



Rats plague agriculture in Cotabato provinces as El Nino intensifies

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GENERAL SANTOS CITY, Philippines -- Rats have destroyed around 1,200 hectares of crops in South Cotabato while in Cotabato province, nine villages in Kabacan town have been placed under a state of calamity after the rodents destroyed P13 million worth of rice and corn crops.

The rodent plague has been blamed on the long dry spell that began mid-2015 and is expected to even worsen because of the El Nino.

Justina Navarrete, acting head of the South Cotabato agriculturist's office, said Thursday the rat infestation in the province has affected the municipalities of Tantangan, Polomolok, Tupi and Tampakan.

In Tantangan alone, she said an estimated 1,000 hectares of crops have been damaged.

Calamity

In Kabacan, Cotabato the municipal council declared the rice and corn producing villages of Pangilan, Kuyapon, Dagupan, Lower Paatan, Upper Paatan, Katiduan, Malamote, Simone and Pedtad in a state of calamity after 470 farming families reported crop failures since December because of the rat infestation, which has destroyed at least 606 hectares of crops.

"The declaration would allow the local government to extend financial and material aid to affected farmers," David Don Saure, point person of the municipal disaster risk reduction and management council, said.

El Nino

Both Navarrete and Cotabato provincial agriculture officer Eliseo Mangliwan attributed the infestation to the long dry spell. Both also warned that the rodent plague is bound to worsen in the coming weeks as the El Nino intensifies.

"This is mainly due to the continuing dry spell. The rats have been coming out and invading our farmlands as their usual food sources have become scarce," she said in a radio interview, adding that in Tampakan, there have been reports of the rodents attacking fruit trees and even coconuts.

“Massive infestation could be attributed to climate change and the onset of (the) El Nino phenomenon,” Mangliwan said, adding that several villages in Arakan and Tulunan towns have begun reporting rat attacks.

Odd behavior

Navarrete also said changes observed in the rats’ behavior could complicate the problem.

Although she said they have distributed zinc phosphate, a rodenticide, to affected farmers, “some rats simply see, smell then ignore the zinc phosphate the farmers placed in rice and corn fields.”

She surmised that the rodents may have learned to evade the rodenticide from last year’s infestation, when the Department of Agriculture in Region 12 distributed more than 400 kilograms of zinc phosphide to farmers in Cotabato, South Cotabato, Sultan Kudarat and Saranggani provinces and the cities of Cotabato, Kidapawan, Koronadal, Tacurong and General Santos.

Navarrete said they have also launched a food for work program which provides a kilo of rice to farmers for every 10 rat tails they turn in.

Other pests and the long dry spell

Navarrete said they have also received reports of black bug and army worm infestation in Banga and Surallah towns, and in Koronadal City as she warned the infestation is expected to worsen in the coming weeks because of the dry spell caused by the El Nino.

The dry spell itself has already wreaked havoc on agriculture in the province since June last year, with around 7,000 hectares of rice and corn crops already affected, particularly in upland areas where farms have dried up as irrigation has run out.

In Koronadal, city agriculturist Emelita Miguel said most corn crops planted late last year in the highlands have already wilted due to the lack of rains.

Citing their initial assessment, she said the damaged farmlands already reached about 20 percent of the city’s estimated 3,000 hectares of corn.