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Fukushima's 'contaminated' rice still in storage two years on

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By TETSUYA KASAI/ Staff Writer

FUKUSHIMA--Officials are still struggling to dispose of some 17,000 tons of contaminated rice produced in Fukushima Prefecture after the nuclear disaster there two years ago.

Most of the rice, called "kakurimai" (rice separated for disposal), was produced in 2011.

The central government wants to incinerate the rice, but disposal facility operators have been reluctant to do so for fear that harmful rumors could start circulating if they handle contaminated material.

Some farmers have proposed using the rice for purposes other than human consumption.

At a private warehouse located in an inland area of the prefecture, rice bags labeled "kakurimai" and marked with an X are piled up in a small room. They are among the 71 bags--2 tons in total--of rice produced in 2012 that were found to contain radioactive cesium above the national standard of 100 becquerels per kilogram.

But that amount is dwarfed by the 2011 total. When rice produced at one farm in a district that year was found to contain more radioactive cesium than the government limit, all rice harvested across the district were left in limbo.

As a result, a total of 17,000 tons of rice harvested in 71 districts in 13 municipalities was banned for shipment.

However, more than 95 percent of the unshipped rice was eventually found to have contained less radioactivity than the government standard, sources said.

Kakurimai produced in 2011 is being handled by an association jointly set up by an affiliate with the farm ministry and the Japan Agriculture Group.

The association has purchased kakurimai from producers at 10,800 yen (\$109) to 12,500 yen per 60 kg.

However, it was not easy to find storage facilities for the rice as warehouse owners often refused to accept it.

"If people learn we have 'contaminated' rice in storage, we would suffer from harmful rumors," an official at the association quoted one owner as saying.

It was only late last year that all the bags of rice ended up in storage at several warehouses in the prefecture.

Fukushima prefectural authorities decided to treat kakurimai as general waste for disposal.

The association initially tried to dispose of the waste at incinerators run by municipalities, but found that their incinerators were structurally incapable of burning the rice grains.

It turned to private operators of incinerators that were capable of burning rice grains, but negotiations were difficult since they, too, were reluctant to accept the request, saying they would suffer from harmful rumors if they burned radioactivity-contaminated material.

In February, an operator started incinerating rice on a trial basis and began full-scale incineration of rice from a municipality in March.

Still, it has so far incinerated only about 10 percent of the 17,000 tons of rice, far from the association's goal of completing disposal of the kakurimai rice produced in 2011 by the end of this year.

Additionally, farmers and shipment service operators have fundamental reservations about incinerating rice.

"I think it would be a waste (to dispose of) the rice when most of it is below the government standard," a man in the shipping business said.

Some farmers suggest using the rice for bio fuel or as a feedstuff for livestock.

A rice farmer in his 60s in Fukushima said, "I hope they will find a way to effectively use the rice."

But the farm ministry says that is impossible.

Citing the fact that kakurimai producers have already been paid compensation by Tokyo Electric Power Co., operator of the stricken Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant, an official said, "It would be difficult to find an option other than disposal."

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