SFRs: heart of Bingawan's food security program

By **RIY Adan**

Mayor Ted Plagata of Bingawan

The first tilapia netcage developed by SEAFDEC/ AQD in the town's small farm reservoir

Declared in 1991 as a 6th class municipality, Bingawan is one of the smallest and poorest towns in Iloilo. The bulk of its 12,000 population is either rice or *kamote* (sweet potato) farmers or sugar cane workers. And being inland, Bingawan has problems getting supply of fresh fish, a cheaper protein source than meat.

This is the reason why the use of SFRs or small farm reservoirs for fish culture was welcomed with much appreciation.

SFRs are man-made water-impounding dams with sizes varying from 300 to 3,000 m². One can say that they form the heart of Bingawan's livelihood – considering the many purposes they serve. SFRs are used for irrigation, duck raising, gardening, and even in managing livestocks.

Recently, the national government funded the construction of more SFRs in line with its program on *Integrated Comprehensive Delivery of Social Services* to alleviate poverty. When SEAFDEC/AQD established a netcage tilapia culture in Bingawan, the use of SFRs intensified.

The Bingawan - AQD collaboration

Before AQD came into the picture, Bingawanons solely relied on the Malitbog creek for their fish supply. This certainly was not enough to provide for the whole town.

"We are very grateful to AQD for introducing tilapia culture. We now know how to culture tilapia – from getting the fingerlings to harvest," Bingawan Mayor Ted Peter Plagata said.

All 14 barangays now have SFRs, bringing the total number of SFRs in Bingawan to 120. All these units are stocked with tilapia. However, because of the high cost of constructing netcages, farmers do away with the netcage and instead stock the tilapia directly in the SFR. Problems on fingerlings supply and feeds have been encountered. There is growing demand for fingerlings with the increasing number of SFRs, while feeds are much too costly for the farmers.

Mayor Plagata is quick to answer the needs of his constituents. He has already requested AQD to conduct a feasibility study for a tilapia hatchery. The Mayor is also looking for supply of formulated feeds affordable to farmers. Native catfish or *hito* will soon be introduced in the SFRs. *Hito* feed on organic materials, which are less costly than commercial feeds. Both tilapia and *hito* have been found to be economically feasible in Bingawan.

"If there is no tilapia, people here would really go hungry," said Mayor Plagata. "We are far from the sea, we cannot rely on livestock because it takes time before it can be marketed; there is also the problem of foot-and-mouth disease. We cannot rely on market vendors for fish, and fish is very expensive and most of the time it's not fresh anymore. Farming is a failure because of La Niña, and there is rat and pest infestation."

The Mayor noted that although tilapia culture is profitable, it is being done for food security. This is the observed fact: people do not sell their tilapia to raise money. Instead, they harvest daily just enough for their family's consumption, the real essence of food security.

Food security in Bingawan

Bingawan is a farm-based community, thus all food security programs focus on agriculture, fisheries/aquaculture included. The main thrust of its administration is the construction and development of more SFRs. Hillside farming practices are also closely watched as these impact on existing SFRs. Siltation is one danger.

The LGU plans to implement an intensified integrated farm in each barangay. This, Mayor Plagata said, could win Bingawan the nationwide "Clean and Green" contest for the sixth time as the said contest now has food security-related programs as one of its criteria. On-going projects for food security include cattle and swine dispersal, vegetable farming in all vacant lots in the town and production of a high yielding variety of *palay*. Farm-to-market roads will also be improved.

All these, Mayor Plagata said, will be for the Bingawanons – to make life for everybody better! ###