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Japanese Struggle to Protect Their Food Supply

By **MARTIN FACKLER**

ONAMI, Japan — In the fall, as this valley's rice paddies ripened into a carpet of gold, inspectors came to check for radioactive contamination.

Onami sits just 35 miles northwest of the wrecked Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant, which spewed radioactive cesium over much of this rural region last March. However, the government inspectors declared Onami's rice safe for consumption after testing just two of its 154 rice farms.

Then, a few days later, a skeptical farmer in Onami, who wanted to be sure his rice was safe for a visiting grandson, had his crop tested, only to find it contained levels of cesium that exceeded the government's safety limit. In the weeks that followed, more than a dozen other farmers also found unsafe levels of cesium. An ensuing panic forced the Japanese government to intervene, with promises to test more than 25,000 rice farms in eastern Fukushima Prefecture, where the plant is located.

The uproar underscores how, almost a year after [a huge earthquake and tsunami](#) caused a triple meltdown at the Fukushima Daiichi plant, Japan is still struggling to protect its food supply from radioactive contamination. The discovery of tainted rice in Onami and [a similar case in July involving contaminated beef](#) have left officials scrambling to plug the exposed gaps in the government's food-screening measures, many of which were hastily introduced after the accident.

The repeated failures have done more than raise concerns that some Japanese may have been exposed to unsafe levels of radiation in their food, as regrettable as that is. They have also had a corrosive effect on public confidence in the food-monitoring efforts, with a growing segment of the public and even many experts coming to believe that officials have understated or even covered up the true extent of the public health risk in order to limit both the economic damage and the size of potential compensation payments.

Critics say farm and health officials have been too quick to allow food to go to market without

adequate testing, or have ignored calls from consumers to fully disclose test results. And they say the government can no longer pull the wool over the public's eyes, as they contend it has done routinely in the past.

“Since the accident, the government has tried to continue its business-as-usual approach of understating the severity of the accident and insisting that it knows best,” said Mitsuhiro Fukao, an economics professor at Keio University in Tokyo who has written about the loss of trust in government. “But the people are learning from the blogs, Twitter and Facebook that the government's food-monitoring system is simply not credible.”

One result has been a burst of civic activism, rare in a nation with a weak civil society that depends on its elite bureaucrats more than citizen groups to safeguard the national interests, including public health. No longer confident that government is looking out for their interests, newly formed groups of consumers and even farmers are beginning their own radiation-monitoring efforts.

More than a dozen radiation-testing stations, mostly operated by volunteers, have appeared across Fukushima and as far south as Tokyo, 150 miles from the plant, aiming to offer radiation monitoring that is more stringent and transparent than that of the government.

“No one trusts the national government's safety standards,” said Ichio Muto, 59, who farms organic mushrooms in Nihonmatsu, 25 miles northwest of the Fukushima Daiichi plant. “The only way to win back customers is to tell them everything, so they can decide for themselves what to buy.”

Mr. Muto is one of 250 farmers in Nihonmatsu who started a makeshift radiation-testing center at a local truck stop. On a recent morning, he and a half-dozen other farmers gathered in the truck stop's tiny kitchen. There, they diced daikon, leeks and other produce before putting them separately into a \$40,000 testing device that was donated by a nongovernmental group.

The farmers test samples of every crop they grow, and then they post the results on the Internet for all to see. Mr. Muto knows firsthand how painful such full disclosure can be: he destroyed his entire crop of 110,000 mushrooms after tests revealed high radiation levels.

But such efforts do not address one of the biggest questions asked by consumers: whether farming should be allowed at all in areas near the plant.

Farmers like Mr. Muto say they have no choice because they have seen little if any compensation and must make a living. So far, Fukushima Daiichi's operator, [Tokyo Electric Power](#), has offered full compensation only to farmers in the zones that were evacuated, which

were within 12 miles of the plant, and a larger area to the northwest, where winds carried much of the fallout.

That approach is in line with the government's basic stance since the accident: limiting as much as possible the size of the land area affected in this densely populated nation. Officials admit that many people question the wisdom of allowing farms so near the plant to operate, but they say that once they stop farming in an area because of radiation, it will take years to persuade the public to allow them to start again.

"Consumers might think the best choice is not to farm here, or just throw the food away, but producers see it differently," said Wataru Amano, chief of the rice section of the Fukushima prefectural government.

However, farmers in Onami have a different view. Even before the discovery of tainted rice in November, they said, the government's policy had left them no choice but to keep farming. Now, they said, they face economic ruin because no one will buy their rice.

"This happened because those up above did not want to pay compensation," said a 74-year-old rice farmer, who gave only her surname, Sato, for fear that further association with radiation could spell the end of her farm, which has been in the family for six generations. "We did what they told us to do, and now we are being wiped out."

Farming officials say they have too few radiation-detecting machines to test every product from every farm; there are only a few dozen machines in all of Fukushima Prefecture, a region about the size of Connecticut, with 110,000 farms. However, they acknowledge that random sampling has proved inadequate because the explosions at the plant spread radioactive particles unevenly across communities, creating small "hot spots" of high radioactivity.

Prefectural officials say that since the discovery of tainted rice, they have tested rice from 4,975 farms in Onami and 21 other communities mostly in the relatively contaminated areas to the northwest of the plant. They said the rice from about one-fifth of those farms contained cesium, though most of it at low levels. Only 30 farms exceeded Japan's current safety level for radiation in food.

However, almost 300 farms had rice that would exceed a new, tougher safety level that the Health Ministry is to adopt in April, bringing Japan in line with most developed countries. "We must regain public trust by putting together a new screening system as quickly as possible," Mr. Amano said.

Still, farming officials have so far resisted removing what many consumers say is the biggest hurdle to regaining their trust: the lack of transparency in the government's radiation testing.

Many consumers complain that the results of radiation tests are kept intentionally vague so consumers cannot tell exactly where the readings come from.

Agricultural officials and many farmers fear that revealing more detailed results would scare away consumers, who might be spooked by even low levels of radiation. “We hear the calls for more disclosure, but revealing more detailed data would just hurt too many farmers,” said Osamu Yoshioka, a [food safety](#) official at the Ministry of Agriculture.

That view was disputed by shoppers at Vegetable Cafe Harmonize, a small grocery store here that sells produce only from western Japan, far from the nuclear plant. One shopper was Junko Kohata, a 42-year-old real estate agent who said she avoided all Fukushima-grown produce because the government only reveals whether it is above or below the permissible level.

“I’d rather buy local, but I have no choice but to protect myself,” Ms. Kohata said. The store was opened two months ago by the Network of Parents to Protect Children from Radiation, known here as [Mamorukai](#), which was started by a few dozen concerned parents after the accident. In nine months, it has grown into a nationwide network with 200 chapters.

“If the government treated us like adults, there would be no need for Mamorukai,” said Sachiko Sato, a network founder. “Japan must build an entirely new food-monitoring system that we average people can really trust.”

Makiko Inoue contributed reporting.