

Philippines confronts potential fertilizer crunch as Middle East tensions threaten global supply routes

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The Philippines is taking proactive steps to address concerns over a potential fertilizer shortage as tensions in the Middle East pose risks to global supply routes.

Agriculture Secretary Francisco P. Tiu Laurel Jr. reassured stakeholders that the country has sufficient sources and viable alternatives to mitigate the impact of rising prices. This comes amid the Department of Agriculture's broader efforts to reduce reliance on inorganic fertilizers, enhance farm productivity, and support sustainable, food-secure agriculture. These initiatives reflect the critical role of agricultural resilience in safeguarding the nation's food supply against external disruptions.

By visiting facilities like Agri Specialists Inc., Secretary Tiu Laurel underscores the government's commitment to fostering innovation and self-sufficiency in the agricultural sector. Such measures are essential in a global context where supply chain vulnerabilities can significantly affect food security. Senator Francis Pangilinan's presence during the visit highlights the collaborative approach needed to address these challenges. The situation emphasizes the interconnectedness of global trade and agriculture, where regional conflicts can ripple across supply chains.

As the Philippines navigates these uncertainties, the focus remains on bolstering local capacity and exploring alternative solutions to ensure farmers have access to affordable and effective resources. This approach aligns with broader global efforts to build resilient agricultural systems capable of withstanding geopolitical and economic pressures

Agri Specialists produces commercial quantities of biofertilizer developed by researchers from the University of the Philippines Los Baños National Institute of Molecular Biology and Biotechnology. A kilo of the biofertilizer, based on company estimates, could replace two 50-kilo bags urea-based fertilizer. Each kilogram costs P750—roughly a third of the current price of around P2,500 of a single bag of complete 14-14-14 fertilizer.

Even before the US and Israel launched an airstrike on Iran on February 28—an event that sent oil prices soaring—the DA had been ramping up the use of alternatives such as liquid fertilizers, biofertilizers, and soil ameliorants to offset the rising cost of petroleum-based inputs.

In retaliation, Iran restricted trade through the Strait of Hormuz, a key passage for a significant share of global urea, nitrogen, and phosphate shipments, triggering concerns over possible supply disruptions.

But Tiu Laurel stressed that the country's exposure remains limited. "Actually, everything will be affected," the DA chief said, referring to the broader impact of higher fertilizer prices on agricultural products.

Still, he emphasized that supply is not the main concern; rather, it is the upward pressure on global prices driven by logistics costs and market uncertainty.

Based on 2025 data, only about 20 percent of the country's 713,000 metric tons of imported urea-based fertilizers were sourced directly from Qatar and Saudi Arabia. The bulk came from Indonesia, Brunei, Malaysia, China, and Vietnam. Meanwhile, ammonium sulfate fertilizers were entirely imported from China and Japan, further reducing reliance on Middle Eastern routes.

He added that field tests show farmers can significantly reduce their use of traditional urea without sacrificing yields. "If you used to apply 10 sacks of urea, you might now be able to use only half or even just three," he said, citing successful trials using bio-based and nanotechnology-driven solutions.

Senator Pangilinan acknowledged that the energy crisis stemming from the conflict in the Middle East could quickly threaten the country's food security if left unaddressed, given its impact on fertilizer supply. He noted that even before the crisis, the agriculture budget was already insufficient.

He called for a review of the 2026 national budget in light of the situation and said senators are prepared to pass a supplemental budget if necessary.

Despite stable supply lines, higher global oil prices and freight costs are expected to push food prices upward. Tiu Laurel estimated increases of around P2 to P5 per kilogram for many agricultural products, driven largely by transport expenses.

Rice remains the most vulnerable due to its heavy reliance on fertilizer, while highland vegetables may see smaller increases. Corn producers, he added, can tap alternative inputs to help maintain yields.

Agriculture secretary expressed confidence that proactive steps will keep supplies stable and protect consumers from sharper price spikes