

Radiation fears send fish hauls spiraling

Kyodo

SENDAI — Fish catches at eight major ports in the tsunami-hit Tohoku region have plunged since April in part because of the severe damage the fleet suffered in the March 11 disaster but mainly due to radiation fears amid the Fukushima nuclear crisis that are making hauls hard to sell.

Fishing boats have gone out less frequently this year on the assumption that consumers will shun fish caught near Fukushima Prefecture. Staying in port at least saves commercial fisherman the price of fuel, preventing their financial losses from growing even worse.

Compared with a year ago, catches are down by as much as 85 to 99 percent in volume in five Tohoku areas, as consumers continue to shun fish from the region, local officials and fishery cooperatives said Friday.

Fish hauls are down sharply at major ports in Aomori, Fukushima, Iwate and Miyagi prefectures, and fishermen and fish market officials lay the blame on the accident at the Fukushima No. 1 nuclear plant.

"Fish from Chiba and Ibaraki are all caught from the same areas of the sea, yet only ours aren't selling well because they are labeled 'Fukushima.' It's absurd," said a fish market official at Fukushima's Onahama fishing port.

Others in the fishing industry said the sales total, including those for exports to China and South Korea, have also dropped as buyers beat down prices because of the nuclear crisis.

Of the eight major fishing ports, only Shiogama, Miyagi Prefecture, saw an increase in catch and sales, thanks to relatively little damage to its port facilities from the tsunami and an increase in fishing boats diverted from nearby ports because they could not land their catches at them.

According to a Tokyo-based national association of fisheries wholesalers, the decrease in the catch in the northeast is unlikely to trigger an immediate supply shortage or price hikes as hauls from other parts of the country are making up for it.

But industry officials are concerned that consumers may stay away from eating fish due to the nuclear crisis.

The fishing industry has been a major economic pillar of many coastal communities in the northeast.

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