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Headline: Not time to be timid

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Now is not the time to be timid. This is especially true in addressing our national water crisis. Climate change is upon us. For many years, our government has not only been timid in the water area; it has also been grossly negligent.

This is why the Agri-Fisheries Alliance (AFA) five coalition heads met President Duterte and Christopher Go in a closed-door meeting from 4 to 5:30 in the morning last April 16. In that meeting, Duterte promised change. We have already seen some significant change in the water area.

Anger

Because of their past experience, the farmers are angry. We have 5.7 million hectares of denuded forests. Our government should not have allowed this. The result is that the topsoil, with all its harmful elements, washes down to destroy our farmland fertility. It also enters rivers, which then overflow and causes floods. Finally, the absent trees can no longer provide the carbon sequestration necessary to compensate for the harmful greenhouse gas emissions in the lowlands.

The fisherfolk are also upset. The 500,000 hectares of mangroves during the Spanish times have now decreased to 193,000 hectares. Excess water coming from the lands bearing harmful elements do not go through the mangrove filtering process and flow into the sea, destroying ecological balance. This is where the fish breed, strive and grow. Less mangroves, less fish, less income for fisherfolk and even more poverty in the poorest sector of our nation. Similarly, storm surges are not protected by the mangroves. These prevent the water from causing life-threatening floods to coastal area residents.

For the two areas of denuded forests and absent mangroves, President Duterte is delivering the change he has promised. Since bamboo for reforestation requires very little maintenance and can even provide income, the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) is increasing our current 35,000 bamboo hectares to one million during the Duterte administration. Similarly, it is rehabilitating and increasing our current 190,000 mangrove hectares to 300,000. There is certainly no timidity in these areas. These ground-breaking initiatives are fully supported by Senate Climate Change Chair Loren Legarda and Environment Secretary Gina Lopez.

Water Basin

However, we still see timidity in many other areas. An example is the table below, which shows Department of Environment and Natural Resources' River Basin Coordinating Office (RBCO) budget for 2017 and 2018.

RBCO is correct in focusing on 18 critical major river basins out of a total 421 principal basins. According to National Water Resources Board (NWRB) Director Bill David, these are found in 12 water resource regions. However, though P15 million was given in 2017 to the Head Office, only P7 million was provided to support the 18 river basins. This is absurd.

An RBCO official confirmed that the 2017 budget was totally inadequate. He therefore submitted the 2018 recommendation shown in the second column. But this would strengthen only two out of the 18 basins. He did not ask for a bigger budget because he thought it might be considered too aggressive.

On the contrary, this submitted budget is too timid. He should instead submit what he really believes is necessary, which is shown in the third column. This covers all 18 basins, instead of just two.

If one argues that P295 million is too much, consider the National Irrigation Administration (NIA)'s budget. It is recommended to increase from P37 billion this year to P60 billion next year. Taking the proposed P295-million basin budget from NIA's P60-billion budget hardly makes a dent in NIA. And yet river basin management that includes watersheds and crosses political boundaries has been shown to be a key solution in addressing the water problem in several countries.

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The Tripartite National Water Roadmap and June Summit, which unites the legislature, the executive branch and the private sector, must now identify at least 5 key strategies that President Duterte must start and finish during his administration. He has already done this with his bold reforestation and mangrove strategies.

We must now jointly transform our current timidity to decisive action if we are to overcome our water crisis. It is about time.