

# Govt eyes stakeholders' help to 'revive' Laguna de Bay

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*In Photo: Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) personnel participate in the demolition of illegal fish pens and cages in Laguna de Bay on January 26. Joining them are the Philippine National Police and the National Bureau of Investigation. The Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) and the Laguna Lake Development Authority (LLDA) are eyeing to tap various stakeholders within the Laguna de Bay region to help revive the country's largest freshwater lake.*

Environment Undersecretary Arturo T. Valdez, also the National Anti-Environmental Crime Task Force (NAECTF) head, said reviving the lake to make it productive once more begins with clearing the lake of illegal fish pens

and fish cages. He said the ambitious target to clear the lake's surface by June 2017 is possible only with the help of various stakeholders.

Disappointed by the progress of the ongoing demolition of the illegal structures in Laguna de Bay, which started on January 26, the official said they are now looking at tapping people living in communities near the Laguna de Bay.

He said the DENR and LLDA, led by newly appointed General Manager Jaime Medina, will meet this week to work out a plan that will hasten the on-going demolition of fish pens and fish cages within the Laguna de Bay.

Medina, who took over as general manager of the LLDA on Monday last week, said they target to clear the lake's 2,000 hectares by the end of year.

Valdez said that, while LLDA's target is realistic, the NAECTF's goal is to clear the lake of all illegal fish pens and cages by June 2017.

"It [demolition] is too slow. I am disappointed. We need to [hasten] the demolition to meet our target to clear [the lake of] all illegal structures by June this year," Valdez said.

He said the demolition crew has been removing fish pens and fish cages since January 26, but said the job will be a lot faster with small fishermen helping in the operation. According to the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources (BFAR) data, there are 23,678 registered fishermen who regularly catch fish within Laguna de Bay as of 2016.

During the first day of the dismantling of illegal structures, the LLDA was able to remove two fish pens only, effectively clearing 100 hectares of the lake's surface.

“We still need to meet [Medina] to work things out. But definitely, fishermen who will take part will receive something for helping demolish fish pens and fish cages,” Valdez said.

He also said he has also reached out to at least five bishops in the dioceses around the Laguna de Bay region to help accomplish the task.

Valdez said the only way to revive the Laguna de Bay is by stopping the operation of fish pens and fish cages. That way, he said, small fishermen would have more areas to cover to fish.

“If the community will help us, the demolition will be a lot faster,” he said. He added that abandoned fish cages and fish pens would be the first to go.

Valdez said operators of fish cages and fish pens are welcome to voluntarily demolish their fish pens and fish cages after harvesting their stocks. He, however, warned that all fish-cage operations must abide by the fish-cage operation moratorium ordered by Environment Secretary Regina Paz L. Lopez.

The Laguna de Bay, the country’s largest freshwater lake, is also the biggest aquaculture hub in the country, with over 13,000 hectares of its 90,000 hectares surface area being utilized to raise *bangus* (Milk fish) and tilapia.

The estimated annual fish output from fish-cage and fish-pen operations in 2015 was recorded at 62,915.91 metric tons (MT), according to the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA). This is twice the 36,185.29 MT of fish caught in open waters during the same period.

Most *bangus* and tilapia supplies in the local market in Metro Manila and around the Laguna de Bay came from the bay, fanning fears that the price of the two most common and affordable fish in the market will go up in the ensuing

months as supply might go down. The number of fish cages and fish pens within the Laguna de Bay swelled since the 1970s because of its popularity among businessmen, who took advantage of the government's policy to promote food security.

According to LLDA, only municipal fishing is allowed in Laguna de Bay, but commercial fishing in deep sea, where the depth is beyond 7 meters, is also allowed.

Last December, taking the cue from President Duterte, Lopez ordered a one-year moratorium in the building of fish pens and fish cages in the area. Since last December, the DENR has not renewed the permits of fish-cage and fish-pen operators, making the operation illegal.

This effectively stopped the operation of 223 fishing companies, 14 cooperatives and 117 individuals with permits to operate prior to the moratorium.

The DENR, through the NAECTF chief, vowed to spare fish traps, or *baklad*, built by small fishermen to boost their daily fish catch. However, Valdez said he would have to meet with *baklad* operators for regulatory purposes.

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