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Japan's Irradiated Beef Scandal

Asia-Pacific Journal Feature

The Japanese government [claims](#) (widely criticized - see [here](#)) that the Fukushima reactors have been stabilized and the threat of further hydrogen explosions removed, but now the Japanese public faces a new source of concern.

Meat from more than 500 cattle fed with irradiated straw from the area around the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant has been [sold](#) to Japanese consumers. The beef was tainted with radioactive Cesium released from Fukushima Daiichi and contaminating straw by up to 500 times standard levels. With beef prices in the vicinity of Fukushima plummeting, farmers raced to market their cattle in the months following the nuclear meltdown. Previous findings of radioactive contamination were reported for spinach, milk, fish and tea leaves.

Government officials, caught [unprepared](#) by the beef contamination findings, are racing to ascertain the extent of the problem and threat to public health. It is now known that beef with three to six times the standard radiation safety level has made it onto the plates of consumers and it is also being reported that contaminated meat has been [sold](#) in 43 of Japan's 47 prefectures, including by Aeon, the nation's largest retailer.

Fukushima farmers had previously been asked not to use feed stored outside, but the government has [acknowledged](#) that safety checks were inadequate and that producers were not given enough information about potential risks. Prime Minister Kan has offered a personal apology: "I feel responsibility for not being able to prevent this from happening and I am extremely sorry."

On July 19th, the Japanese government ordered a stop to shipments of meat and live animals from Fukushima Prefecture. Chief Cabinet Secretary Edano has pledged to compensate farmers, not only for lost animals, but also for falling beef prices. He was contradicted, however, by officials handling Fukushima accident compensation at the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology who claim that compensation cannot be promised until "the full scope of the situation becomes clear." With these [mixed messages](#) in the background, the *Mainichi* reports growing desperation among farmers.



Hasegawa Harunobu, a local agricultural cooperative leader, [reports](#) that his feed costs for 1300 cows approach the equivalent of US \$200,000 a month, but he has received no compensation or support from either the Japanese government or TEPCO in the months since the accident. Ueno Michiko, another Fukushima farmer, is reported as saying: "It is just too sad that cows I gave my all to raise cannot be sold. I'm pissed off. Feed, heating, personnel costs, I can't even begin to guess what our losses will be like. I want [the government] to thoroughly test all of the animals, because if they can't tell us which ones are okay to sell and which ones aren't, then we're stuck."

Government spokesmen acknowledge that the level of Cesium in the meat is five times higher than suggested limits but insist that it should not have an impact on human health if consumed in limited quantities. The Japanese government has frequently taken the position that low levels of radiation exposure, including internal exposure, is safe. Many scientists disagree. *The Mainichi Shimbun* has run a feature which [condemns](#) the government for a "weak attitude" toward testing and asserts that it is now clear that neither the central authorities, nor prefectural or local regulators, had a grip on the extent of contamination of livestock feed or a coherent plan to prevent tainted products from making it to consumers.

Fukushima officials interview livestock farmers after radioactive cesium was detected in cattle raised in Minamisoma.

Hiroko Tabuchi of the *New York Times* [writes](#): "Japanese government officials insist that even at levels above government limits, radioactive cesium will not have an immediate effect on health. Longer-term effects are less known, however. "If you eat it every day, it might be a problem," Goshi Hosono, the minister in charge of the nuclear issue, said last week. "But if you eat just a little, there would be no big effect on your health. "Experts, however, disagree on what the effects may be of exposure to radiation above the limits but at low doses." Many specialists say that prolonged exposure to radiation can lead to a higher incidence of cancers like leukemia.

The ambiguity of the Japanese government's response to radiation is highlighted by revelations from Miyagi, a prefecture bordering Fukushima. One Miyagi farmer was shocked to discover that feed he sold was contaminated with Cesium. He told the *Mainichi Shimbun*: "The wind was in a different direction immediately after the hydrogen explosions, so I never thought it was contaminated. I really feel sorry." The farmer is based in Osaki, over 150 kilometers from the Fukushima Daiichi plant. The Japanese government has repeatedly downplayed the potential effects of radiation outside of Fukushima Prefecture and in this case, the lack of clear information and regular, widespread testing of soil, air, and plant radiation levels, has caused confusion and a beef scare that is developing into a crisis in public confidence in government and domestic agriculture. Suspecting that there may be a problem, the farmer had his straw tested at a private research facility before the government became involved. He says, "If there had been a possibility of danger, even if only slightly, authorities should have conducted surveys much earlier." While the Japanese government has acted decisively and effectively in some instances such as the early provision of iodine tablets to children, this Osaki case is yet another example of arbitrary administrative boundaries such as those between prefectures preventing adequate testing of radiation levels in agricultural products.

Meanwhile, the [inability](#) of Japanese authorities to rule out the possibility that contaminated beef was exported has further weakened international confidence. There were already international expressions of concern about Japanese food imports in the [United States](#), [Europe](#), and among East Asian neighbors such as [Taiwan](#). The latest revelations further undermine confidence in the safety of Japan's exports and, indeed, of the country's very lifespaces. As Japan produced food is shunned by some abroad, the number of tourists visiting the country has declined precipitously.

The *Mainichi* [reports](#) new efforts to leverage Japanese popular culture, particularly the pop group Arashi, in order to appeal to tourists, but the [numbers](#) are stark. Visitors in April of this year were down over 60% compared with April 2010. May figures reveal a 50% drop over the preceding year. There has been some recovery since, but the continued decline in tourism is likely to derail the plans of Japanese merchants and the government to make Japan the go to destination for big spenders among China's new middle class and other Asian visitors. Japan's Council for the Promotion of Tourism has set an ambitious

goal of boosting the number of tourists visiting Japan from 8.6 million in 2010 to 20,000,000 by 2020, but this recent food scandal and concerns about radiation in general bespeak an uphill battle.

Stories about Japan's international connections aside, new domestic revelations continue to anger consumers. [Reports](#) from Sakata in Yamaguchi Prefecture indicate that contaminated beef was served in primary school lunches.

On July 21, Fukushima farmers' groups held an emergency [meeting](#) to appeal to the government to find a solution to the problem or buy the prefecture's cattle. This is not simply a problem for Fukushima agriculture, however, as the *Mainichi* [reports](#) a nationwide plunge in beef prices. In another regional [meeting](#) on July 24th, farmers restated a common position - if the Japanese government does not buy affected animals and immediately introduce a compensation plan, the viability of farms all across one of Japan's most productive regions will be threatened.

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