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Food Contamination Set to Rise as Japan Fights Radiation Crisis at Reactor

By Jae Hur - Mar 27, 2011

Radioactive contamination in food is likely to increase as Japan enters a third straight week of battling the biggest nuclear-energy crisis since Chernobyl.

“The number of radiation-affected foods will likely increase as each prefecture is testing its produce,” Taku Ohhara, an official at the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, said in a phone interview yesterday. Some 99 products, including milk and vegetables, were found to be contaminated in Tokyo and five prefectures to its north and east as of late March 26, according to the health ministry’s [statement](#) on its website.

Shoppers in Hong Kong, Singapore and Sydney are shunning Japanese food products in supermarkets amid concern about radiation. The plight adds to the drags on economic growth caused by as much as 25 trillion yen (\$307 billion) of damage from the March 11 earthquake and tsunami. Japan exported 481 billion yen of food last year, accounting for 0.7 percent of total exports, government figures show.

Radiation on some vegetables produced in Fukushima and Chiba prefectures was higher than legal standards, Japan’s Health Ministry said two days ago, according to Kyodo News. Chiba detected above-maximum radiation on 11 vegetables including red-leaf lettuce, Kyodo reported yesterday.

Tolerable Levels

Among products found to be contaminated, red-leaf lettuce in Ibaraki prefecture had 2,300 Becquerels per kilogram of iodine-131, exceeding the ministry’s limit of 2,000 Becquerels. Parsley in Chiba on March 22 had a reading as high as 3,100 Becquerels and spinach as high as 3,500 Becquerels on March 24, according to data on the health ministry’s website.

Singapore expanded its suspension on fruit and vegetable imports to include Tokyo and two other prefectures after more radioactive contaminants were detected in two samples of vegetables, the Agri-Food & Veterinary Authority of Singapore said in an e-mailed statement March 26. The city-

state had previously halted imports of milk, seafood and meat from four other affected areas in Japan.

Japan plans to urge other nations to observe World Trade Organization rules after the U.S., China and others halted imports of some Japanese food products on radiation concern, the Nikkei newspaper said yesterday. Rules require restrictions on imports and exports to have a scientific basis, the paper said.

China Monitoring

China's Ministry of Health started radiation monitoring of food and water in 14 provinces and cities after the nuclear accident, according to a statement on its website yesterday.

The regions include provinces and cities in northeastern and coastal areas of China and the capital of Beijing, the ministry said. The low levels of radioactive iodine detected in the atmosphere of northeastern Heilongjiang province won't pollute food and water in China or affect people's health, the ministry said.

While Japanese Chief Cabinet Secretary [Yukio Edano](#) said yesterday that "some progress" is being made in solving the problems at the crippled Fukushima Dai-Ichi nuclear power plant, radiation in water at the No. 2 reactor soared to more than 1,000 millisieverts an hour. The level is higher than the dose that would cause vomiting, hair loss and diarrhea, according to the World Nuclear Association.

Water may be leaking from the reactor, [Sakae Muto](#), a vice president at plant operator [Tokyo Electric Power Co.](#), said at a news conference early today in Tokyo.

Water Safety

The highest radiation readings so far suggest Japan's crisis has yet to be contained more than two weeks after an earthquake and tsunami knocked out power to the plant. Thousands of tons of water dumped on the reactors may now be leaking radioactive elements outside the plant. Engineers are working on ways to drain and store the contaminated water.

Elevated radiation levels, fires and explosions at four of the six reactors at the nuclear plant have hampered repair work since it was hit by a tsunami following the magnitude-9.0 temblor on March 11. The number of dead and missing following the quake had reached 27,116 as of 10 a.m., according to the National Police Agency in Tokyo.

Radioactive iodine in seawater collected near the Nos. 5 and 6 reactors of the nuclear plant was 1,150 times the legal limit, Japan's nuclear safety agency said today.

Tap Water

Meantime, there were signs of improvement in the safety of tap water in Japan's capital. Radiation in water was found in one out of three Tokyo water purification plants based on samples taken, the Tokyo metropolitan government said. Two out of three facilities detected radioactive levels March 26.

The only water purification plant that found radiation was the Asaka plant in Saitama, north of Tokyo, where the reading of radioactive iodine-131 fell for a second day to 27 Becquerels per kilogram. The Nuclear Safety Commission of Japan's limit for adult consumption is 300 Becquerels per kilo. Officials have set a tentative limit for infant use at 100 Becquerels.

Fukushima prefecture asked local farmers to delay rice and other crops because of concerns the soil may be contaminated by radiation from the plant, the Asahi newspaper reported.

Japan will be forced to import more processed food and meat in the aftermath of the crisis, Macquarie Commodities Research said March 25. While economic losses may affect demand in the medium term, the impact won't be large, the researcher said.

In 2009, more than 70 percent of Japan's food exports went to Hong Kong, the U.S., China, Taiwan and South Korea, according to the Japan External Trade Organization.

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