the tasks in a hopeful way.

Administrator/CEO Robert Victor G. Seares Jr., who succeeded his father, believes the twin projects are worth pursuing even with their higher costs. These are big investments, and he knows that the Tobacco Fund has enough money available to fund the projects.

We applaud the current leadership for their can-do attitude toward development and transformation of the tobacco industry. The Tobacco Fund and this level of effort of our leaders are just what the industry needs now for the sustainability of the industry and a better future for our farmers and the government workers that assist them. ■

#### From the Editor

### *The reason you've noticed changes*

YOU have noticed some changes we made to our publication **The Philippine Tobacco News**—it now has a magazine format, and a quarterly release, unlike the tabloid type and bi-monthly release in the previous years. Since its maiden issue in the 1980s under the Philippine Virginia Tobacco Administration and its merger with other tobacco agencies and transition to NTA, its revival in 2010, and the succeeding issues thereafter, the size has been the same—a regular-sized paper or an A4 (folded size).

As a magazine, we came up with more in-depth articles on various projects of the agency, more success stories from the tobacco growers, research and technology updates, and some personal essays. These information, unlike news articles, do not get stale after a year or longer than that. Our coverage for events and activities in the industry and our agency, a staple feature in newsletters, is now being posted on our official Facebook page and website, and on social media accounts of our Branch Offices. Such coverage is easily accessible by our stakeholders with the click on the mouse or a tap on our mobile phone keypads.

As a magazine, you don't attempt to it throw away like a newspaper and spend the rest of its life in an archive stack. Rather, the magazine will remain in the glasstop center table of your offices or racks in your reception area, so that the information can be read and reread. Or you can keep it in your file as a ready reference about anything to do with the industry or the regulatory agency or the people in them. That's why we retain the glossy paper for longer shelf life.

I welcome your comments or your feedbacks on these changes. -- **Neyo E. Valdez**

## Alternative work setup adopted beginning May 17

NTA has adopted new alternative work arrangement (AWA) for onsite reporting, per Memorandum No. 049-2021 signed by Administrator/CEO Robert Victor G. Seares Jr. on May 6.

This is consistent with the Civil Service Commission (CSC) amended guidelines, per CSC Resolution No. 200912 promulgated on 14 October 2020, on AWA in government offices to align with the community quarantine rules issued by the Inter-Agency Task Force on the Management of Emerging Infectious Diseases (IATF).

The AWA requires NTA employees to report to the office Monday to Thursday, except holidays, for two alternate weeks, with Friday being a work-from-home (WFH) for all employees to comply with the minimum “8 hours per day, 8 days per month.”

At all times, every department or office is required to maintain a minimum of 50% work complement per week,

subject to adjustments when necessary.

Senior citizens, persons with disability, and those with immunodeficiency and respiratory or lung-related diseases who are not fit to work shall be on full WFH setup, subject to submission of a medical certificate issued by Dr. Salter Joseph B. Elizalde, NTA resident Medical Health Officer.

The AWA was effective May 17, but the implementation was suspended due to the requirement of RT-PCR swab tests for employees returning to work, in coordination with the testing center at the National Kidney and Transplant Institute (NKTI). The suspension was lifted on June 14, per Memorandum No. 056-2021 dated June 6.

In the latest memorandum, returning employees are now required to present their negative RT-PCR test for COVID-19 and proof of vaccination (either for 1st and 2nd dose) ■

## Sambrana named OIC for Operations

ADMINISTRATOR/CEO Robert Victor G. Seares Jr. has designated Engr. Cesario G. Sambrana as the officer-in-charge of the Office of the Deputy Administrator for Operations, per Special Order No. 0141 s. 2021 dated April 7, 2021.

Sambrana, the agency’s focal person for its Tobacco Farm Mechanization Program, will lead the Operations Group in concurrent capacity as Branch Manager of NTA Pangasinan. He replaced Dr. Roberto R. Bonoan who died of illness on March 17.

The eight Branch Offices, the Farm Technology and Services Department (FTSD), the Industrial Research Department, and the Regulation Department report directly to the DAOP Office.

He also exercises general supervision over the implementation of the Kadiwa ni Ani at Kita and the Tobacco Dust Production Plant, including the Kahuyang Pangkabuhayan at Pangkalikasan (KPP).

Sambrana is a licensed Agricultural Engineer, with a Master’s degree in Development Administration from Don Mariano Marcos Memorial State University in Agoo, La Union. He has been the Branch Manager of NTA Pangasinan since 2000, and was designated last year as manager in-charge of NTA Candon.

He has organized farmers’ dialogue and consultative meetings with industry stakeholders on the Sustainable Tobacco Enhancement Program (STEP), and other flagship programs of the agency. ■





**QC Protektodo.** The second batch of Central Office employees show their vaccination cards during their first job at the vaccination drive of the City Government of Quezon City, held at the City Hall on May 30.

## NTA steps up staff vaccination

NTA employees of Central Office in Quezon City got their first dose of the COVID-19 vaccine under the QC Protektodo vaccination drives of the city government of Quezon City.

The employees in the first batch, who were included by the Department of Agriculture as among the food security front liners, received their first dose of AztraZeneca vaccine at the vaccination site hosted by the DA at the Bureau of Soils and Water Management (BSWM) building in Visayas Avenue on May 21.

The second batch, under the vaccine priority list, A2 and A3, had their first dose of the same vaccine at the Covered Path of the Quezon City Hall Compound on May 30.

According to NTA Administrator/CEO Robert Victor G. Seares Jr., more batches of staff in the Central Office also received the vaccine in various vaccination centers in the following weeks.

“We are very thankful to the city government and Mayor Joy Belmonte for the COVID-19 vaccines now being rolled out at a rapid pace for the residents and workers in the city,” Administrator Seares said.

He announced that the agency has an ongoing coordination with the local government units and partners from the private sector for vaccination drive of employees at the Branch Offices.

“We are confident that with collective efforts, NTA will able to achieve the target of having all the staff fully

inoculated, safe and healthy, before they resume their regular on-site work schedules,” he said.

He added that the current pace of the vaccination roll-out is a proof of the relentless effort of President Rodrigo Duterte and his government to bring this pandemic under control.

“NTA fully supports the government and all efforts from various sectors that bring us to the goal of keeping the population safe and getting our economy back on track,” he said.

Administrator Seares also signed Memorandum No. 054-2021 dated June 3, 2021, setting up additional guidelines for vaccinated employees for on-site reporting.

In said memo, all vaccinated employees, either for the first or second dose or whether fully vaccinated are no longer allowed to report to work with 14 days from date of vaccination, where they shall be on strict home quarantine or isolation. However, they may be allowed to adopt work-from-home (WFH) arrangements with this period.

After the lapse of 14-day period, the vaccinated employees shall be required to undergo confirmatory RT-PCR swab testing.

Only those with negative results may be allowed to report onsite, while those with positive results are advised to continue home quarantine or isolation while adopting WFH arrangements. ■



## Robert Victor G. Seares Jr.

BS Botany, Batch 2002

- NTA Administrator, National Tobacco Administration
- Former Mayor of Dolores Abra



**Distinguished Alumni  
in the Field of Public Service and Governance**

# Administrator Seares receives award for public service and governance

ADMINISTRATOR/CEO Robert Victor G. Seares Jr. is an awardee of the Distinguished Alumni Award in the Field of Public Service and Governance by the University of Sto. Tomas (UST) Faculty of Pharmacy and UST Faculty of Pharmacy Alumni Association & Scholarship Foundation, Inc.

Administrator Seares, a graduate of BS Botany (class 2002), received the citation during the virtual awarding of 150 distinguished alumni, held on May 29.

The UST Faculty of Pharmacy recognized the achievements of the Administrator in supporting and improving the systems of health services and educational developments of the local communities as a former local executive; and in implementing programs for a progressive and sustainable tobacco industry as the current highest official of the regulatory agency.

In his nine years (2010-2019) as mayor of Dolores, Abra, he transformed the 5th class municipality into one of the most progressive towns in the Cordillera Administrative Region and a consistent DILG Seal of Good Governance Awardee (2016-2020). Among the awards he received as local official was the Most Outstanding Mayor Award for 2013 by the Superbrand Marketing International, Inc. (SMI), the only international award-giving body in Marketing/Branding in the Philippines that identifies excellence in governance and honoring outstanding individuals in the field of politics.

The Distinguished Alumni Award is the highest honor bestowed upon the graduates of the Faculty of Pharmacy who have attained distinction in professional achievements and have made substantial contributions to the society. ■

## Project Manager, 2 division heads retire from service

HERMOGENES A. Galvez, Project Manager of NTA Tobacco Dust Processing Plant, retired after 42 years of government service. It was an optional retirement as he will turn 65 on April 19 next year.

NTA La Union prepared a simple program for his retirement held at the branch office in Bauang, La Union on June 30. Galvez was the Chief Agriculturist of the La Union Branch before he was appointed in 2015 to the highest position at the TDPP in Sto. Tomas, La Union.

In 2019, he was designated Overall Coordinator for the Kahuyang Pangkabuhayan at Pangkalikasan (KPP) Project, the agency's flagship program under the

Renewable Fuelwood Fuel Farm Program.

Two division heads joined Galvez in the list of retirees from January to June 2021. They were Priscilla S. Esguerra, head of the Management Information System, Corporate Planning Department, who reached the mandatory retirement age of 65 on March 12, and Cecilio A. Cabigan, head of the Product Development Division of the Industrial Research Department (IRD), who opted to retire on January 1.

Other retirees in the same period were: *Mandatory* – Victor L. Salvador, Tobacco Production and Regulation Officer (TPRO) I, NTA Isabela, March 18; Crisanto A. Ibbay, Agriculturist

I, NTA Vigan, May 21; Diosdado L. Maduli, Supervising TPRO, NTA Vigan, June 20; *Optional* – Roberto F. Pedro, Senior TPRO, NTA Cagayan, January 31; Ramon L. Fernandez, Market Specialist II, IRD, March 24; Timeteo C. Dorol Jr., Agriculturist I, NTA Isabela, April 21; Patricia A. Inocentes, Community Development Officer III, Farm Technology and Services Department, May 17; Milagros C. Magcaleng, TPRO I, NTA Ilocos Norte, June 30; Emelda L. Manzananas, Agriculturist I, NTA Ilocos Norte, June 30; and Juanito S. Urulaza, June 30; Reynaldo A. Pugrad, June 30; and Laurence R. Bueno, June 30, all TPRO I of NTA Vigan. ■

# Merit Promotion, Selection Board starts virtual interview of applicants

THE NTA Human Resource Merit Promotion and Selection Board (HRMPSB) approved on May 19 the revised guidelines on the virtual interview of applicants for appointment and promotion to various vacant positions in the Central Office and Branch Offices.

The meeting was hosted by the NTA Administrative Department headed by Perla C. Manzon, who presided the online meeting as HRMPSB chair.

Other members of the HRMPSB are Dinah E. Pichay, Manager of Internal Audit Service, vice-chairperson, as representative of the appointing authority; Ophelia T. Gonzales, HRMO IV, who is directly responsible for recruitment, selection and placement; Neyo E. Valdez, PRO V, who represents the NTA Employees Association, for second level positions; and Carmelita V. Albano, Senior Bookkeeper, for first level positions.

