

Rice harvested in no-entry zone being checked for radiation levels

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By YOSHIAKI ISHIGE/ Staff Writer

OKUMA, Fukushima Prefecture--Wearing white protective gear and wielding sickles, officials of the Okuma town government on Oct. 10 cut and bundled rice plants grown in the no-entry zone established after last year's nuclear disaster.

The plants were cultivated on an experimental basis to determine the radiation level of rice grown in radioactively contaminated soil.

The rice field, close to the Okuma town government office building, is located about 6 kilometers from the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant, which spewed radioactive materials after it was damaged in the Great East Japan Earthquake and tsunami of March 11, 2011.

In June this year, the town government planted the "koshihikari" variety of rice in two plots of the rice field, each measuring 4 meters by 4 meters. In one of the two plots, the surface soil was removed to a depth of 5 centimeters to decontaminate the land. In the other plot, no decontamination work was conducted.

The harvested plants will be dried for about two weeks, after which the unmilled rice will be tested for radiation levels.

The findings from the experiment, which are expected to show how much radioactive cesium the rice absorbed from the highly contaminated soil, will be useful in restoring agriculture in the town.

"We cannot imagine when people of this town can return to their homes. It may be several years from now or several decades from now. But we hope that the result of this experiment will help farmers who want to return to this town to resume their farming in the future," said Kiyoyuki Matsumoto, 35, a town government official who is managing the two plots of the rice field.

Central, prefectural or municipal governments are conducting experimental rice cultivation in 14 municipalities in Fukushima Prefecture.

The town of Hirono began measuring radiation levels on Oct. 9 for rice raised there.

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