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Furukawa Journal; Rice Farmers Dig In: To Them, the Land Is Sacred

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FURUKAWA, Japan -- When he plants his rice crop each year, Kan-ichi Sugawara pours a bottle of sake onto the field as an offering to the god of the paddy.

Such a ritual might seem out of place in modern Japan, but it attests to the deep tradition of rice farming in Japan. And that tradition, Mr. Sugawara says, lies behind the ferocity with which Japan's farmers are opposing the opening of the nation's rice market to imports, a move that the Government might be forced to make in the coming months.

"Frankly, rice farming is not that profitable," said Mr. Sugawara, a sixth-generation farmer in this city 250 miles north of Tokyo. "But we keep on going because we want to preserve that faith. Religious faith is not a matter of cheap or expensive."

The ban by Japan on rice imports, meant to insure self-sufficiency in its staple food, has become one of the last stumbling blocks to achievement of a new global trading treaty under the auspices of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade. Painful Decision Postponed

Rather than block a GATT agreement that would benefit many other of the country's industries, Prime Minister Kiichi Miyazawa suggested in December that Japan would eventually accept a slight opening of its rice market. But delays in the overall GATT negotiations are allowing Japan to postpone what will be a painful decision and, in the meantime, it keeps urging its trading partners to let it retain the import ban.

But even without an opening of the rice market, and despite heavy Government subsidies, rice farmers in Japan, where the average farm is only 3.3 acres, are having trouble making a go of it.

"Japanese rice farming is like a person on a bed barely surviving with an oxygen mask," Mr. Sugawara said. "If the conditions become worse, many people will just abandon farming."

Already that is happening. The number of farm households has dropped from more than 6 million in 1960 to 3.8 million today. Rice consumption per person has also been steadily declining as the Japanese diet has diversified, so that livestock has now surpassed rice as the nation's biggest agricultural product.

Young people, lured by the big city, have been shunning farming for years. Mr. Sugawara, who is 38, was one of only five students in his agricultural high school class of 40 who became full-time farmers. Another farmer here, Yoichi Aonuma, said with some discomfort that even his own elementary-school daughter tends to admire men in business suits and look down on those in farmer's clothes. Income From Other Sources

Only 12 percent of farm households in Japan get all their income from farming. Another 12 percent get most of their income from farming and the rest, about three-quarters of Japan's farm households, get most of their income from other sources, like jobs in factories or offices.

The full-time farmers, like Mr. Sugawara and Mr. Aonuma, look down somewhat on the part-timers, who, they seem to suggest, have sold out in return for more economic security. "The part-time farmers are the richest people in Japan," Mr. Aonuma said.

To some extent, the full-timers say, the fact that most farmers now are not dependent on agriculture for their livelihood has undermined support among Japan's population for farmers. Still, they say, without the part-timers maintaining the farms, farm communities would vanish.

To cope with changing times and the prospect of market liberalization, farmers have developed several strategies. One has been to establish a quality brand name for their rice in an effort to obtain a premium price and insulate the product from lower-priced foreign rice.

Recently, the Sasanishiki brand produced here has lost some of its popularity, so yet a new brand was developed by a local laboratory. This one is being called Hitomebore, which means "love at first sight."

Spurred by the Government, farmers are also trying to unify their farms into larger plots, so that modern machinery can be used efficiently. Right now, the farms here look like a patchwork quilt. One farmer might own several patches, but they are usually not adjacent to one another. Diversifying to Survive

Farmers in some areas of Japan are swapping land to try to create larger continuous patches, or they are pooling their land and farming it cooperatively.

But the same tenacity that makes farmers cling to their land for generations makes them reluctant to part with their patch, even to trade for one a few yards away. "Many times people say their rice patch with their rice patch god is very productive, so they can't exchange the land with anyone else," Mr. Aonuma said.

Mr. Sugawara has managed to survive by diversifying into cattle raising and increasing his acreage. He now farms about 10 acres of his own land plus a similar amount that he rents from others.

He said he was "determined to stick with it" even if the market was opened to imports. But he said he was not sure whether farming would be a viable option for his three sons, now at elementary-school age. Even if high tariffs on imported rice protect Japan's farmers from immediate harm, he said, the prospect of competition will discourage young people from going into agriculture.

"We are taking this tough position because I want to pass this farming onto my sons," he said. "We can't give up just because it doesn't make economic sense."

Photo: "Frankly, rice farming is not that profitable," said Kanichi Sugawara, a sixth-generation farmer in Furukawa, Japan. "But we keep on going because we want to preserve that faith. Religious faith is not a matter of cheap or expensive." He stood with his youngest son, Toru, in front of a rice paddy. (Andrew Pollack for The New York Times) Map of Japan.

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