

Plentiful (March 29, 2011)



Fukushima Prefecture has 70,000 farmers.

Here and elsewhere in Fukushima Prefecture, the region hit hardest by the nuclear crisis, farmers are worried about their future — and convinced, like Mr. Sato, that the government is not on their side.

In interviews, several said they believed that leaders in Tokyo had mishandled the Daiichi disaster, sending conflicting signals on radiation dangers that fed panic among citizens. And they nurse a grievance, justified or otherwise, that in this moment of national peril the powers that be have thought first about Tokyo and only later about the hinterlands that are hurting the most.

And they are clearly hurting. Japan depends heavily on foreign suppliers for most food, but up to 80 percent of all vegetables are locally grown. Fukushima's 70,000 commercial farmers produce more than \$2.4 billion worth of spinach, tomatoes, milk and other popular foods a year.

[The government's ban on produce sales](#) last week stopped that industry — and those in three adjacent prefectures to the south, Ibaraki, Tochigi and Gunma — in their tracks. Across the region, farmers are dumping millions of gallons of milk and tons of ripe vegetables into pits and streams, unable to sell their products legally on the open market.

"I can't keep going for too long," said Kenzo Sasaki, 70, who milks 18 cows on a farm outside the city of Fukushima, the local capital. Mr. Sasaki estimates that he is losing nearly \$31,000 — not including the cost of feeding his herd — for every month that the sales ban continues.

Across town, Shoichi Abe, 62, milks about 30 cows in his own dingy barn. He has been unable to sell his 1,100 pounds of daily production since the March 11 earthquake damaged the milk-processing plant at the local farm co-op.

Now the government has extended that prohibition indefinitely.

Mr. Abe said, "It's costing us 70,000 yen a day" — about \$860.

"We have no income," he said, "and the truth is that we don't want to continue this. All the agriculture is gone. The consumers don't want to buy products from Fukushima Prefecture, so we can't sell them. It's the rumor problem."

To a person, the farmers say their products are safe to eat and drink. None of the growers interviewed had been visited by anyone seeking to monitor radiation on their land. The government's radiation readings — to the extent that they have been publicized — have been ambiguous at best.

The government has ordered residents to leave a zone within 12 miles of the stricken Fukushima nuclear complex, while American regulators have suggested that people stay at least 50 miles away from the plant. Officials in the city of Fukushima, about 40 miles from the stricken reactor, have regularly posted analyses of radiation levels in drinking water — levels that approached official safety limits early on, but that have since dropped.

Outside the city, however, readings have been spotty, and some local residents feel overlooked. "They found radiation in the water in Tokyo, so they announced about Tokyo," said Miyoko Abe, 57, the wife of a Fukushima dairy farmer, referring to radiation reports that caused a run on bottled water in Tokyo last week. "But we know nothing about water north of Tokyo. The government is trying only to protect Tokyo.

"Maybe the prime minister is hiding in the nuclear shelter," she said. "We don't see him anywhere."

More confusing to growers and consumers alike is the opaque official stance on what is



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safe and unsafe to buy and eat. The National Health Ministry, which had no limits on radiation in food, scrambled to set safety standards after the Fukushima crisis erupted. The new provisional rules, modeled on international criteria, generally deem a food unsafe if consuming it daily for one year would be likely to cause health problems.

Japanese officials began by banning the sales of only certain foods, including spinach and milk, which are especially prone to absorbing radiation. But the ban was later extended to a broad range of produce, even as officials stressed that the radiation level in any single product was not dangerous for anyone who consumed it at ordinary levels.

Farmers say the ambiguity has effectively shut down their sales. "We think we'll lose 80 percent of our income," Ryuji Togashi, who runs a Towa-area farmer's co-op store, said last weekend. "We've been damaged by rumor. People think that all our vegetables are affected by radiation. We can't even sell the products that aren't affected."

The central government has promised that farmers will be compensated for their losses, and Fukushima officials have urged growers to keep records documenting crops that are thrown away and milk that is dumped. But how farmers will be paid, and how much, remains in limbo.

The government has said that the [Tokyo Electric Power Company](#), which runs the Fukushima reactors, may be held liable for farm losses, but the utility has yet to address the issue. Farmers say the government's record on compensating them for losses from other problems like bird flu and [mad cow disease](#) does not inspire confidence.

"What the government offers is much less than what we expect," said Mr. Sasaki, the dairy farmer. "It has always been like this. But this time, we're on the edge."

At least one farmer has been pushed over the edge. The newspaper The Asahi Shimbun reported recently that a 64-year-old farmer in Sukagawa, a city in Fukushima, killed himself one day after the government imposed a ban on the sale of cabbages from the prefecture.

The farmer, who was not identified, was reported to have lost his house in the earthquake but had a field of 7,500 organically grown cabbages ready for harvest when the prohibition was announced.

"Vegetables in Fukushima are finished," his son quoted him as saying.

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