In the meeting, Deputy Administrator for Support Services Benedicto M. Savellano, who exercises oversight over the HRMPSB, directed the members to finalize schedule of the first batch of applicants before the first virtual interview.

The agency approved last year the hiring and promotion procedures under the new normal condition using virtual platform.

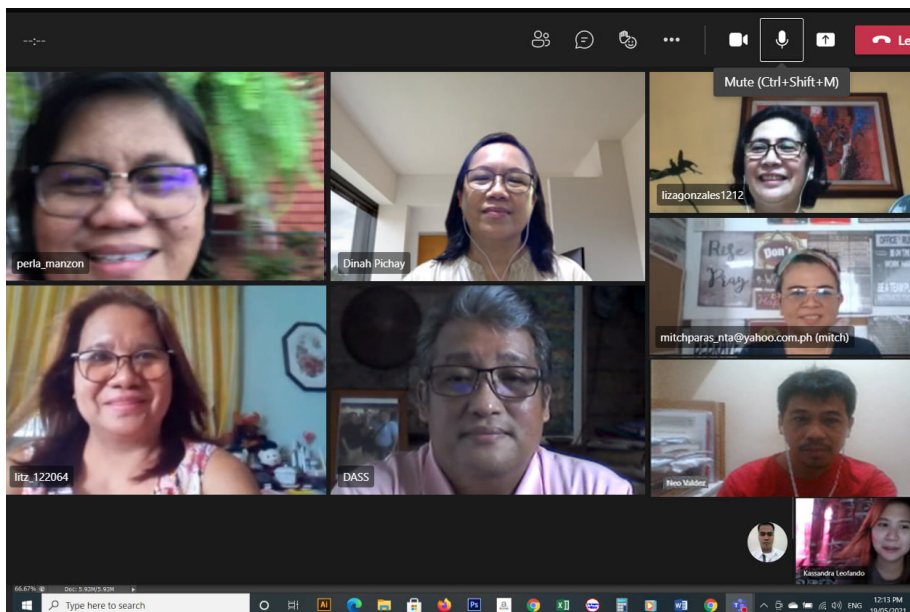
Administrator/CEO Robert Victor G. Seares during a recent ManCom meeting has instructed the Administrative Department to accelerate the filling-up of vacant plantilla positions to enhance manpower capability of the agency for its projects under the Sustainable Tobacco Enhancement Program.

On May 17, the HRMPSB Secretariat hosted a technical dry run for the upcoming interview of applicant, to assess technical capability of applicants from the branch offices and remote location of WFH (work-from-home) areas.

Secretariat members Michelle P. Nacpil, HRMO II; Jayson I. Gannaban, AV Technician II; and Cassandra M. Leofando, Secretary of DASS Office discussed the purpose of the dry run, virtual meeting etiquette, technical troubleshooting, and other appointment/promotion concerns.

The first virtual interview for the initial batch of applicants was held on May 25.

The HRMPSB interviewed the applicants for the following positions: Tobacco Production and Regulation Assistant III (Regulation Department), Economist IV, (Coporate Planning Department), Market Specialist IV, Supervising Tobacco Production and Regulation Officer, and Supervising Science Research Specialist (Industrial Research Department). ■



Screengrab of HRMPSB Members during their first virtual meeting on May 19

## NTA designates OIC manager, other positions

ADMINISTRATOR/CEO Robert Victor G. Seares Jr. designated Chief Science Research Specialist Myrna O. Lozano as Officer-in-Charge (OIC) of the Industrial Research Department (IRD) in concurrent capacity as head of the department's Techno-Laboratory Services and Instrumentation Division.

The new designation effective April 22 per Special Order (S.O.) No. 0147 s. 2021 was the result of the death of Quality Assurance Division Chief Lina O. Cera, who was earlier designated OIC of IRD.

The IRD is responsible in developing other industrial uses of tobacco, setting quality standards of tobacco leaf and products, conducting market research and rendering laboratory analytical services.

As OIC, Lozano also supervises three other divisions, namely, Product Development in Batac City, Market Research and Development, and Quality Assurance.

Engr. Noralyn I. Idica was also designated acting Chief Agriculturist of NTA Vigan in concurrent capacity as Administrative Officer V of the branch office, effective June 16. She replaced Supervising Tobacco Production and Regulation Officer and designated Acting Chief Agriculturist Diosdado L. Maduli who retired from government service in June 20.

Orlando O. Galdones was designated acting Administrative Officer of Kadiwa ni Ani at Kita in Narvacan, Ilocos Sur in addition to his function as acting Administrative Officer of NTA Candon, effective April 29.

Administrator Seares also designated Jordan Turalba as acting Administrative Officer V of NTA Abra, per S.O. No. 0154 s. 2021, effective May 3.

Turalba, who occupied the position Cashier II, replaced Felicisimo T. Lazo who died of illness on March 16. Replacing Turalba as acting cashier for the branch office is Ethelwolda C. Bosque, in concurrent capacity as Computer Operator II. ■



Lozano



Idica



Galdones

## NTA backs online buying of tobacco in trading centers

NTA welcomed the implementation of online buying in tobacco buying stations as a safety measure to avoid infection of COVID-19 virus during trading operations.

Leaf buyer Universal Leaf Philippines, Inc. (ULPI) initiated the online buying, in addition to established health protocols for the safety of those involved in the trading operations.

This was launched in ULPI's buying stations first in Rosales, Pangasinan on April 19, and next in Candon City and Sta. Cruz, Ilocos Sur on April 21.

"Since last year, the agency has been strictly ensuring that safety and health protocols are observed from delivery and grading to payment of tobacco. This online process is another

safeguard for our tobacco farmers and NTA staff assisting in the buying stations," Administrator/CEO Robert Victor G. Seares Jr. said.

In the online buying, the tobacco are delivered to the buying station, while the farmer or his representative with assigned NTA personnel will watch the loading and grading of the leaves at a designated viewing area. Then the farmer or a representative will discuss with the trading personnel for the processing of necessary documents and for payment. Farmers with bank accounts receive the payment through bank deposits.

The viewing area will be disinfected for the next farmer. ■



*Tobacco farmer Jasmin Antolin, of Dirdirig, Burgos, stays in front of a monitor inside a viewing booth and gets a first-hand experience of a real-time virtual grading of her tobacco delivered to the ULPI-18 buying station in Candon City. Julius Briones of NTA Candon assists the activity on the trading floor. (Edgar C. Torres)*

### Tobacco online buying kicks off in Region 2

NTA Cagayan and tobacco farmers monitored online the loading of the first batch of tobacco for this year's trading season in Region 2 on May 25.

The farmers, all Burley growers from Battung in Tuao, Cagayan, witnessed on the TV monitor at the Branch Office in Tuguegarao City the virtual grading and classification of their tobacco at the buying stations of Universal Leaf Philippines, Inc. (ULPI) in Reina Mercedes, Isabela. Branch Chief Agriculturist Gilbert A. Taguiam and OIC Senior TPRO Moises D. Duran supervised the activities at the buying stations.

Before the opening of the trading, NTA Cagayan Manager Dr. Corazon R. Riazonda briefed the farmers on the process of online buying. She encouraged them to ask questions if they have concerns on the grading and classification.

"We will transmit all your questions immediately to the buying station to be addressed by the graders and our own staff on-site," she said.

Tobacco Production and Regulation Officers and Job-order trading clerks helped the farmers at the Branch Office in the documentation of the grades and classifications of their tobacco. ■



*Farmers joined NTA Cagayan at the Tuguegarao City Office in monitoring via remote video the grading and classification of their tobacco at the buying station in Isabela. (Maricar R. De Leon)*





NTA Isabela and Universal Leaf Philippines Inc. (ULPI) conducted calibration of weighing scales at a buying station in Reina Mercedes, Isabela on April 12 or before the start of trading season. TPRO I Jovanie C. Gante and Agriculturist I Christopher D. Queddeng of NTA Isabela Branch worked with Engr. Jomar Olarte, Electrical Engineering Management Trainee of ULPI, in ensuring the accuracy of weighing and measuring instruments for the trading operations of Burley and Native tobacco in the region. (C. Queddeng/J. Gante)

## NTA Ilocos Norte sets up tobacco checkpoint at provincial border



Photo: Joel Pambid

To personally see and evaluate tobacco deliveries going out of the province, NTA Ilocos Norte OIC Luzviminda U. Padayao visited on April 14 the Tobacco Monitoring Point at the Ilocos Norte-Ilocos Sur boundary along the national highway in Sta. Cruz, Badoc Ilocos Norte.

The Branch Office has set up checkpoints in major exits in Ilocos Norte to monitor transport of tobacco outside the province as a protocol in ensuring that tobacco production in Ilocos Norte are properly documented and checking if the leaf buyers involved in the transport have proper documents issued by the NTA.

According to Divina D. Pagdilao, acting chief of Branch Operations, shippers of tobacco leaves must also present at the checkpoint the following documents: License/COA (certificate of authority), or proof of registration, Permit to Transport Certificates on Inspection Copies, Consolidated Purchase Invoice Vouchers (for Buying Stations) and Consolidated Certificate of Purchases (for field canvassers).

Trucks of tobaccos are delivered to buying stations and other licensed buyers in Ilocos Sur and La Union.

Pagdilao, along with Saturnino A. Agatep, acting Senior TPRO, and Jan Jan A. Gudoy, TPRO, joined Manager Padayao during the visit.

Manning the checkpoint that day were officers on-duty from the 2nd Provincial Mobile Force Company (PMFC), PSSG Mark Anthony Agapay and Patrolman Clark Ryan Gamit, two of the eight PMFC officers assigned at the said monitoring point during the tobacco trading season.

The Branch Office has other monitoring checkpoint at the Ilocos Norte-Abra Boundary in Nueva Era. ■ (Divina D. Pagdilao)

## Monitoring of tobacco trading in Candon, Isabela

A TEAM from NTA Candon, headed by acting chief of Branch Operations Adonis D. Lazo, visited the buying stations of ULPI in Sta. Lucia, Ilocos Sur on April 15 to monitor the weighing and grading of tobacco delivered by the farmers from various towns in the second district of Ilocos Sur.

The team also met with NTA tobacco inspectors to remind them of their tasks to ensure strict compliance of the 4Ps in leaf trading (proper weighing, proper grading, prompt payment, and proper documentation). The team also discussed with the trading staff, security officers, and cluster leaders on health and safety protocol on the trading floor.

In Isabela, Branch Manager Dr. Corazon R. Riazonda and staff monitored Burley and Native Broadleaf tobacco trading in ULPI buying station in Nappacu Pequeño, Reina Mercedes on April 28.

During the visit, ULPI Vice President Irwin Ang and Senior Project Manager Virgilio Ubaldo discussed with the Branch officials about the ongoing online trading of tobacco and health and safety protocols that must be strictly observed during the trading season. ■

# Building a new home for NTA

by Melanie Rapiz-Parel

THE National Tobacco Administration is constructing a new Central Office Building, replacing the old eight-story building at the NTA compound in Scout Reyes cor. Panay Avenue Streets in Quezon City.

A design has been approved for a 15-story, 4,218-square-meter office building with rentable commercial facilities, including parking areas, department offices, satellite offices for the Branch Offices and an Office of the Secretary of the Department of Agriculture, and a penthouse for accommodation.

