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MANILA -- Department of Agriculture (DA) Secretary William Dar on Thursday said the occurrence of African swine fever (ASF) outbreaks in the country is “tapering down”.

In a press conference, Dar said the DA managed the outbreaks through elevated quarantine measures, as well as through enhanced interagency and interdepartmental collaboration.

“The outbreak is now tapering down. It is decreasing. It’s a good pangitain na bumababa yung occurrence ng outbreaks (It’s a good sign that the occurrence of outbreaks is dwindling),” Dar said.

Dar, however, stressed the need to disseminate the national zoning plan to all local government units to effectively control the movement of pork and pork-related products and prevent the spread of the hog disease.

“Itong zoning plan na meron na tayo... i-disseminate pa mas lalo sa lahat ng local government units (This zoning plan that we have should be further disseminated to all local government units),” Dar said as he pushed for the whole-of-nation approach to arrest the spread of ASF.

Under the zoning plan, areas in the country will be classified by their ASF status -- free zones, containment zones, surveillance zones, protected zones, and infected zones. These are further categorized using a color-coded mechanism.

Dar said Visayas, Mindanao, and Mimaropa regions are considered free zones (green). This means that these areas can freely trade their products anywhere in the country.

For the containment zones, regions 1 (Ilocos), 2 (Cagayan Valley), and 5 (Bicol) are protected zones (light green); Regions 3 (Central Luzon) and 4A (Calabarzon) are surveillance zones (yellow); Bulacan and Pampanga are infected zones (red).

Dar also highlighted that the zoning plan also imposes a transport ban of longganisa, tocino and hot-dog products from Luzon to Visayas and Mindanao.

“Para klaro, yung mga longganisa, tocino at hot-dog ay hindi pa natin papayagan na iti-trade from Luzon to Visayas, to Mindanao. Ang papayagan lang natin through the zoning plan ay fully-cooked and canned processed pork products,” he said.

The Agriculture chief said the local hog industry has been losing PHP1 billion a month, or a total of PHP4 billion since mid-August, due to the ASF.

“Ang development bumaba na ‘yung outbreak. Nag-pi-pick up na din (prevention and control measures). Tumataas na ang confidence at negosyo ay bumabalik na (The development is that the occurrence of outbreaks has decreased. The prevention and control measures have also picked up. That’s why the confidence of the public has increased and the business is returning),” he said.

He noted that PHP220 million has been disbursed from the PHP1-billion indemnification fund to mitigate the impact of ASF. (PNA)

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PRRD to make announcement on water issue next year: Palace

MANILA -- President Rodrigo Duterte will make a major announcement in relation to the alleged onerous contracts between the government and two water concessionaires on Jan. 6, 2020, Malacañang said on Thursday.

Although mum on details about the President’s upcoming revelation, Presidential Spokesperson Salvador Panelo assured that the Chief Executive remains determined to resolve the water issue before the end of his term in 2022.

“He (the President) said he will make an important announcement on January 6, 2020. Siguro idi-discuss pa sa Cabinet (Perhaps he will discuss it with his Cabinet first),” Panelo said in a Palace briefing.

“I think you can be assured that the stand of the President remains unchanged. I will not preempt the President,” he added.

Earlier, Panelo said the President wanted the alleged onerous provisions in the water contracts removed.

He said the President was still keen on hearing the explanation of those involved in the drafting of the water contracts as to why they allowed the provisions which were disadvantageous to taxpayers.

“I think he repeated that he still wants to talk to those involved--the lawyers of the government, the private lawyers. He said ‘I still want to hear why they allowed this kind of treason against the interest of the Filipino people,’” Panelo said.

Panelo, however, said it was not clear whether Duterte wanted to speak to them or would let Metropolitan Waterworks and Sewerage System (MWSS) administrator Emmanuel Salamat do the negotiating.

“Wala siyang sinabi he wants, basta sinabi niya (He didn’t say he wanted to talk

to them, he said) he wants to know why they allowed these kind of provisions. Sabi niya (He said), he will either rise or fall with this issue. Sabi niya hindi siya papayag na walang mang-yari sa kasong ‘to (He said he won’t allow this case to remain unresolved),” he added.

He had no knowledge of whether or not the President wanted to speak to the water firms before his scheduled announcement.

Duterte began questioning the alleged onerous provisions after the Singapore-based Permanent Court of Arbitration issued separate decisions, compelling the Philippine government in 2017 to pay PHP3.4 billion to Maynilad and in November 2019 to compensate PHP7.39 billion to Manila Water for the losses the two firms allegedly suffered due to non-implementation of increases in water rates.

He said the concession agreements apparently “mirrors” the Anti-Graft and Corrupt Practices Law or Republic Act 3019.

The President refused to pay them and instead threatened to sue them for economic sabotage.

Duterte asked the Department of Justice and Office of the Solicitor General to craft new water concession agreements that are “favorable to the State and the Filipino people”.

He also floated the idea of ordering the military to take over the operations of the two water concessionaires.

On December 10, Maynilad and Manila Water have written separate letters to Duterte, expressing their intent to review the alleged onerous provisions in the existing water concession deals.

“Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and He will flee from you.” – James 4:7