

# DA program to reforest 1M has

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The Department of Agriculture (DA) plans to lease out government land, including watershed areas to private companies that will engage in agro-forestry and reforestation projects, its secretary Emmanuel Piñol said.

Piñol said he will seek approval from the Office of the President for the implementation of Bantay Kagubatan, a convergence project with the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) to promote agro-forestry farming to speed up reforestation and to provide livelihood to poor families in rural areas.

Piñol got the idea from Finland where agro-forestry farming accounts for 20 percent of the gross domestic product and remains to be heavily-forested.

He said he will propose to reforest a million hectares of land within three to five years.

“It is time for us to be ambitious (in reforesting our lands)... Unlike the Finnish model, the Bantay Kagubatan is a stewardship program where poor rural families are assigned to guard an area of five hectares per family,” Piñol said.

He added the agro-forestry program is open to private companies, including foreign-owned if allowed by law, under lease contracts of 50 up to 100 years “for sustainability.”

Piñol said the watershed areas he wants prioritized under his proposal include the Kalayaan watershed, the Sierra Madre mountain ranges, the Pampanga River watershed area, the Panay watershed area, and the Mindanao River Basin watershed area.

Piñol added the program’s focus will be on tree species that could be harvested in five to 10 years, as well as a tree species for permanent forested areas. The program will also engage families to plant at least 500 tree seedlings of both harvested and indigenous tree species.

“For every growing seedling, a family would get P2 as incentive or a total of P5,000 a month if it attains a perfect survival rate. In addition, the family would receive livelihood projects like raising native pigs and free-range chicken,” he said, adding that families will also be taught to plant high value crops like black pepper, coffee, cacao, abaca, yam and mushroom culture.