The Central Office is currently holding temporary office at the 3rd and 4th floors of Ben-Lor Building along Quezon Avenue or a short walk away from the old building.

According to Administrator/CEO Robert Victor G. Seares Jr, the new Central Office building will provide more space and modern facilities for the employees.

“It will be accessible to all – personnel, tobacco farmers, stakeholders, other attached agencies of the Department of Agriculture and other agencies who wish to visit NTA and hold small and enormous gatherings like meetings, conferences, and pieces of training or seminars. Besides, it will be shared with



Architectural design of the proposed 15-story NTA building

other government agencies,” he said.

According to Engr. Abraham C. De La Peña, Supply Officer IV and focal person for infrastructures, the 55-year-old building (built in 1966) has already obtained damages in its physical appearance and is no longer safe for occupants as its structural component, life securing, has also started to deteriorate, steadily inclining to its weakest point and has no chance to withstand a major earthquake.

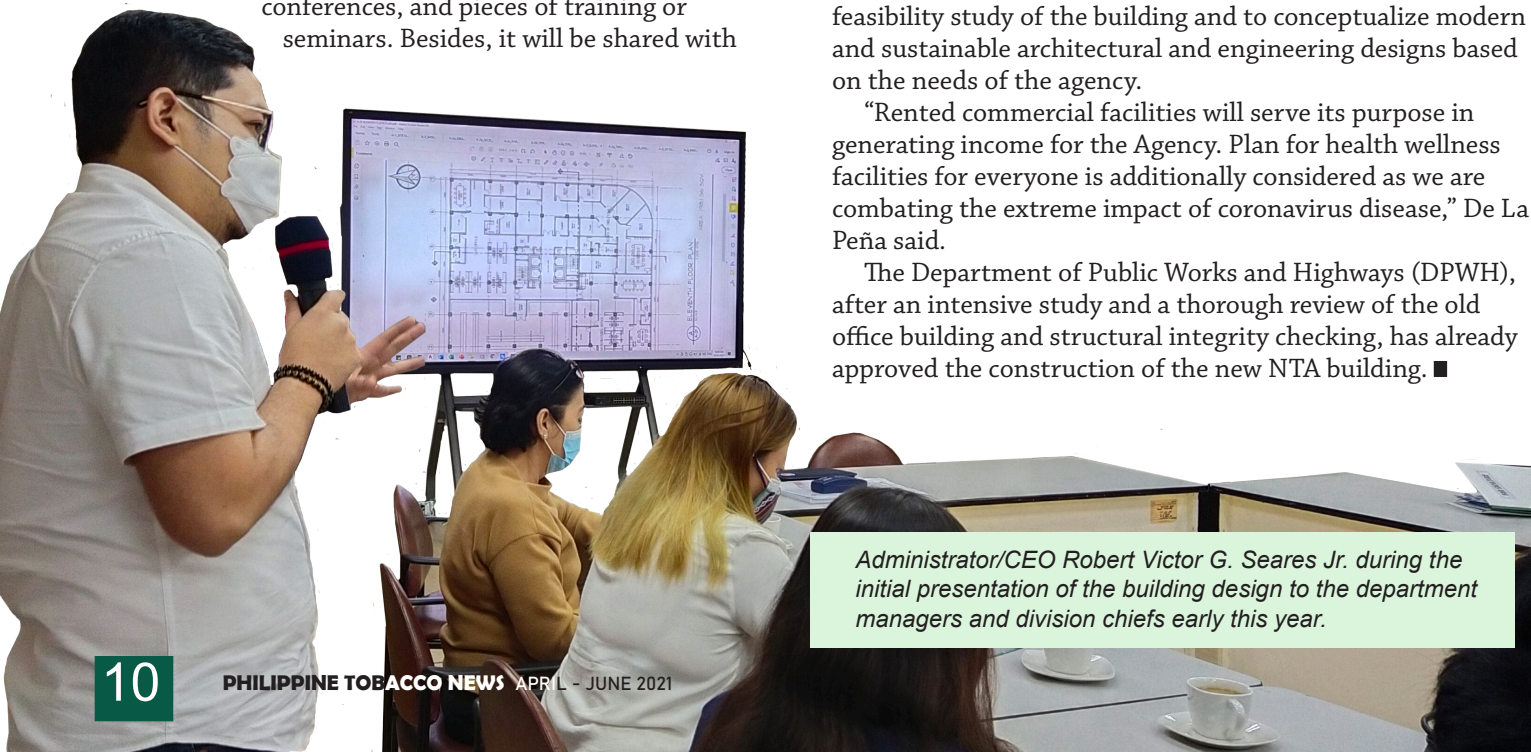
“Due to the structural failure, it will possibly endanger many lives and inflict damage to the property and others nearby if not acted immediately,” said De La Peña.

He added that saving the building through retrofitting was the primary recommendation. But it turned out that reinforcing the existing structure is much more expensive compared to constructing a new building and quality assurance of the building is taken into account to be riskless.

NTA Management outsourced technical experts to steer a feasibility study of the building and to conceptualize modern and sustainable architectural and engineering designs based on the needs of the agency.

“Rented commercial facilities will serve its purpose in generating income for the Agency. Plan for health wellness facilities for everyone is additionally considered as we are combating the extreme impact of coronavirus disease,” De La Peña said.

The Department of Public Works and Highways (DPWH), after an intensive study and a thorough review of the old office building and structural integrity checking, has already approved the construction of the new NTA building. ■



Administrator/CEO Robert Victor G. Seares Jr. during the initial presentation of the building design to the department managers and division chiefs early this year.



The Farmers' Training Centers in (from the top) San Juan, Ilocos Sur; Tuguegarao City; Bangued, Abra; and Ilagan City

NTA has its own “Build, Build, Build” program, creating infrastructures that improves its services to the tobacco growers and other industry stakeholders.

The construction of farmers’ training centers in four provinces sums up the efforts of the agency to deliver its promise of better services and more opportunities for the tobacco growers to enhance their quality production capabilities.

The agency has allocated P66.7 million for the construction of two-story NTA Tobacco Farmers’ Training Buildings in four locations: Barangay Poblacion in San Juan, Ilocos Sur managed by NTA Vigan; Zone 6 in Bangued, Abra by NTA Abra; Osmeña in Ilagan City by NTA Isabela; and San Gabriel in Tuguegarao City by NTA Cagayan. The total amount also includes furnitures and air-conditioning units.

The farmer’s training centers will serve as venues for meetings, seminars and training activities where farmers learn the latest updates on farm technology and participate in various livelihood programs of the agency. The centers will also host the proposed mini soil testing laboratory for the rapid testing of soil for fertility and micro nutrient content and for water quality.

NTA Administrator/CEO Robert Victor G. Seares Jr. said that the training centers are designed to create a productive training environment and convenience to the tobacco farmers for the training programs set by the agency and hold special meetings and conferences to the stakeholders and NTA staff.

The training areas have rooms for billeting of participants including two visitors’ quarters and one executive quarter; smaller rooms for small gatherings; and a training hall that can accommodate from 150 to 200 persons.

The training centers in Abra, Isabela and Ilocos Sur each features a total land area of 612.00 square meters. The facility in Cagayan, on the other hand, has a bigger area at 1,267.40 square meters which also covers additional area for commercial purposes.

“Developing infrastructures for the farmers’ benefit is our way of giving back to the tobacco farmers for their efforts and contribution to the development and economic progress of their respective provinces. Besides, this is the mandate of the NTA and this is what my late father wants – to ensure the welfare and uplift the lives of our tobacco farmers,” said Administrator Seares.

“These training centers are almost complete and we will make sure to accomplish these projects the soonest time possible to provide a conducive and better learning environment to our tobacco growers,” he added.

NTA completed the construction of the two-story NTA Tobacco Farmers Training Building in Barangay Magsaysay in Tagudin, Ilocos Sur in December 2019. The training center, under the Capability Enhancement for Quality Assurance of the NTA, cost over P11.5 million, sourced from the Tobacco Fund.

NTA La Union has its own Farmers’ Training Center built and funded by the Provincial Government of La Union from its share of the excise tax collection.

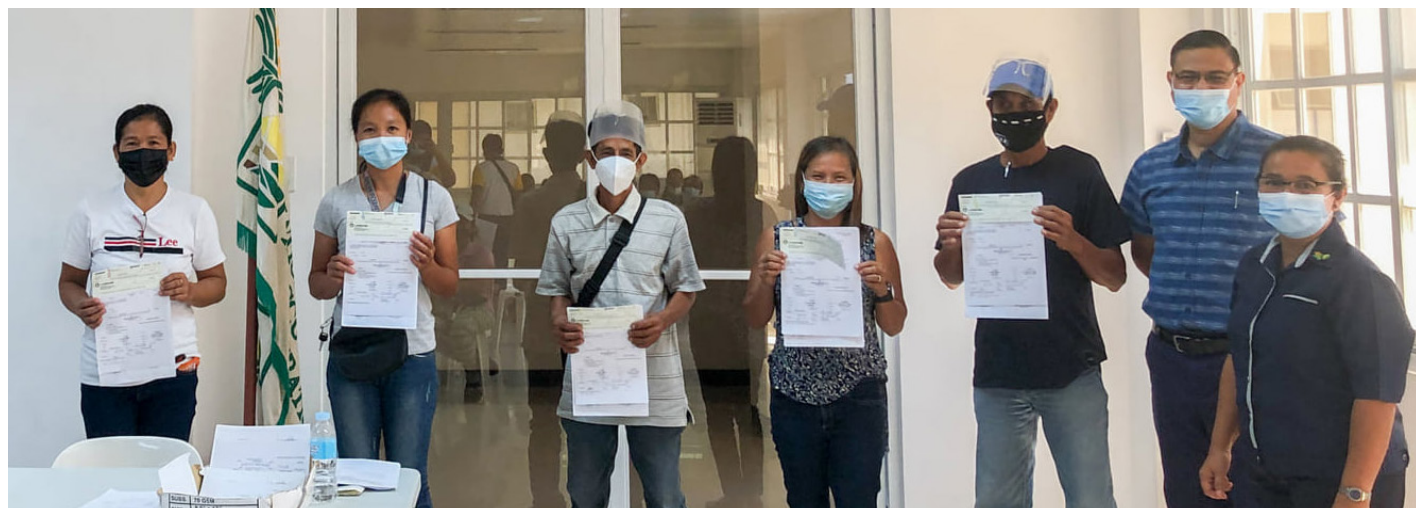
Build, Build, Build is the centerpiece program of the Duterte Administration that aimed to usher the country into the so-called “Golden Age of Infrastructure.” ■

## NTA sets up farmers’ training centers for quality production, livelihood

by **Melanie Rapiz-Parel**

## Tree Seedlings

### Tree seedling growers get assistance from NTA La Union



Five of the 17 farmer-cooperators of the STP project show proof of their production assistance, with NTA La Union officials headed by Branch Manager Dr. Giovanni B. Palabay and Chief Agriculturist Emma Beth Fantastico (2nd and 1st from right, respectively). (Gerylle Vanmarie Palabay)

NTA La Union released production assistance to all 17 farmer-cooperators of its Synchronized Tree Planting project.

The release was held immediately after the project briefing and orientation conducted by Branch Manager Dr. Giovanni B. Palabay and senior staff of the NTA La Union, held at the NTA Branch Office in Bauang, La Union on May 19.

NTA La Union is set to produce 136,200 of various forest tree species ready for the tree-planting activity in July, as part of the celebration of the 34th Founding Anniversary of NTA.

The STP is an annual inter-agency and multi-sectoral tree planting activity conducted by the Branch Offices as part of the agency's effort to contribute for the restoration of ecological integrity in tobacco areas.

The branch office distributed 126,200 tree seedlings for the STP last year. ■

### Seedlings for synchronized tree planting in Cagayan



NTA Cagayan Branch Manager Dr. Corazon R. Riazonda checked on the tree seedlings at the nursery managed by the Branch Office in Tuguegarao City on April 15.

A total of 220,000 seedlings are expected to be produced from the nursery for the Synchronized Tree Planting (STP) Project to be conducted in July this year.

The Branch Office produced 124,450 seedlings for the STP last year, or a total of 762,110 seedlings it has produced since the start of the project in 2014.

The Branch-managed nursery, with mahogany, narra, gmelina, zapote, mabolo and calamansi seedlings, is being managed by the two foresters hired by NTA, Arjie Sunido and Harold Z. Guilang, and under the supervision of the Operations staff led by Branch Chief Agriculturist Gilbert A. Taguiam and Supervising TPRO Alicia A. Malab. (NTA Cagayan)



ALICE A. Malab, Supervising TPRO, and Josefa P. Correo, Acting Administrative Officer of NTA Cagayan (3rd and 2nd from left, respectively) supervised the turnover of 425 seedlings of various forest tree species to the officers of the PNP Regional Communications and Electronics Unit 2 (RCEU2) in Tuguegarao City on May 10.

RCEU2 officers, under the supervision of PMaj Benjamin C. Baculi Jr., used the seedlings for their tree-planting activity in Patagueleg, Peñablanca, Cagayan. This is part of their environmental protection and preservation project dubbed as "Plant a Tree Program: The PNP'S New Normal of Disaster Preparedness and Response." (Photo: Rceudos Pnpces FB Page)

## Farmers' coops get tractors from NTA in Abra, Isabela

FIVE tobacco farmers' cooperatives and associations in Abra were the latest beneficiaries of the Tobacco Farm Mechanization Program (TFMP) of the National Tobacco Administration.

The ceremonial turnover of P6.25 million worth of farm machineries to the representatives of each farmers' group was held at the NTA Abra Office in Bangued, Abra on June 8.

The cooperatives/associations each received 40-HP Massey Ferguson four-wheel tractors, including rotavators and trailers. They were the Agtangao Tobacco Farmers Association (Agtangao, Bangued), Velasco Tobacco Farmers Association (Velasco, Tayum), NTA Bolbolo Farmers Association (Bolbolo, Pilar), Dalnatan Tobacco Farmers Association, Inc. (Dalnatan, Dolores), and Angkilat-Bananao-Daddao Farmers Association (Barit, Luba).

In his message for the event, NTA Administrator/CEO Robert Victor G. Seares Jr. said the agency implements the farm mechanization project under the farm facility assistance program to improve production yield and increase farmers' income.

"We assure our farmers of our continuous efforts to implement our flagship programs to uplift their economic status, especially in these challenging times of the pandemic," Administrator Seares said.

Acting Deputy Administrator for Operations Engr. Cesario G. Sambrana, in a video message, said the implementation of the farm mechanization program is a collective effort of the farmers and the agency to enhance quality tobacco production and sustain the tobacco industry.

Director Danilo C. Trongco of the NTA Governing Board joined NTA Branch Manager Minerva P. Mizal in the distribution.

Before the turnover, Jose A. Taclas Jr, acting Chief Agriculturist for NTA Abra, explained the guidelines of the farm mechanization program to the farmers, stressing on the importance of upholding good reputation as a cooperative to avail of the facility assistance from NTA.

This is the second distribution of farm machineries in the province. The first distribution was held on February 2020 at the Branch Office with six tractors awarded to selected farmers' organizations during a ceremony graced by the late Administrator Robert L. Seares.

In Isabela, three tobacco-based cooperatives and farmers associations in Isabela each received four-wheel tractor from TFMP on May 14.

The cooperatives through their representatives personally received the tractors from NTA Isabela during the turnover ceremony held at the Branch Office in Ilagan City. They were Zosimo G. Solito of Reina Mercedes Tobacco Farmers Association, Donie F. Bernardino of Quezon, Isabela Tobacco Growers Agriculture Cooperative, and Faustino U. Agudon of Sta. Isabel Sur Tobacco Farmers Credit Cooperative.

Dr. Corazon R. Riazonda, NTA Cagayan Branch Manager and concurrently in charge of NTA Isabela, explained to the farmers the guidelines of the agency's facility assistance program as part of the effort of the agency to speed up the farm activities of the local tobacco growers and to reduce their production costs.

Manager Riazonda spearheaded the signing of the Memorandum of Agreement between the farmers' representative and the agency, witnessed by senior officials of the Isabela Branch Office.

Administrator Seares emphasized the importance of the farm modernization program in the government efforts to increase productivity and income of farmers. NTA Legal Counsel Atty. Jun Fred V. Parado relayed the message of the Administrator through online video message during a brief orientation before the turnover ceremony.

TFMP is also a major component of the farm modernization program for the Block Farming in major tobacco growing provinces in the country under the Sustainable Tobacco Enhancement Program of the agency. ■

*Director Danilo C. Trongco (in red shirt, center) of the NTA Governing Board assists in the distribution of tractors to members of tobacco grower cooperatives conducted by NTA Abra headed by Branch Manager in charge Minerva P. Mizal and acting head of Branch Operations Jose A. Taclas Jr. (Melanie Rapiz-Parel)*



# Tobacco farmers say 'hello' to beef cattle

by Felisa R. Aurellano, Rhonelle P. Sulicipan and Gay Anne B. Ronduen

WHOEVER says a tobacco farmer is only for the tobacco crop has no idea about diversified farming. For years now, NTA has been promoting diversified farming as part of its livelihood program for the tobacco growers. Among its recent activities in this line is the Beef Cattle Production Assistance Project (BCPAP). This was launched in 2020 to provide tobacco growers another source of income, other than what they earn from tobacco and rice production.

The BCPAP, now on its second phase of implementation, is under the Integrated Farming and Other Income Generating Program (IFOIGAP).

As the agency is mandated to improve the economic and living condition of the tobacco farmers, it now provides tobacco farmers with beef cattle as one of the income-generating activities to augment their income derived from tobacco.

Last year, the total allocation for Regions 1 and 2, and Abra was P10-M for the procurement of beef cattle, production technology package and cattle production training, artificial insemination services and animal health services. Ilocos Norte received 35 heads; Ilocos Sur, 75; La Union, 25; Pangasinan, 25; Cagayan, 25; Isabela, 25; and Abra, 40.

For the second phase, implemented this year, the agency doubled the budget to P20-M and increased the number of farmer beneficiaries from 250 last year to 500 this year.

The Branch Offices of Ilocos Norte, Vigan, Candon, La Union and Pangasinan conducted in October last year online beef cattle production training for the beneficiaries. In the said training, Administrator/CEO Robert Victor G. Seares, Jr. said that the project will help

jumpstart the beef cattle industry in the tobacco growing provinces and will also forward the vision of Department of Agriculture for advancing food sufficiency in the country.

The production assistance shall be repaid with two 12-month-old cows, the first and third offspring, within a maximum period of six years. The first offspring shall be the repayment which is to be loaned out to next-in-line farmer while the third offspring shall be sold out as income of the agency to recover the investment.

So, who says a tobacco farmer is only for the tobacco crop?

With all the assistance that NTA provide for additional income-generating activities, we are assured that the tobacco farmers will become "total diversified farmers." ■



**First Gain.** The heifer of tobacco grower and Barangay Chairman Robert Opinaldo of Pa-o, Balaoan, La Union gave birth to a calf on March 28, or just more than a week after he received the Brahman heifer from NTA under its Beef Cattle Production Assistance Project (BCPAP).

Opinaldo told NTA La Union that he was not aware that the heifer was pregnant when he received it from the Branch Office on March 19, or during the distribution of the first batch of beneficiaries for the second phase of the project. He said he was just lucky that he gained an offspring in such a short time. With his first calf, Opinaldo will now have the first repayment for the production assistance. (Gerylle Vanmarie Palabay)

# Beef cattle distribution

## La Union

NTA LA UNION distributed 22 beef cattle to BCPAP beneficiaries at the Branch Office in Bauang, La Union on April 15. This completed the 60 heads allocation of NTA La Union for the second phase of the project, which is part of the livelihood component of the Sustainable Tobacco Enhancement Program.

In the first phase of the project last year, NTA La Union distributed 25 heads to Tobacco Contract Growing System (TCGS) farmer-cooperators.



Photo: Mon Darvin Tejano

## Ilocos Norte

TOBACCO grower William M. Ezebb of Barbarangay in Banna, Ilocos Norte received his Brahman heifer from NTA Ilocos Norte during the distribution held on May 18 in Batac City.

Ezebb is one of the 40 beneficiaries comprising the second batch of farmers in Ilocos Norte who received their cattle during the distribution. The first batch has 30 beneficiaries, bringing the total of beneficiaries in the province to 70.

NTA Ilocos Norte Officer-in-Charge Luzviminda U. Padayao and senior staff from the Branch Office, with Patrick Cortez from the Provincial Veterinary Office, spearheaded the distribution of the second batch.



Photo: Dianne May A. Jose

## Pangasinan

A TOTAL of 60 heads of Brahman heifer was distributed to qualified farmer recipients in the province under the BCPAP last April 14 and 23.

Farmer recipients are from the tobacco-producing municipalities of Alcala, Malasiqui, Balungao, Sta. Maria, Sto. Tomas, Villasis, Laoac, Sta. Barbara, Manaoag, San Fabian, San Manuel, and Rosales in Pangasinan and San Manuel in Tarlac.

The said distribution was witnessed by Kurt Dela Torre and Januario S. Corpuz of the Commission on Audit.



