



Details: Notices for vegetables grown in Fukushima Prefecture show the level of radioactive cesium — in this case, less than 10 becquerels per kilogram, well below the allowable limit — at a Cataloghouse store in Tokyo's Shinbashi area last month.  
YOSHIKI MIURA

## NUCLEAR AWAKENING

# Mothers first to shed food-safety complacency

By MIZUHO AOKI

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*Third of five parts*

The disaster at the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear plant and the threat of radioactive fallout changed the lives of many people, including Mizuho Nakayama and other mothers of young children whose primary goal suddenly became that of keeping their kids out of harm's way.

Once career-oriented, Nakayama, 41, quit her full-time job in August and now devotes her life to doing her utmost to minimize her 3-year-old son's exposure to the various dangerous isotopes released amid the three meltdowns at the Tokyo Electric

Power Co. plant.

Her efforts range from preparing foods with what she hopes are the safest ingredients to becoming a key member of a group of mothers based in Setagaya Ward, Tokyo, worried about radiation.

When she bakes bread or cream stew, for example, she goes out of her way to pick ingredients that come from outside the Tohoku or Kanto regions.

"It takes double the time it used to prepare a meal now," Nakayama said.

"My priorities have changed. My child comes first now," she said. "When it comes to radiation problems, our only option is self-protection."

Yoshiko Fukagawa, 41, mother of a 7-year-old and a 4-year-old, also takes extra care in selecting food because of the nuclear crisis. She and her offspring fled from Koriyama, Fukushima Prefecture, to Setagaya Ward on March 17 and still live in an evacuee complex.

"I feel a sense of crisis over food safety," Fukagawa said. "And I can't trust the government. I have to set my own standards and make my own choices."

Food safety became an immediate concern when the nuclear crisis erupted following the March 11 natural disasters.

Consumers as well as food suppliers quickly raised their voices and took measures to minimize their exposure to radiation-contaminated produce.

Mothers with small children formed one of the largest movements, collectively cropping up nationwide after images of the March hydrogen explosions at the Fukushima plant sparked them into action.

They researched the health effects of radiation exposure and mulled collective steps to minimize their children's exposure to harmful radiation, according to Nakayama, who joined the Setagaya group in June.

Various grassroots groups got together in Tokyo in July to share information and formed the National Network of Parents to Protect Children from Radiation, which as of Dec. 15 consisted of 250 groups with an estimated 5,000 to 6,000 members, Nakayama said.

"There are limits to what an individual (group) can achieve," said Nami Kondo, one



**ATOMTEX 101:** A staff member at the Citizen's Radioactivity Measurement Station in Setagaya Ward, Tokyo, demonstrates how to use an ATOMTEX machine to measure radioactive cesium in food items in mid-December. SATOKO KAWASAKI

of the founding members of the network. "We thought that if we got together and shared information and the knowledge we had gained, we would be more powerful."

With advice from experts and shared information, the member groups launched petition drives to hand to mayors and education minister Masaharu Nakagawa, demanding that authorities take protective measures to ensure food safety, especially school lunches.

The mounting demands from parents forced many municipalities, including Setagaya, to purchase radiation-measuring equipment to check school lunches. The education ministry also set aside ¥100 million in subsidies for 17 prefectures in the Tohoku and Kanto regions to purchase such monitors.

"We've been relying too much on (the safety assurances of) food distributors. I believe we were too complacent about the food we were supplied," Kondo said. "It's really important to raise our voices as consumers. I believe we are going to be faced with radiation for a long time, so we have to demand (that the government) and distributors ensure the safety of food."

Officials indeed responded, Nakayama of Setagaya said.

"Among our members, there are many mothers who never even voted in elections. But by observing a ward assembly in action and even lobbying, (we) have realized that (things can get done)," she said.

Other citizens' groups are also taking action to lessen the risk of radioactive food, setting up monitoring stations in Fukushima Prefecture and Tokyo after the government's apparent failure to prevent contaminated food, including tea, rice and beef, from hitting store shelves.

