Nuclear fears contaminate sales for Tohoku farmers

By Patrice Novotny

TOKYO — Mayumi Kurasawa’s seaweed company saw seven of its factories swept away by the March 11, 2011 tsunami. Nearly two years later, sales continue to be eroded by consumer fears over nuclear contamination.

“Our seaweed is checked every day, and I guarantee you that it’s safe,” she told AFP during a recent visit to Tokyo to promote the company she works for, Kawashu. “But we are selling two-thirds less than before Fukushima.”

Like many farmers in the Tohoku region in northeast Japan, Kurasawa is struggling to sell her produce to a wary population that remains unconvinced by reassurances of food safety.

The problem is the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant in the region’s south, where reactors went into meltdown after cooling systems were swamped by the tsunami.

The reactors spewed radioactive contamination into the atmosphere, forcing the evacuation of tens of thousands of people.

Despite the Kawashu company’s production sites being 300 kilometers away from the nuclear plant, in Iwate Prefecture, it is struggling to sell its “wakame” seaweed.

“Many clients prefer produce from South Korea or from China over us. They think it’s safer,” said Kurasawa.

Previously lauded for their quality, Tohoku products from wasabi, mushrooms, fruit and cereals to salmon and sake (rice wine) are now regarded with suspicion by many Japanese customers as a consequence of Fukushima.

Sales for Tohoku’s products have dropped 60 to 70% on average against pre-accident levels.

In the aftermath of the disaster, the legal limit for radioactive cesium in Japanese foods was raised in line with international emergency procedures before returning to normal in April last year.

This return to “normal” should have reassured consumers, but the stigma has lingered from temporary bans imposed on beef, milk, mushrooms, vegetables and rice from Fukushima prefecture after they were found to contain levels of radioactive cesium above government safety limits.

Public faith that certain foods were safe has also been hit by instances of fraud, in which wholesalers have attempted to sell Fukushima produce under the labels of other regions.

The products in question were found to not be dangerous, but the deception, along with doubts over government food screening measures cobbled together in the wake of the accident, has made life even harder for farmers.

Consumers and experts have also voiced suspicions that officials understated potential health risks due to worries about potential economic fallout and the complications of possible compensation.
Food shops, skeptical about the government’s legal limit of 100 becquerels of radioactive cesium per kilogram for food, have begun their own testing regimens.

The country’s largest supermarket chain, Aeon, has been enforcing zero-risk policy.

“If we detect radioactive cesium in a product over measurable limits, we stop procuring it from the area it is produced,” Aeon spokesman Norihito Ikkai told AFP. “As a result, it enables customers to buy our products free from anxiety.”

In the area around the power-station, the majority of produce is now well below the legal limit for radiation and most produce, plants and animals raised in other prefectures of Tohoku, pass inspections.

“All products sold here are checked and healthy,” said Katsuyasu Ito, the chef of French restaurant L’aurole in Oshu, Iwate Prefecture. “But anxieties remain among consumers when it comes to Tohoku products.”

Exports have also been hit, falling 8.3% from 2010 to 451.1 billion yen in 2011, according to statistics from the agriculture, forestry and fishery ministry.

“A total of 45 countries and areas restricted food imports from Japan following the nuclear plant accident, resulting in declines in shipments,” a ministry official said. “Generally, they are easing the curbs except for South Korea.”

In the town of Soma, 40 kilometers from the Fukushima Daiichi power plant, locally grown rice is often up to scratch but only locals want to buy it.

Masahiro Saito, a chicken farmer who has seen a 20% loss in his turnover, feels less unlucky than his cereal and vegetable-growing neighbors, some of whom have had to pack up for good.

“At the peak of the radiation in March 2011, I recorded 5 becquerels of radioactive cesium per kilogram on my chickens,” said Saito—well below the government limit.

Like most of his counterparts, he has raised his animals on American corn, which explains why he and other farmers have suffered less than others in the region.

But the consequences of the nuclear accident are still being felt two years later on the overall economy, not just agriculture, and on the daily lives of hundreds of thousands of people in the region.

The clean-up around Fukushima is expected to take decades and experts warn that some settlements may have to be abandoned.

Anecdotally, the pressures are mounting and stories of people whose livelihoods have dried up abound in the Japanese press.

The Cabinet Office says up until last November, 76 people in the region took their own lives in connection with the disaster.

