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Solution to rice farmers' problems just a text away

By Anselmo Roque
Central Luzon Desk

Posted date: September 20, 2007

SCIENCE CITY OF MUÑOZ -- Rice farmers in the country who have problems on their crops are now finding it easy to get assistance from scientists and experts of the Philippine Rice Research Institute (PhilRice) here.

Using their own or borrowed cellular phones, they just text their queries or requests for information on rice production problem to the PhilRice's "Farmers' Text Center" here.

"If the question sent belongs to the category of most frequently asked questions [FAQs], of which we have the ready answer, we send the answer instantly," said Roger Barroga, project director of the Open Academy for Philippine Agriculture (Opapa), in which the center belongs.

"The answer is condensed in 160 characters," he said.

Barroga said if the question was too technical, it was sent to scientists or experts of the agency.

"They make sure that they get the response of the concerned scientist or expert within a reasonable time to satisfy their waiting clients," he said.

"Sometimes if the answer seemed vague to the farmer, we contact the PhilRice experts in the field or the technicians from other agencies and request them to visit the farmer," he said.

Barroga said some farmers, through their cell phones' multimedia messaging service (MMS), would now send photographs of their rice plants afflicted with disease.

Through these photos, the experts can readily tell what kind of disease has hit the plants and give the proper procedure on how to control it, Barroga said.

"We do not give though the name of the chemicals to use lest we be accused of patronizing certain products," he said.

The center, which started operating in 2004 using an old-model mobile phone for its texting service, is now using computers to accommodate hundreds of clients a day.

Barroga said Dr. Leocadio Sebastian, PhilRice executive director, saw the big potential of the "texting service" to help farmers so the center supported the project.

Records of the center showed that it had received 5,327 text messages from January to July this year or an average of 761 text messages a month.

Of the number, 1,071 messages came from Central Luzon farmers, 824 from the Ilocos and 299 from Calabarzon (Cavite, Laguna, Batangas, Rizal and Quezon), according to the records.

Farmers in Northern Mindanao sent the lowest number of messages (25), according to the records.

Barroga said the center also received questions or requests for information on crops other than rice. He said the questions were referred to the proper agencies.

Farmers who want to reach the Farmers' Text Center should type REG/name/age/address/occupation/and the message in their phones and send the inquiry to telephone number **0920-911-1398** .

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