Photo: Venbel V. Echalar

## Cagayan

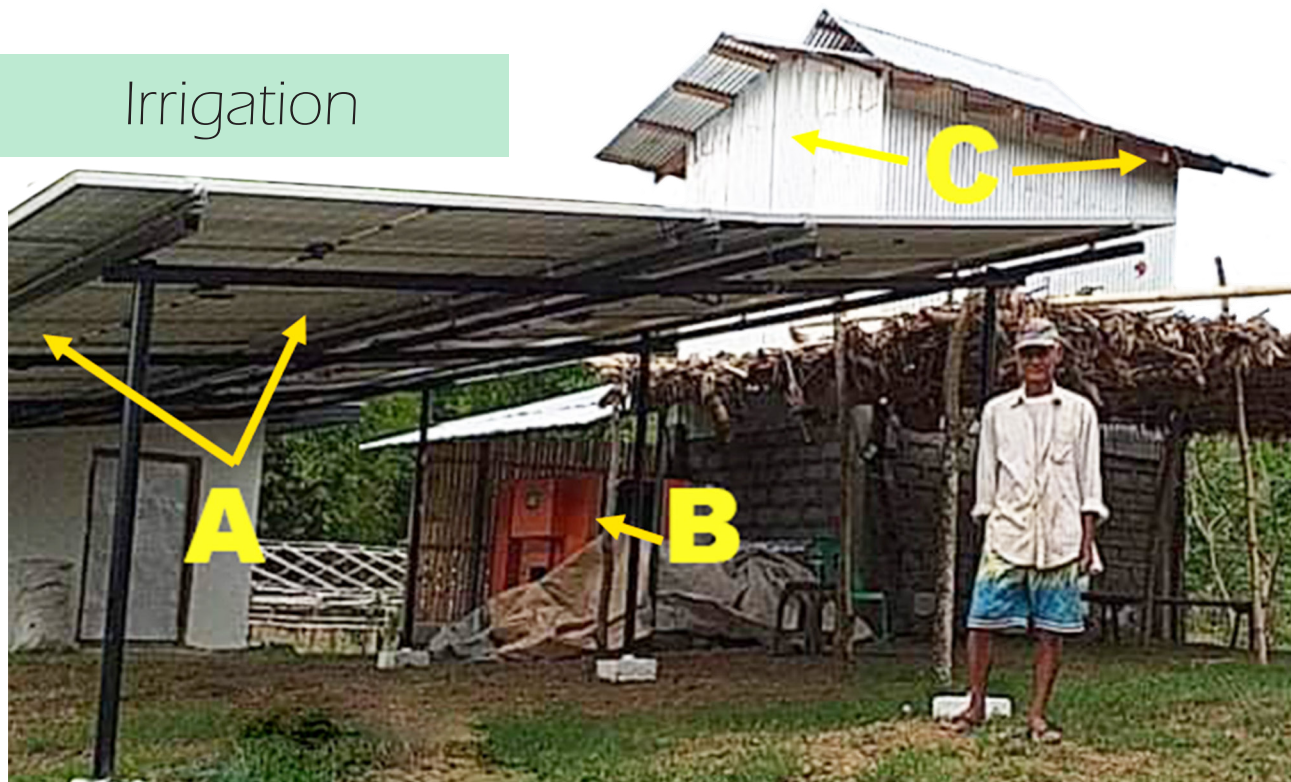
THE second batch (second delivery) of dispersal for the BCPAP was conducted on May 26 by NTA Cagayan. A total of 20 cattle were distributed to the beneficiaries in the tobacco-producing municipalities of Alcala (5 heifers), Baggao (9), and Gattaran (6).

NTA Cagayan Branch Manager Dr. Corazon R. Riazonda, Chief Agriculturist Gilbert A. Taguiam, and Supervising TPRO Alicia A. Malab supervised the distribution held at the drop-off point in Baculod, Alcala, Cagayan.



Photo: Joven Erico E. Reyes

## Irrigation



Farmer Norberto Salmasan with the solar-powered curing barn showing the (A) solar panels, (B) heat pump dryer, and (C) curing barn. (FTSD)

## NTA turns over first solar curing barn to Ilocos farmer

by Rhonelle P. Sulicipan

THE first-ever unit of the solar-aided curing barn (SACB) from NTA was awarded to farmer-leader Norberto Salmasan of Camanga, Badoc, Ilocos Norte in a turnover ceremony on June 1.

Salmasan is the first recipient of the SACB designed by the NTA Farm Technology and Services Department (FTSD) under its farm modernization program. The unit will be shared to at least four Virginia tobacco growers under the newly organized block farm in Barangay Camanga.

SACB uses solar energy to power the heat pump dryer which supplements the heat requirement and in the long run will reduce fuelwood consumption. In terms of structure, the traditional curing barn was maintained in the design to make it more adaptable for the current operations and management during curing.

“This demonstrates the latest technology in tobacco production that will help our farmers raise their income from quality tobacco production,” said NTA Administrator/CEO Robert Victor G. Seares, Jr. in a video message for the turnover ceremony.

He added that curing dictates 40% of the quality of tobacco.

“We aim to raise the quality of our production, and at the same time reduce fuelwood consumption using renewable energy for curing,” he said.

Based on the feasibility study conducted by FTSD, fuelwood consumption with the new curing barn design is expected to be reduced by 40%.

“This is a big help to Virginia tobacco industry, as it solves problems on fuelwood supply and stricter regulations in cutting of trees,” Deputy Administrator for Operations Engr. Cesario G. Sambrana said in a separate video message.

“We have to thank the first farmer-recipient for embracing the latest technology and we urge other farmers to do the same for the project’s continuous implementation and for sustainability of the industry,” he said.

FTSD Manager Imelda N. Riñen led the turnover ceremony, with NTA Ilocos Norte OIC Luzviminda U. Padayao, Members of the Sanggunian Bayan of Badoc, Engr. Eugenio Manarpaac, Jr. of EMB Solar, Municipal Administrator Janice Gorospe, Municipal Agriculturist Leonor Escarda, ABC President Virgilio Calajate, Atty. Pancho Jose (representing Ilocos Norte Gov. Matthew Manotoc Marcos) in attendance.

Thirty-four tobacco growers from Camanga and neighboring barangays also witnessed the ceremony.

Administrator Seares commended the provincial government of Ilocos Norte headed by Gov. Marcos, and the local government of Badoc and Mayor Maximo D. Cajjgal for giving NTA the opportunity to demonstrate production technologies for the benefit of the tobacco growers.

The groundbreaking ceremony of the project was held on February 16 in Barangay Camanga, with successful test runs conducted on March 30.

SACB Project Leaders from FTSD, Engr. Warner Batugo and Engr. Kenneth Russell Tanaval, facilitated the test run during the turnover ceremony. ■



# FTSD holds writeshop on technical reporting

by Rhonelle P. Sulicipan

THE Farm Technology and Services Department (FTSD) held a webinar on technical reporting for the agency's extension workers and researchers on May 31, June 2, and 4.

The three-day event aimed to enhance the writing skills of the staff, particularly in the preparation of technical reports and other project reports relative to their functions in their respective branch offices or departments.

The speakers were Dr. Dennis D. Raga, a Science teacher of Pecos High School in Texas, USA, and Leonora P. Nudo, Science Research Specialist of the NTA Industrial Research Department.

In his message, NTA Administrator/CEO Robert Victor G. Seares, Jr. emphasized the importance of good writing skills in making technical reports on programs, projects and activities.

"A well-written report achieves better understanding of our activities, which is a key to maximum support and participation from our stakeholders," Administrator Seares said.

Acting Deputy Administrator for Operations Engr. Cesario G. Sambrana urged the staff to enhance their skills in technical reporting as they pursue their various field activities, thus making transfer of technology simple and more comprehensible to the end-users.

FTSD Manager Imelda N. Riñen awarded certificates of completion to the participants via virtual presentation from the FTSD office in Batac City.

"I hope this writeshop will empower our extension workers and researchers with enhanced skills in writing technical reports about the programs and projects of the agency," Riñen said.

A highlight of the webinar was the presentation of the participants' written output (homework) for critical review by their fellow participants and the resource speakers.

Adjudged top performers among the 47 participants were as follows:



A screenshot of the virtual training

Homework Presentation (Day 2): *Best Presenter* - Mary Jane C. Vives, IRD Batac; *Best Critique* - Evangeline C. Cabigan, FTSD; *Best Synthesis* - Kenneth Russel L. Tanaval, FTSD; *Best Presentation* - Vigan Branch by Danah Angelica Sambrana.

Homework Presentation (Day 3): *Best Presenters* - Jianne M. Gabriel, IRD CO, and Gay Anne B. Ronduen, FTSD; *Best Critiques* - Noralyn I. Idica, Vigan, and Gay Anne B. Ronduen, FTSD; *Best Presentations* - FTSD by David Paolo Villa Ogatis, Cagayan Branch by Bryan Mark William R. Simeon, and IRD Central Office by Jianne M. Gabriel.

Topnotchers - Pre-Test: (1) Dianne May A. Jose, Ilocos Norte Branch; (2) Kenneth Russel L. Tanaval, FTSD; (3) Joey A. Pascual, Isabela, and Joanaliza D. Ordinate, La Union; Post-Test: (1) Jianne M. Gabriel, IRD CO, and Bryan Mark William R. Simeon, Cagayan; (2) Cyrus Raymond C. Olivenza, IRD CO; and (3) Orlando Arugay, Cagayan. ■

## NTA staff, farmer leaders join online Food Security Summit



BERNARD Vicente, president of the National Tobacco Farmers Association and Cooperatives, Inc. (NAFTAC), represented tobacco farmers' associations and cooperatives for the NTA Vigan Branch during the National Food Security Summit 2021 hosted online by the Department of Agriculture (DA) on May 18-19.

Vicente and fellow tobacco grower and coop member Arlyn Vega joined NTA staff at the Branch Office in Bantay, Ilocos Sur during the livestreaming. They took part in the sectoral breakout sessions, one of the highlights of the summit.

According to DA, the summit served as a venue to gather

stakeholders to craft strategic action plans that will address emerging challenges and opportunities of the agriculture and fisheries sector. Expected outputs include policy recommendations as inputs to the commodity and industry roadmaps and in crafting food security plan.

NTA Vigan staff who joined the livestreaming were Diosdado Maduli, acting Chief Agriculturist, Noralyn I. Idica, Administrative Officer V, and Tomasito Taloza, Agriculturist II.

Selected NTA staff and farmer leaders of other branch offices also participated in the Food Summit from their respective offices. ■



### On-Farm Evaluation.

The Branch Technical Committee of the Tobacco Grower of the Year (TGY) contest visited on May 4 the cured tobacco of farmers Romulo Cabalar (upper photo) of Sucoc, Narvacan, Ilocos Sur, and William Egido (lower photo) of Busel-Busel, Santiago, as part of the on-farm evaluation of provincial contestants for the annual awards. Acting Branch Chief Agriculturist Adonis D. Lazo supervised the evaluation conducted by TGY Branch Coordinator Oliva C. Galdones, area supervisors and team leaders of the Candon Branch Office. (John James B. Canosa)

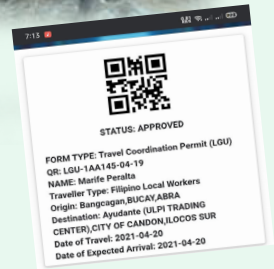
## NTA hikes travel allowance for extension workers

BEGINNING March 1, 2021, all extension workers of the branch offices will receive an additional P200 or P400 pesos of their Travelling Expense Voucher (TEV), per Resolution No. 2055-2021 of the NTA Governing Board approved on March 4, 2021.

All Supervising and Senior Tobacco Production and Regulation Officers (TPROs) will now each receive P2,000 and P1,800, respectively, or P200 more than their old rate. All levels of TPROs and Agriculturists will also receive P1,800 each or P400 more than their old rate. ■



**Consultation on Tobacco Trading.** Before the start of tobacco trading, Bauang, La Union officials headed by Mayor Menchie L. de Guzman spearheaded a consultative dialogue on May 10 with NTA La Union, tobacco buyers, and field canvassers operating in the municipality to thresh out issues on tobacco production, buying and documentation of acceptances of tobacco leaves in buying stations. Bauang is the top producer of Native-Batek tobacco in the province, and the local officials want proper documentation of acceptances in buying stations, which will be the basis of tobacco excise tax shares for Native and Burley under Republic Act No. 8240. NTA La Union Branch Manager Dr. Giovanni B. Palabay and Chief Agriculturist Emma Beth Fantastico attended the meeting with some of the staff from the Area IV. Other local officials in attendance were Sangguniang Bayan Members Angelo S. Aquino and Warlito B. Daus Jr., Municipal Agriculturist Dr. Allan Gamueda, LGU Consultant Manuel Ramiscal, and some barangay leaders of tobacco growing communities. (Gerylle Vanmarie Palabay)



# Unhampered Delivery

by Marife P. Peralta

*HARD work and patience in the face of challenges!*

That's how our Branch Manager Minerva P. Mizal described the "secret weapon" of Agriculturists and Tobacco Production and Regulation Officers (TPROs) of NTA Abra who go the extra mile in assisting the farmers haul their tobacco from the province to the leaf buying station in Candon City.

