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Fukushima May Abandon Rice Planting as Soil Tainted by Radiation

By Aya Takada - Mar 28, 2011

Farmers in Fukushima prefecture, Japan's fourth-biggest rice producer, may not plant the grain this year after tainted soil was discovered near a crippled nuclear plant leaking radiation.

"Farmers cannot grow anything without assurance from the government that their paddies are safe for food production," Takuo Ichiya, agricultural production manager at the Central Union of Agricultural Cooperatives, Japan's largest farmers group, said today in an interview. "Concerns about radioactive contamination may hinder planting not only in Fukushima but neighboring prefectures too."

Hazardous radiation levels found at two damaged reactors delayed repair work at the Fukushima Dai-Ichi power plant, site of the worst nuclear disaster since Chernobyl. Shoppers in Hong Kong, Singapore and Sydney are shunning Japanese food products in supermarkets amid concern about radiation. The Japanese government restricted milk and vegetable shipments in the area after tainted products were discovered through random testing.

Rice production in Fukushima and neighboring Ibaraki and Miyagi prefectures amounted to 1.22 million metric tons last year, representing 15 percent of Japan's total output.

The main growing regions are in the northern island of Hokkaido, away from the affected area on the main island of Honshu, followed by Niigata prefecture in the northwest and Akita prefecture, which shares a border with Fukushima.

Milk, Vegetables

Radioactive contamination in food is likely to increase as each prefecture tests 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.

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

Japan's Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries is collecting data for each crop on acceptable levels of radioactivity in the soil. Farmland testing may not start by the middle of April, when farmers in Fukushima normally start sowing rice, said Takashi Himeda, director at the ministry's food safety and consumer affairs bureau.

'Useless' to Plant

"It is useless to produce crops that may end up destroyed because of contamination," Himeda said today in a phone interview. "If farmers may have no other option but to abandon planting, they should be compensated for lost production by Tokyo Electric Power."

[Tokyo Electric Power Co.](#) President [Masataka Shimizu](#) is facing calls to quit after the crisis at the utility's nuclear plant capped a tenure that has seen \$26 billion wiped off the company's market value. The company has been battling to end the release of radiation at the plant, struck 17 days ago by Japan's biggest earthquake on record and a tsunami.

The company faces a maximum 120 billion yen (\$1.5 billion) in costs to cover third-party damages resulting from the accident, according to Japanese law. Chief Cabinet Secretary [Yukio Edano](#) said this week the government will aid farmers if the utility is unable to bear the costs.

Tolerable Levels

The government has discovered 163,000 Becquerels per kilogram of radioactive cesium and 1.17 million Becquerels of radioactive iodine in the soil in Iitate village, about 40 kilometers from the Fukushima nuclear plant.

Japan's health ministry tentatively set tolerable levels of radioactivity for each food. For grains including rice, the level is set at 500 Becquerels per kilogram of cesium and 100 Becquerels per kilogram of uranium. The nation's Food Safety Commission is assessing the tentative standards for possible revision as early as this week.

Japan, the world's largest corn importer, is self-sufficient in rice. Fukushima produced 439,100 tons of paddy rice last year, accounting for 5.3 percent of the nation's total output, data from the agriculture ministry showed.

Ibaraki prefecture, south of Fukushima, was Japan's fifth- biggest rice producer last year with 392,800 tons. Miyagi prefecture, north of Fukushima, was ranked as the sixth-biggest grower with 391,300 tons.

Other Regions

"If rice production is hindered in areas affected by the nuclear plant accident, growers in other regions will increase planting to make up for the loss," said Ichiya at the central union, known as JA-Zenchu.

Japan's food-rice stockpiles held by the private sector and the government are forecast to climb 2.5 percent to 3.24 million tons by the end of June because of declining consumption, according to the agriculture ministry. The volume is the biggest in eight years and equivalent to almost five months of consumption, the ministry said in July.

The government also held 880,000 tons of foreign rice in inventories at the end of October last year. Japan agreed to give minimum-market access to exporting countries at the Uruguay Round of world trade talks in 1993, buying 770,000 tons a year from overseas.

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