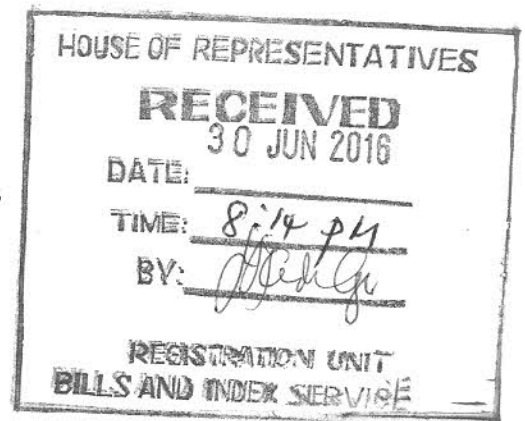


Republic of the Philippines
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
Quezon City

SEVENTEENTH CONGRESS
First Regular Session

HOUSE BILL NO. 558



INTRODUCED BY REPRESENTATIVES

ARIEL B. CASILAO

**CARLOS ISAGANI T. ZARATE, EMMI A. DE JESUS, ANTONIO L. TINIO,
ARLENE D. BROSAS, FRANCE L. CASTRO, AND SARAH JANE I. ELAGO**

EXPLANATORY NOTE

The national economy is predominantly agricultural. Majority of the population in fact belong to the countryside and source their livelihood from agricultural production. Philippine agriculture however has long been characterized as backward, manual and small-scale, with the social context of landlessness being the defining factor that has brought about more than a hundred years of extreme poverty to millions of Filipino peasants.

The underdevelopment of peasant communities in the country is generally typified by, among other impediments to the growth of Philippine rural economy, the continuing imposition of land rent on tenant farmers, the unmitigated onslaught of usury, and the vicious underpricing of farm products that goes along with the exorbitant cost of farm inputs.

Such dire circumstance is further exacerbated by the apparent lack or utter absence of state support to agriculture and the renegeing of concerned government agencies on its service function to vital areas of production such as irrigation.

Irrigation is one of the primary factors for the growth of agricultural productivity. It is crucial especially in the production of major staples – rice and corn – and is therefore key in ensuring the country's food security. It likewise plays an important role in making crop diversification viable, enhancing multi-cropping even during the dry season.

Given the strategic importance of irrigation in pursuing sustained agricultural growth and development, rice self-sufficiency, food security, and the upliftment of the welfare of Filipino farmers, it is the obligation of the state to provide free irrigation services.

There is however much to be desired in the efforts of the state in providing irrigation in the countryside. In 2015, the National Irrigation Administration (NIA) claimed that irrigation development has only reached 57 percent or 1.7 million hectares of land supposedly irrigated out of the targetted 3 million hectares. At least 1.3 million hectare thus are still without irrigation.

The Philippine Statistics Authority meanwhile said in 2013 that 61 percent of the country's rice farms are irrigated through the National Irrigation System (NIS). It should be noted however that the NIS covers only 31 percent of the entire irrigation millieu in the country which includes, among others, smaller but widespread localized or communal irrigation systems.

Worse, previous national administrations, including the last Aquino administration which wholly embraced and adopted the World Bank's principle that water resource is a commodity, have implemented various finance mechanisms to collect irrigation service fees (ISFs) from farmers.

So-called farmer-beneficiaries of the NIS program administered by the NIA and the Irrigators Associations (IA) under the Communal Irrigation Systems (CIS) are forced to pay expensive ISFs. This has led to huge amount of back accounts or unpaid ISFs. These back accounts, which are imposed with penalties and interests, have further burdened the already poor farmers with bigger debts.

Amid the clamor of peasant organizations against irrigation fees, the Aquino administration through the NIA has time and again justified the imposition of ISFs by saying that it is where the salaries of the agency's personnel are sourced. Such claim not only runs counter to the assumption that irrigation is a social service and should be provided at no cost to the beneficiaries, but also falsely presents a situation where NIA employees' sallaries could not be sourced elsewhere or could not possibly be defrayed from the NIA's budget or savings. NIA's budget has in fact ballooned from P1.7 billion in 2013 to P32.7 billion in 2016.

Moreover, despite the fact that water, as a natural resource, belongs to the people and should not be subjected to the control and utilization of local and foreign big corporations for profit, previous governments have promoted the privatization of water services to the sole advantage of private businesses and to the detriment of the people especially the farmers especially through the Aquino administration's so-called Public-Private Partnership (PPP) program.

With Aquino's PPP program, \$1.1-billion worth of dam and water projects have been geared to be auctioned off for investment to local and foreign private companies. Big-ticket dam projects funded through the national budget have been designed primarily for power generation purposes and only secondarily for irrigation services.

Since 2009, the government has entered into the Participatory Irrigation Development Project (PIDP), a World Bank (WB)-assisted project that aims to transform the NIA into a strategically-focused and financially viable irrigation service through restructuring and reform programs in the irrigation sector that will

include purportedly the rehabilitation and modernization of the NIS and the rationalization of the NIA.

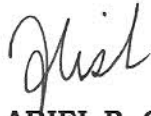
It is the farmers however who are expected to shoulder the payment of such loans through cost-recovery arrangements under the PDIP. This is on top of the already high ISFs collected by the NIA from farmer-beneficiaries who avail of irrigation services.

In the 16th Congress, Anakpawis Representative Fernando Hicap, together with the other representatives of the Makabayan coalition, and in close coordination with farmers organizations, irrigators associations and stakeholders in the agriculture sector, filed this bill seeking the abolition of irrigation service fees collected by the National Irrigation Administration (NIA) and the institutionalization of a genuinely just program that will accelerate irrigation development nationwide. The 16th Congress however failed to pass this bill into law.

The 2016 elections, apparently taking the cue from militant peasant organizations, saw the particular issue of free irrigation conspicuously included among the more articulated campaign promises of a considerable number of candidates. President Rodrigo Duterte himself, during his appearance last February in the Peasant Agenda Forum sponsored by the Kilusang Magbubukid ng Pilipinas (KMP) at the University of the Philippines in Diliman, vowed to pursue rural development through various measures including the implementation of free irrigation service for the benefit of the farming sector.

Indeed, the Filipino farmers, are both serious and hopeful in challenging the present administration to make good on its promise to unburden the sector of irrigation fees and to implement with strong political will a host of other reforms that will usher in genuine rural development.

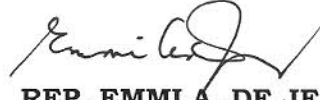
In view of the foregoing, the immediate passage of this bill is earnestly sought.



REP. ARIEL B. CASILAO
ANAKPAWIS Party-list



REP. CARLOS ISAGANI T. ZARATE
BAYAN MUNA Party-list



REP. EMMI A. DE JESUS
GABRIELA Women's Party



REP. ANTONIO L. TINIO
ACT Teachers Party



REP. ARLENE D. BROSAS
GABRIELA Women's Party



REP. FRANCE L. CASTRO
ACT Teachers Party



REP. SARAH JANE I. ELAGO
KABATAAN Party-list

