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Experts start study on optimal processing of fresh tomatoes

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Researchers and experts from the University of the Philippines-Los Baños and the Mariano Marcos State University (MMSU) will embark on a three year research and development program to formulate a protocol for the optimal farming of fresh tomatoes in the Philippines, particularly in the provinces of Ilocos Norte and Ilocos Sur.

Funded by the Department of Science and Technology-Philippine Council for Agriculture, Aquatic and Natural Resources Research and Development (DOST-PCAARRD), the P15 million program seeks to come up with a comprehensive integrated crop management technology for farming tomatoes.

Also participating in the program are the Regional Crop Protection Center, the local government units of Ilocos Norte and Ilocos Sur, and Northern Foods Corp. (NFC), the only tomato producing company in the country which sources its processing tomato needs from 2,000 farmers in Ilocos.

Leilani Domingo-Pelegrina, industry strategic S&T program manager for vegetables, cited the need to raise the production of tomatoes, particularly of processing tomatoes to bring down the country's dependence on imported tomato paste.

Pelegrina said NFC can only produce 4,000 tons of tomato paste from the contract growers-farmers' production of about 26,800 tons of processing tomatoes a year.

"The local demand for tomato paste is 30,000 tons. So we're importing 26,000 tons of tomato paste annually valued at P1.25 billion," Pelegrina told **The Star.**

Pelegrina said tomato paste is a raw material for the production of ketchup and other sauces.

The R&D program has three project components, which will focus on diseases, insect pests and weeds, and nutrient management.

The team will practice a systems approach in integrating the results of each project to come up with one comprehensive ICM technology for tomato.

The tomato plant is known to be threatened by many diseases. The most destructive disease of which is tomato leaf curl disease, which is transmitted by whiteflies.

Pelegrina said the tomato plant variety planted by the 2,000 tomato contract farmers of NFC, is the 'Ilocos Red," which is susceptible to the said disease.

To address the tomato leaf curl disease, the first project will establish the disease profile of tomato, and determine the efficacy of healthy seedling technology and carrageenan technology for leaf curl management.

Field-validated ICM recommendations will then be formulated.

The second project will address the insect pest and weed problem in tomato production. An improved control and management of insect pests and weeds will also be developed.

Among the expected outputs of project 2 are site-specific insect pest succession pattern, modified release strategy of BCAs, carrageenan technology for managing insect pests, improved weed management strategies, and field-validated ICM recommendations for fresh and processing tomato.

The third project, on the other hand, will focus on the development of site-specific nutrient management program for tomato production in Ilocos Norte and Ilocos Sur.

* FARMING
* DOST (DEPT. OF SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY)