

Alien plant species invading Fukushima restricted zone

The Yomiuri Shimbun

Alien plant species have been flourishing on idled rice paddies in Fukushima Prefecture, where entry is restricted due to the accident at Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant.

The alien species have begun having an impact on eco-systems one year and seven months after the the nuclear crisis occurred.

Biologists have said the vital coexistence of agriculture with nature is once again under the spotlight.

Koichi Nemoto, a 75-year-old farmer, said: "[Alien plant species] are growing thicker than last year. So it's hard for me to know where my rice paddy is."

His idle farm is in the Odaka district of Minami-Soma, Fukushima Prefecture, about 10 kilometers north of the nuclear plant.

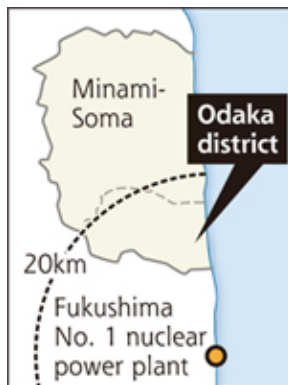
Nemoto had to push through weeds, including Canada goldenrod, which grows twice as tall as an average person, to reach his farm.

Roots of the plant, which came from North America and has strong reproductive capabilities, grow 50 centimeters deep. Because of this, the plant obstructs other plants' growth.

"If this were a field, it would be OK to dig up the soil. But if it continues for years, rice paddies will be ruined," Nemoto said.



Koichi Nemoto walks in his rice paddy, where Canada goldenrod and other weeds have grown unchecked in Minami-Soma, Fukushima Prefecture, on Oct. 6.



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This year, Nemoto cultivated rice in part of his paddy on a test basis. In Minami-Soma, normal rice planting has been restricted in the entire city.

This year, test planting was done on a total of about 15 hectares in 134 locations.

Nemoto's rice paddy is in a zone being prepared for residents' return, and he is not allowed to stay there overnight.

He has a one-hour and 20-minute commute to his farm from Soma, where he lives as an evacuee, to maintain irrigation channels and cut weeds on the farm.

Proliferation of weeds is not the only problem in rice paddies and fields left untended.

In early September, when Nemoto hoped to harvest, rice at the test cultivation sites had been eaten by boars.

In the past, such things only happened near mountains. However, as there are no people living there and limited hunting, the animals targeted the rice, which was the only grain in the area.

Nemoto picked up some of the plants and with a bitter smile said: "Boars must be struggling to survive. But I feel like I'm ready to give up."

Nemoto belongs to the Fukushima Organic Agricultural Network. Some members made a presentation at the 11th meeting of the Conference of the Parties of the U.N. Convention on Biological Diversity (COP 11) in India.

They explained the difficulty in continuing farming on radiation-contaminated land and how important it is to maintain "satoyama," or village forests. The presentation garnered a great deal of attention.

Hiroshi Hasegawa, 51, a director of the network who made a presentation, instructed affected farmers at home about agricultural techniques and measuring radiation levels.

Hasegawa said: "Before the nuclear accident, there was a rich ecosystem with animals living in rice paddies and birds or other predators eating them.

"Today, after the accident, I feel the idea of agriculture coexisting with nature is also important for ecosystems."

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