As of Dec. 19, there were nine Citizen's Radioactivity Measuring Station outposts in Fukushima Prefecture and one in Tokyo, each equipped with devices to measure contamination levels of food items brought in by consumers and producers, according to Kodai Tanji, a store manager of a CRMS site in the city of Fukushima.

Each station is run by a different group, but they share information and data. Their operating costs are basically covered by the fees they charge to check food for radiation — roughly ¥3,000 per test — as well as from donations, Tanji said.

All test results are posted on their websites.

"Our role is like what they call a second opinion in the medical world," said Tanji. "By having this kind of independent measuring station, we can keep checks on the government."

Ikuro Anzai, a professor emeritus at Ritsumeikan University in Kyoto and a radiation protection specialist, said mothers in Japan waged similar movements amid the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear accident, but on a much smaller scale.

"This kind of independent action, to secure the safety of their living environment by

raising their voices, is a very good thing," Anzai said.

"And I believe this is a great chance to learn about radiation. The important thing for the nation to do is to raise each citizen's radiation literacy," he said.

"It's really important for (people) to deepen their knowledge so they obtain a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between our lives and radiation exposure."

Increasing consumer skepticism has also forced food suppliers to win back trust by testing their products for radiation.

Many co-ops and supermarkets purchased measuring instruments and began checking the contamination levels of the food they sell, including Seikatsu Club, a co-op that serves some 350,000 households in 21 prefectures from Hokkaido to Hyogo Prefecture.

The group has been testing most food items it sells and disclosing the results on its website every week since September.

"In the past three months, we tested more than 7,500 items," said Seikatsu Club spokesman Akira Ishii.

Shiitake so far has been the only item that exceeded the government's provisional safety threshold of 500 becquerels per kilogram of radioactive cesium, Ishii said. According to him, it is the responsibility of suppliers to properly inform consumers about contamination levels of products they are selling so they can decide for themselves whether to buy them.

Cataloghouse Ltd., primarily a mail-order operation, began in August selling fresh vegetables grown in Fukushima at its shop in Tokyo's Shinbashi district. Notices indicate their becquerel readings, taken twice, once in Fukushima and then in Tokyo.

"At first, we worried about the reaction of customers, but responses have been good, with many saying they feel more at ease purchasing vegetables after knowing their contamination levels," Cataloghouse President Oku Saito said.

The government, on the other hand, has appeared very slow to act. Nine months after farm produce outside Fukushima Prefecture started to be exposed to radioactive fallout, the health ministry finally proposed a stricter cesium threshold for food on Dec. 22 that will take effect in April.

The new threshold lowers the allowable limit of total internal exposure from food from 500 becquerels per kilogram to 100 in an effort to reduce annual exposure from 5 millisieverts to 1 millisievert.

The new limit for milk was lowered from 200 becquerels to 50, and for water the limit was cut from 200 becquerels to 10. Considering the vulnerability of small children, the new regulation sets a 50-becquerel per kilogram limit on baby food.

Experts say it is vital to prevent any food that exceeds the threshold from reaching the market. Because government-level sampling tests don't cover all produce, citizens and suppliers must go the extra mile to ensure safety.

"In the case of the Chernobyl accident, (1 kg) of mushrooms from Belarus failed to clear EU Customs in November because the radioactive cesium level was 834 becquerels. Even 25 years after the accident, this is the reality," said Hidemasa Yamaguchi, a professor of food safety at Mimasaka University in Okayama Prefecture. The half-life of cesium-137 is about 30 years.

"So (we) should realize (food) contamination will continue for a long time in Japan," Yamaguchi said.

As for the health effects of radiation exposure, a cumulative dose of 100 millisieverts increases the cancer mortality rate by 0.5 percent, according to the International Commission on Radiological Protection. But below that level, scientists' opinions vary.

Anzai of Ritsumeikan University said that although the food contamination level is not as bad as he had expected in March, it's too early for people to let down their guard.

"We have yet to determine if the contamination (of food) will lower over time, or will increase again as highly contaminated leaves from the mountains turn up on farmland," Anzai said. "We must remain on alert."

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