Of the deaths, 21 were linked to financial and livelihood issues and nine to employment issues, the government said.

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10 Comments (LEAVE A COMMENT)

Crazedinjapan JAN. 15, 2013 - 07:57AM JST

The public has lost faith because the governing bodies have misled, misinformed, hid, altered and didn’t inform before. How can you expect the public to trust a deceptive group of inspectors and companies. If it isn’t labeled wrong its being covered up to some degree by greed or ignorance for people’s safety.
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Yubaru  JAN. 15, 2013 - 08:12AM JST

"Our seaweed is checked every day, and I guarantee you that it's safe"

Sorry if I don't believe you. Rice from Miyagi, 2 years after has more radiation in it than last year, and think about how much cesium and other chemicals that were released into the ocean in the area around Fukushima and you want us average consumer to believe you on face value alone? Sorry I want to live. If however what you say is true you and everyone else need to do a better job of letting people know that your products are safe. But to some, no matter what you do won't ever be enough.

Yubaru  JAN. 15, 2013 - 08:16AM JST

The country's largest supermarket chain, Aeon, has been enforcing zero-risk policy.

I would wish that ALL chains would enforce this policy.

kurisupisu  JAN. 15, 2013 - 08:25AM JST

How many times are checks carried out that screen all products? 100% of the time? Is this why food over 'government limits' keeps turning up all over the country? The place of origin is also concealed with little sanction for the merchant. Fish is landed at distant ports with the landing port as point of origin. Even rubber tyres from Japan have been refused entry into foreign countries due to dangerous levels of radioactivity. Once radioactive soil is not going to become 'safe' after a year or two-incineration of radioactive debris is ongoing around the country-the damaged plants are still discharging radiation with any form of control decades away! Free speech on the issue is denied so who in their right mind would willingly consume any food produced in Japan full stop?

humanrights  JAN. 15, 2013 - 08:54AM JST

I like how it says, *Nuclear fears contaminate sales for Tohoku farmers*. it should say "Nuclear REALITY contaminates..."

slumdog  JAN. 15, 2013 - 09:09AM JST

I would wish that ALL chains would enforce this policy.

It would be nice if the government did, too.

ChibaChick  JAN. 15, 2013 - 09:15AM JST

"Our seaweed is checked every day, and I guarantee you that it's safe,"

No problem - just pop the name of the company independantly testing your product on your packaging, along with their results and I will happily buy it. But until then please forgive me if I dont believe a word that comes out of anyone with a vested interests mouths when it comes to produce from affected areas.

Yubaru  JAN. 15, 2013 - 09:26AM JST

It would be nice if the government did, too.

While I agree wholeheartedly sadly though it wouldn't be the government of Japan if it did.

Zero risk is not in the accepted vernacular of the Japanese government.

Disillusioned  JAN. 15, 2013 - 09:36AM JST

This drop in consumer confidence is a direct result of all the lies and cover-ups from TEPCO and the J-Gov. The J-Gov has done very little to ensure that Tohoku produce is safe to consume. Having some jiji on the idiot box giving apologies and promises is not enough. Nobody trusts the anything the J-Gov or TEPCO says anymore. Plus, the incidents of food from Tohoku being labelled as coming from other areas. The only way to restore consumer confidence is to have totally independent and possibly foreign inspection teams guaranteeing the safety and quality of produce from Tohoku. In the meantime, the producers should be seeking compensation from TEPCO.

moomoochoo  JAN. 15, 2013 - 09:37AM JST

If you want people to buy your products you need to regain their trust.

Have your produce INDEPENDENTLY ASSESSED for contamination with results open for public evaluation regardless of the results.

Nancy Foust

Ah the new push to end "harmful rumor". Expect more of these types of news stories blaming the whole thing on those pesky consumers and their "fears".

The government failed and has done nothing to regain public trust when it comes to food. The only thing that will regain consumer trust is a detailed system that can not be gamed to prove the food you hold in your hands isn't contaminated.
BTW the US govt isn't any better on this issue. The intervention limit is 1200 bq/kg. The FDA pulled some pre-disaster products off store shelves in the US, tested it and declared there to be no problem. Their follow up testing involved foods highly unlikely to be contaminated and they refused to document the location in Japan the item came from. Sure something from Okinawa isn't going to show contaminated and it is "Japan" so they call it good.

JAN. 15, 2013 - 10:53AM JST