It is the peak of the trading season in March and April. And extension workers like me were expected to exert efforts for the unhampered delivery of tobacco despite the ongoing lockdowns in our area, all for the benefit of our tobacco farmers.

Tobacco deliveries have to cross the provincial border, which require rigid implementation of travel restrictions along checkpoints. Due to travel restrictions, only the assisting extension workers and farmer leaders are allowed to go out from Abra to Candon City where the trading center is located.

A negative result of antigen and approved travel passes are requisites to cross the border. However, not all farmers and even hauling truck drivers, including those registered with ULPI, are willing to pay P1,500 for the price of antigen testing, with just three-day validity, in order to be able to travel. Only two municipalities Bucay and Pilar, provide free antigen testing. So only a few drivers and trucks are available for the hauling of tobacco when we need them.

That means we have to do extra effort and extended time to assist our farmers in the delivery of tobacco, exposing us to further risk of infection of the deadly virus.

I have been working as extension of NTA for seven years now, and I have observed that the lack of trading center or buying station here in the province is always one of our biggest problems during the tobacco trading season.

Before the pandemic, it was only the distance (Abra to Ilocos Sur) that bothers us. This time, however, due to strict implementation of travel protocols by the local governments, our patience is really tested.

For our initial delivery of tobacco on April 11, we had to leave Abra early in the morning. No matter how early we arrived at the buying stations, however, we still have to wait for long hours because the buying stations, in compliance to health protocol to accommodate all the deliveries, employed only a limited number of staff to assist us, in addition to the tedious process from grading the tobacco to the payment. It was already late at night when we returned to Abra and reached our homes, thus cancelling our early arrival in the buying station.

Our manager has put it succinctly on a Facebook post as a recognition of our sacrifice for our farmers, and somehow boosted our morale:

*"Panunumpa ng Kawani ng Gobierno: 'Ako ay magsisilbi ng lampas sa oras kung kinakailangan!' From dawn to night; weekends or holidays! With or without per diems! MECQ or GCQ, even if no hazard pay! All in the interest of the service!"*

For our successful deliveries of our farmers' tobacco to ULPI Candon, our manager also took time to commend me and my companions, my fellow EWs who were on full duty during the trading, Ella Mae Agbusac, Ryan Jay Sape and Carmencita Barcelona.

That kind and reassuring words gave us the drive to double our efforts to fulfill our tasks while observing health protocols for our own safety. For this I can say, that our commitment to serve our tobacco farmers overshadowed our fear of COVID infection. ■

# Sustainable Tobacco Enhancement Program

A Briefer



## Project Description

The STEP is a Five-year Tobacco Industry Roadmap which aims to increase the tobacco farmers' income and productivity. It serves as a guide for optimal realization of the goals set for 2021-2025 and to spur development through livelihood creation, job generation, and income augmentation, thereby contributing to poverty alleviation.

## Rationale

Block farming espouses operational clustering or consolidation of small and diversified tobacco farms to attain economies of scale, thus reducing cost of operations, attain bountiful harvests, and earn bigger income.

The agency assists all the tobacco farmers in the block farm and helps them achieve self-reliance, high productivity, maximize cropping diversification and sufficient financial facility for agribusiness ventures through block farming systems.

## Components

The STEP is envisioned to finance for a five-year period the following component programs, to wit:

- Block Farming – P25.46 billion
- Technology Assistance – P776.73 million

- Industrial Research – P228.67 million
- Agricultural Research – P56.79 million
- Regulatory Services – P181.79 million
- Institutional Development – P77.53 million

**Funding Source:** *Tobacco Fund under Republic Act. No. 4155*

The Tobacco Industry generates an average of P106 billion annual revenue from the collection of tobacco excise taxes. An average of P8 billion annually, which part of the said annual collection, is credited to the NTA's Special Account under the General Fund (SAGF) created under Republic Act No. 4155 which has an accumulated fund of more than P80 billion as of December 2019.

*Reason for Request:* The NTA's fund from RA 4155 is not automatically appropriated, and releases therefrom need the prior approval of the DBM. This action will no longer need for any legislative appropriation as we will be merely utilizing a portion of the NTA's existing Tobacco Fund under RA 4155.

## Basis of the Roadmap

NTA implements various interventions and strategies anchored on the Tobacco Industry Roadmap of 2018 and the NTA's mandate, responsive to the "new thinking" in agriculture.



area of 27,765 as of CY 2020) as the beneficiaries of various assistance and interventions that will form part of the block farm.

The NTA will transform the traditional small-scale tobacco-rice farmers to become part of a larger commercial food system/network, thru:

- more efficient farm production and post-harvest operations
- more efficient distribution of agricultural supplies, materials, and equipment
- engagement in value-adding activities, i.e., processing and storage, and
- more efficient marketing and distribution of farm commodities, i.e., consumer chain

## Physical and Financial Targets

A block farm consists of 60 hectares and 75 farmers. It has two components:

- The *Production Assistance* identifies the various crops/livestock/fisheries that are recommended in each block farm. The total cost to be incurred shall be P7.2 million;
- The *Capital Outlay* mostly for Farm Machineries, some of which will be given to Tobacco Farmers Cooperatives/Associations who will meet the criteria set by the Agency under its Tobacco Farm Mechanization Project (TFMP). The capital outlay component is about P48 million.

For the five-year period 2021-2025, the agency will finance the following with 41,516 farmers:

### *Production Assistance*

1. Tobacco Production – P2.025 billion for 27,765 hectares
2. Rice Production – P563.34 million for 27,765 hectares
3. Corn Production – P289.97 million
4. Gulayan at Manukan sa Barangay – P415.16 million
5. Goat Raising – P167.38 million
6. Swine Raising – P302.25 million for 46,500 heads
7. Cattle Raising – P222.75 million for 4,950 heads
8. Tilapia Farming – P19.09 million for 890 sites

### *Capital Outlay*

1. Farm Machineries and Equipment for Tobacco – P2.87 billion
2. Farm Machineries and Equipment for Rice – P7.7 billion
3. Irrigation Support – P2.9 billion
4. Farm Structure/Hauling Equipment for Tobacco – P2.47 billion
5. Farm Structure/Hauling Equipment for Agribusiness – P5.5 billion

## Net Income from Block Farms

A tobacco farmer can double his income with the inclusion of various components in the block farm. Currently, the farmer gets about P140,000 (for a 0.60 hectare farm) for tobacco and rice production. But with vegetable and livestock production as additional income-generating activity, and the addition of 40% subsidy in production and facility, the farmer will earn about P300,000 for the same farm area. ■

-- Prepared by the **NTA Corporate Planning Department**



This is aligned with the Duterte administration's 10-Point Socioeconomic Agenda to eradicate hunger and poverty by 2040 through the 25-year long-term development plan *Ambisyon Natin 2040*. Important in this respect are the following:

- enhancement of the technology assistance, extension and production support services;
- rural infrastructure development;
- strengthening research and extension services;
- market and institutional arrangements supporting farmers' access to capital and inputs and providing them with strong price incentives;
- strengthening the institutional capability of the agency to better respond to the needs of the industry;
- increasing the production of quality tobacco leaves, which is an essential component of competitiveness and driving force for increasing export.

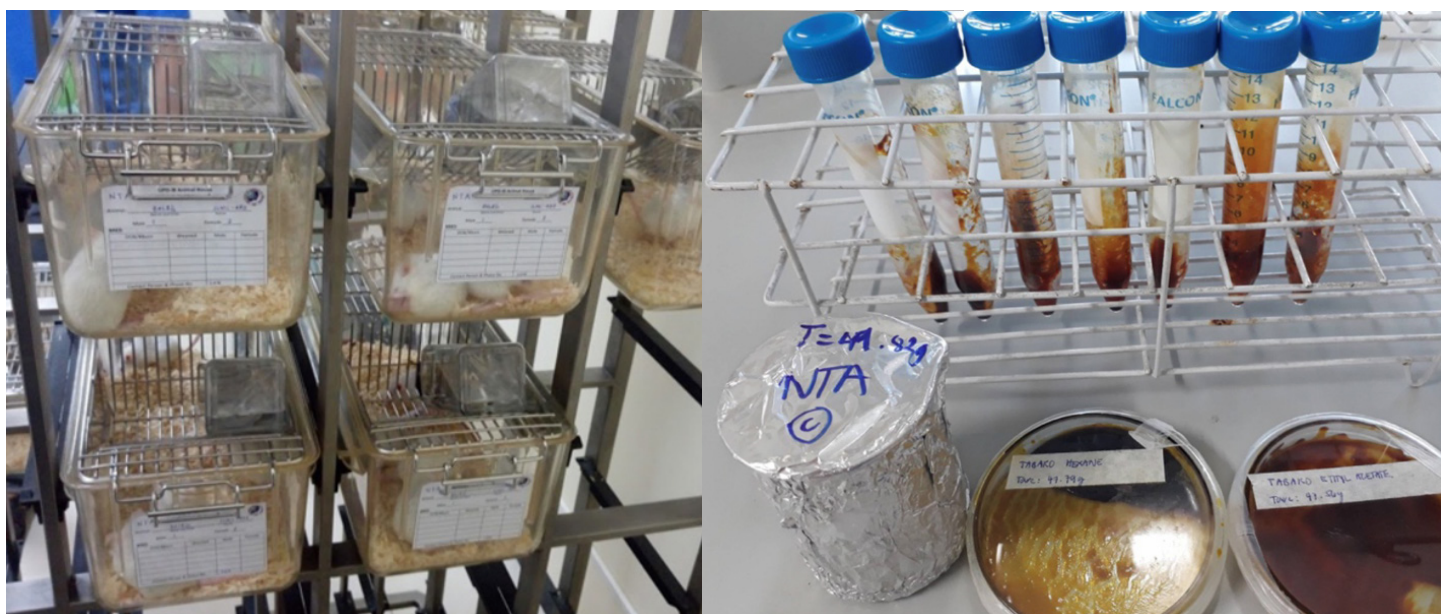
## Rationale of the Block Farms

Block farming, as a major strategy in achieving the goals and objectives of the STEP, requires the proper distribution and allocation of physical and financial resources to be able to cover all existing tobacco farmers and areas.

With the existence of the Tobacco Fund, we considered all tobacco farmers (numbering 41,516 with farms covering a total

# Immunomodulatory Property of Tobacco Extract

by Leonora P. Nudo, Maria Rexie R. Jimenez, Cyrus Raymond C. Olivenza  
Cecilio A. Cabigan and Roberto R. Bonoan, Ph.D.



Breeding of BALB/c mice. Each cage contains 1 male and 3 female mice (left) and air-dried tobacco leaf extracts (right)

## Rationale/Background of the Study

The immune system provides protection against infection and unwanted immune reactions. Clinically, adverse immune responses are managed using substances known as immunomodulators. Depending on their mode of action, immunomodulators may enhance or inhibit the normal activity of the immune system.

Immunomodulators are either plant-derived or synthetic in nature. Although proven effective, most synthetic immunomodulatory agents possess several adverse side effects. This reason led scientists and medical researchers to study the potential of plant-derived immunomodulators which are perceived to be relatively safer to use.

*Nicotiana tabacum L.* gained the reputation as a panacea and holy herb in 1500. It was considered a remedy for a wide range of illnesses for a time. In fact, different tobacco extract

preparations were used as traditional medicines in the 19th and 20th century. However, tobacco was eventually removed from the list of medicinal plants due to prejudgments caused by the harmful effects of tobacco smoking and nicotine toxicity. Tobacco contains active compounds other than nicotine. With proper laboratory testing and control of dosage, the medicinal value of the different components of tobacco extract can be realized.

## Objectives of the Study

The study was conducted to assess the immunomodulatory potential of tobacco leaf extracts (TLE) on cell cultures of macrophage and lymphocyte. Specifically, the study aims to evaluate the effects of TLE on macrophage phagocytic activity and reactive oxygen species (ROS) production. Phagocytic activity measures the potential of the TLE to stimulate or suppress macrophages to eat foreign body (e.g., bacteria and viruses). Ingested foreign bodies

are degraded by ROS which have microbiocidal action. Next is to test the immunomodulatory efficacy of TLE on the growth and proliferation of lymphocyte through the MTT (3-(4,5-dimethylthiazol-2-yl)-2,5-diphenyl tetrazolium bromide) assay.

Last is to determine the antioxidant activity of TLE through the DPPH (2,2-diphenyl-1-picrylhydrazyl) assay.

## Experimental Design

Macrophages and lymphocytes were collected through washing out of the mouse abdominal cavity and from the mouse spleen, respectively. A gradient of Percoll solution was used to specifically isolate the lymphocytes from the splenocyte suspension. For each assay, different concentrations (10µg/mL, 50µg/mL, 100µg/mL, and 200µg/mL) of TLE crude extract, ethyl acetate fraction, hexane fraction, and aqueous fraction were tested on cell culture. Appropriate negative and positive controls were included per setup.



Preparation of filter-sterilized tobacco leaf extracts

### Locale of the Study

Air-dried leaves of tobacco were collected in Batac, Ilocos Norte. Leaves were powdered at the Quality Assurance Laboratory of the Industrial Research Department of the National Tobacco Administration. Preparation of test extracts (TLE crude extract, ethyl acetate fraction, hexane fraction, and aqueous fraction) and conduct of experiments were done at the Functional Bioactivity Screening Research Laboratory of the Institute of Biology, University of the Philippines, Diliman, Quezon City. The laboratory mice (BALB/c strain) used in the study were housed in the animal house facility of the institute.

### Significant Finding and Implication

The responses of immune cells to TLE treatment were observed to be concentration-dependent. TLE promoted phagocytic activity, production of reactive oxygen species, and proliferation of lymphocytes at low concentrations (10µg/mL and 50µg/mL). The same immune activities were inhibited at high concentrations (100µg/mL and 200µg/mL) of extract treatment. The proliferation rate of lymphocytes was remarkably reduced to as low as 10%

when cells were treated with 100µg/mL and 200µg/mL of test extracts. For the phagocytic activity, the number of ingested inactivated yeast cells per macrophage increased in extract-treated cells compared with the negative control.

Reactive oxygen species (ROS e.g., superoxide anion radical, hydrogen peroxide, and hydroxyl radical) are essential in degrading ingested foreign body. Results of the nitroblue tetrazolium (NBT) assay showed that TLE induced macrophages to produce ROS at 10µg/mL and 100µg/mL. Among the test extracts, cells treated with the ethyl acetate fraction produced a remarkable concentration of superoxide anion radical. At 200µg/mL, ROS production was reduced. This can be attributed to the observed antioxidant activity of TLE at high concentrations (>125µg/mL).

Further investigation on the immunomodulatory potential of TLE is essential to validate the concentration-dependent induction and inhibition of immune responses observed in the study. Experiments using an animal model may be performed and, eventually, the bioactive compound/s present in the most potent fraction can be targeted and tested to elucidate the immunomodulatory action of tobacco. ■



Preparation of murine splenocyte suspension (top) and reaction mixture (bottom)

## SUCCESS STORY

JHONAYLN Pahinag Pambid, 43, of Brgy. #5 Nagpatayan, Banna, Ilocos Norte, was one of the 10 participants in the Livelihood Training on Cakes and Pastries Production with NC II Accreditation, conducted by the Marcos Agro-Industrial School in Ilocos Norte. The training was facilitated by the NTA Ilocos Norte Branch Office from February 12 to March 13 under the Farmers Organizational Development (FOD) Project of the National Tobacco Administration.

"I was informed by our technician that a training is at hand, so I immediately grab a slot," she said. "An NC II accreditation after the training was my primary goal then."

Jhonalyn learned through lectures and return demos how to make cakes (with different designs, shapes and flavors), rolls, pandesal, ensaymada, egg pie among other recipes.

She loves cooking, but she had minimal knowledge in the production of cakes and pastries. She just took the best of this opportunity, and did her best in every return demo they were required to do.

Jhonalyn was very attentive on all details of the lectures and cooking demonstration by Judith Valencia-Gallego, Assistant Professor of Marcos Agro-Industrial School.

During the conduct of the live-in training, NTA Ilocos Norte OIC Luzviminda U. Padayao, who coordinated the training along with FOD Provincial Coordinator Rosemarie T. Soriano, visited the training to monitor Jhonalyn and the other trainees and to talk to the school management on the status of the trainees.

The NC II assessment of the trainees, however, was not held on the third week as scheduled due to the COVID-19 outbreak.

During the lockdown Jhonalyn used what she learned to bake *pandesal*, *ensaymada* and Spanish rolls for family snacks. For additional income, she sold the rest to her neighbors. Her husband Rico and other tobacco growers were then very busy

during the harvest season. She baked snacks that her husband sold to the farmers and farm workers.

Jhonalyn baked her first birthday cake for her mother on May 25, 2020, and received positive comments for the cake and her other recipes.

This jumpstarted her baking career and the birth of **Rev's Cakes and Goodies**, her registered baking business named after her only child Rev. In just a month as an entrepreneur, she was able to buy a gas range, which became her reliable baking partner. From then on, she received more orders from acquaintances and referrals from customers, both local and abroad, to cater birthday-bundle surprises.

She and her husband now deliver orders from customers not only within Banna, but also in neighboring towns like Dingras, San Nicolas, Nueva Era, Pinili, and Badoc.

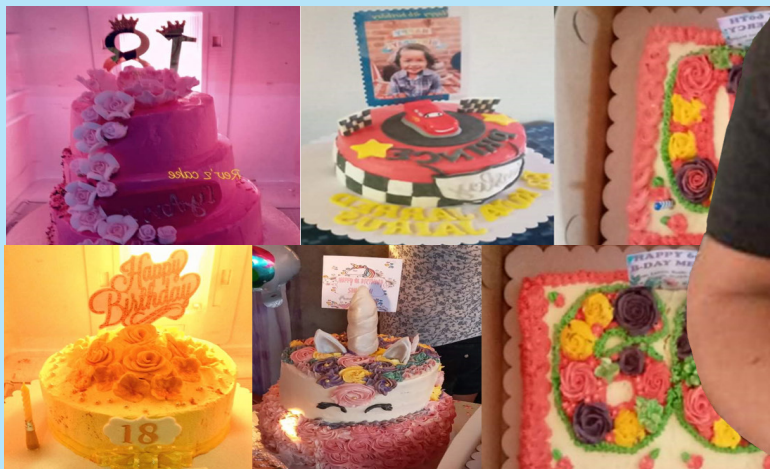
Her cakes costs P500-P1,000, depending on the ordered design, while the surprise bundle has a minimum cost of P3,000 which includes a cake and three other recipes. Price varies depending on the quantity of the order and the venue where it will be delivered. She hired at least two helpers, when there are orders of bundle-surprise.

The NC II assessment from TESDA came later on December. More than the certificate, however, Jhonalyn gained a successful family business.

"Thank you very much, NTA. I did not expect this. I only wanted to attend the training for the NC II certificate. Thank you for the opportunity to learn that helped me establish our family business. Now I am enjoying and loving what I am doing, especially with the positive feedbacks on our products from our satisfied customers." ■

# A family business out of livelihood training

by Divina D. Pagdilao



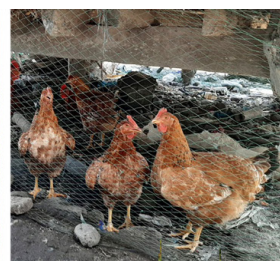
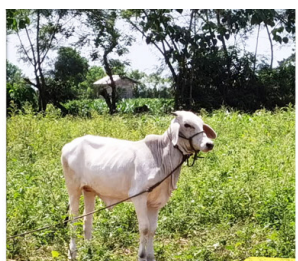
Jhonalyn Pambid, with her recipe during the NCII accreditation assessment and some of the cakes she designed for her business, at the background





# A Spark of Hope for Manong Rey

by Eleanor N. Macasieb



WHAT could have been another dedicated day to cultivate tobacco farm had become a day of fear for Reynaldo “Manong Rey” Malenab Cannu on March 17, 2020. It was the day that government placed the entire Luzon under Enhanced Community Quarantine to control the outbreak of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in the country.

The 49-year-old farmer wakes up at every crack of dawn, walks for miles to reach his farm in the rural community of Battung in Tuao, Cagayan, then works towards noon, enduring the heat of the sun. This has been his routine tending his tobacco farm for the past 12 years. He couldn't complain as he depends every crop year on producing Isabela Burley, and corn during off-season, to earn income for his family, his wife and their two children.

Now, with a series of strict community quarantines that practically limit movements of people, including their economic activities, aggravated by super typhoons in the region in the past months, Manong Rey couldn't help but worry about his farm operations. Farming is his main source of livelihood. If he can't attend to his farm, how can he survive? Who will put food on his family's table?

His enthusiasm to till the soil seems slowly fading or dying like an ember smoldering in ashes brought about by the crisis.

Farmers like him had no recourse but to ask the government for help and protection. All he needs was a “spark” to enliven his farming venture.

Fortunately, he did not wait longer for another tobacco season to look for an additional income to sustain his family during the pandemic.

As part of the intervention to support the farmers during the pandemic, the NTA implemented the Gulayan and Manukan sa Barangay Project last year to ensure food sufficiency in the rural communities and serve as an additional income to tobacco farmers. Manong Rey was one of 39 farmers in Cagayan comprising the first batch of farmers who received free vegetable

seed packs and Sasso chicks on May 29, 2020.

With the project, he was able to provide food for his family and earn additional income from selling beans (*sitaw*) and the free-range chicken he harvested in his farm.

As the farmers prepare for the next cropping season, NTA introduced the Block Farming approach to tobacco production, as the key strategy under the Sustainable Tobacco Enhancement Program. This involves more efficient farm production activities through farm mechanization where costs of production are reduced and farm productivity and incomes are increased. It is a program of transforming from a tobacco farmer to an integrated/diversified farmer who does various agricultural activities including livestock production.

Manong Rey was one of the 50 farmers in Cagayan who comprise the first batch of recipients of production assistance under the Solar-Powered Irrigation System (SPIS) project—a part of the Tobacco Farm Mechanization Program of NTA and a component of Block Farming. With the solar-powered irrigation system, the fuel cost for irrigating his farms is removed from the equation as water could be accessed anytime during the dry months due to abundance of sunlight that power the water pumping system.

He was also one of the 25 farmer-cooperators of the Beef Cattle Production Assistance Project, a livelihood production component of the Block Farm. He received upgraded Brahman heifer from NTA Cagayan Branch, which he can breed to produce offspring, giving an additional source of income for the family.

Manong Rey was also given 40% subsidy of the assistance he received to construct his curing shed under the agency's Curing Barn Assistance Project. This is the free and non-recoverable portion of his loan to encourage him to produce more quality output and earn higher income by cutting the cost of production.

As Manong Rey prepares for the next cropping season for

see next page

# Online Kamustahan: *It's OK Not To Be OK*

by Michelle P. Nacpil



Screengrab: Support Services staff in the first virtual kamustahan

AFTER a long lockdown, sometime in June 2021, our Deputy Administrator for Support Services Benedicto M. Savellano instructed us to create a chat group for support services.

This chat group gave us members of the support services (administrative and finance department) a virtual access to our units, and be reconnected to each other during the lockdown. Initially, it was for sharing official announcements and memos from the Top Management, and later became an 8 o'clock (p.m.) habit, where we conduct our daily novenas and prayers as well as outlet for motivational quotes and shout-outs for small victories during the pandemic.

Sir Benedict presided over a pocket meeting among the support services to conceptualize an online *kamustahan*. This was a new take on the usual opening statement in every virtual meeting during the lockdown, “Kamusta kayo? Okey ba kayo?”

After the meeting, the Administrative Department headed by our OIC Perla C. Manzon and with big support from our resident medical officer Dr. Joseph Salter B. Elizalde, the ONLINE KAMUSTAHAN was initiated. What used to be a small virtual exchange of relevant information and prayers and even motivational quotes, now became a virtual get-together, where every staff is given an opportunity to share his or her experiences, the ups and downs staying or working at home during the lockdowns, best practices and learning, tips and strategies of coping up involving medical or mental activities.

The pilot activity was within the support services, held on April 7 via MS Teams. Here we unloaded our fears, doubts, and anxieties, and give each other moral and emotional support. This time our cameras were on, and we see each other's faces and emotions as we talked and we listened intently.

Each of us shared his or her inspiring stories, how one picked up the pieces after a storm and bounced back.

After the activity, we assessed what came out during the sharing and got the validation that we need. The group decided to help each other's out during this difficult time.

With the positive feedback, the online kamustahan was extended to the other departments. The support group, facilitated by the Administrative Department, along with Sir Benedict and Dr. Elizalde, invited other departments in the central office for a short sharing of their stories, and for assessment and debriefing. The activity was conducted with the Industrial Research Department under the supervision of OIC Department Manager Myrna O. Lozano on April 30, and the Public Relations unit headed by Neyo E. Valdez, PRO V, on May 5.

The same fulfilling effect happened. Yes, after a bucket of tears, we had a sense of relief, sharing our stories with our NTA family.

The next step for the kamustahan is the launch of online teleconsultation and hotline, for health and wellness of our colleagues.

If there is any important lesson this pandemic has imparted to us, it is the thought that sometimes “It's OK not to be OK,” especially when you have a family or friends to listen to you and support you.

Yes, we are here for each other even not just to extend help but by simply LISTENING. ■

CONTINUED from page 25

tobacco, as in other members of the block farm in Battung, he is confident that he will improve his productivity by becoming a diversified farmers, integrating vegetable farming and livestock production in his farm, which translates into a higher income.

“I am very thankful to NTA for giving the tobacco growers like me wide opportunities to earn for our family even during the crisis,” Manong Rey said in Ytawes.

According to Administrator/CEO Robert Victor G. Seares Jr., NTA continues to uplift the economic and

social condition of the tobacco stakeholders and plans to deliver more projects and increase the subsidy portion of their loans. The NTA, he said, gives special recognition of the significance contribution of tobacco growers like Manong Rey in the development and success of the tobacco industry.

With government support, Manong Rey and other tobacco growers see a ray of hope despite the pandemic scare. They can see now an ember suddenly turning bright in the ashes left by the crisis' wake. ■

# My COVID reminders

by Divina D. Pagdilao

## Challenges

THE COVID-19 pandemic which started in March 2020 has given us the biggest challenge to our lives and even to our character as a government worker and as a Christian. The period from March to May is crucial in my job at the Operations Division of NTA Ilocos Norte Branch Office. Extension workers have to assist our farmers during the trading. With the pandemic, however, we were required to stay at home most of the time as part of the health protocol during the lockdowns.

Everyone was scared to go out. Barangays were being locked down, and checkpoints were almost everywhere. But the tobacco traders, just like tobacco farmers, needed the assistance of NTA to transport their tobacco and clear their storehouses for new purchases from farmers who depend on them to turn their harvests into cash.

Our OIC Manager had to act firmly. She reminded all the staff to keep themselves available even during difficult situations, as part of our commitment to serve the farmers. She issued certifications that we are employees of NTA and that we need to assist our tobacco farmers during the trading and implement various projects of the agency in our area of assignments. We were required to present these certifications to checkpoint officers to allow us passage and perform our tasks.

It has been a year since the start of the pandemic and we continue fulfilling our “*sinumpaang tungkulin*.”

## Observing health protocols

Even during the lockdowns, the Branch Office extends services to the tobacco community, adhering to health and safety protocols.

We, extension workers, go out to work with firm instructions to observe social distancing, wear face mask and face shield, and wash or sanitize hands with alcohol. An additional instruction is to maximize our activities while on the field, and run home immediately after official duty.

We also tried to minimize exposure to potential cases. For our field work, we prepare own meal (*baon*) rather than buy them on stalls everywhere. We limit the number of farmers in a meeting place to avoid crowding that may result in spreading the virus. We avoid unnecessary and lengthy conversation during these meetings, and go home immediately after the day's work.

## Virtual connections

We need to be in good shape, both in mind and body. This way we can accomplish our duties and obligations in project implementations, monitoring, and data gathering.

The limited face-to-face interactions in the conduct of the different activities make us harness the power of the Internet. We use messaging and e-mails, in addition to calls and texts from our mobile phones, as channels of communications. We use videoconferencing apps like Zoom and Microsoft Teams to conduct virtual meetings and seminars and information dissemination. This form of interaction significantly reduced risks of exposure to infections.

## Individuality

We work in our own pace, in our own management style and in our own remedy to accomplish what is expected of us. Each one has his or her own way to take extra care against the infection. Some are really scared but some others have find means to overcome fear. Our reactions to the pandemic depends on our responsibilities.

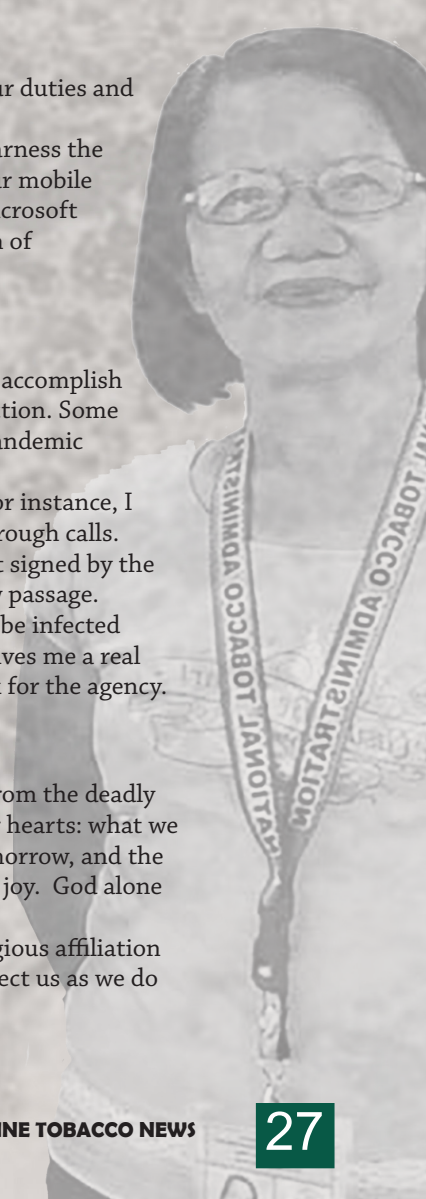
Personal decision prevails. Being in an organization, however, I have to weigh things. For instance, I have to decide whether to personally visit the farmers or monitor the farmers' activities through calls. Either way I can find the means to do it. I can show my NTA ID, a certificate of employment signed by the head of office, or pass slips from barangay to every checkpoint or monitoring point to allow passage.

Going home after a day's hectic work is fulfilling, yet I fear that I am exposed and might be infected with the virus. And how about my family? Thinking of them getting the infection always gives me a real scare. But the hope that God will protect me and my family is where I draw courage to work for the agency.

## Divine dependence

God is our personal companion in these difficult days. Amidst fear of infection from the deadly virus, we keep on asking for His protection and intervention. The all-knowing God sees our hearts: what we fear, our burden, sadness (for those who lost their loved ones), our hope for a healthier tomorrow, and the healing of our land. God knows exactly when to give us courage, strength and gladness and joy. God alone is in control.

The virus reminds us that wealth, education, physical appearance, social status, and religious affiliation cannot save us from being infected. We have to believe the power of God to guide and protect us as we do our shares in taking care of our selves by adhering to the health and safety protocols. ■



*Rice Production 2021.* The farmer cooperators in Dasay, Narvacan, Ilocos Sur under the IFOIGAP-Rice Project have started to till the land and transplant rice seedlings. **Hermielyn Ringor**, Agriculturist I of NTA Candon, took this picture on June 30 while she supervised the land preparation and transplanting activities of her rice farmers under the Block Farm.



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## Tobacco Farm Mechanization Program Beneficiary

***“Malaki ang maitutulong ng traktora, dahil tiyak na mababawasan ang gastusin sa pagsasaka at napapadali ang aming trabaho. May oras pa kami sa ibang gawaing mapagkakakitaan. Tiyak na tataas ang aming kita para sa aming pamilya. Nagpapasalamat kami sa NTA at kay Administrator JR Seares at napili ang aming asosasyon na mabigyan ng mga production at facility assistance para madagdagan pa ang aming kita. Maraming salamat po.”***



**Mercy Corrales Doral**, 38, of Bolbolo, Pilar, Abra, is the president of NTA Bolbolo Farmers' Association. The association was one of the five tobacco farmers' cooperatives and associations in Abra who received four-wheel tractors including rotavators and trailers from the agency through the NTA Abra Branch Office in Bangued. Doral has been a tobacco grower since 2019 and most of the members of the association were contract growers of private companies before they became farmer-cooperators of the NTA Tobacco Contract Growing System. They organized their association for the block farm last year.

-- *Melanie Rapiz-Parel*