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Main
Features

The Food Safety System in Japan

Deborah Steinhoff

Introduction:

In the last few years, Japan has seen the biggest major changes in Japan's Food Safety system and food safety laws in over 20 years. This change is a result of food scares that have led to major changes in both consumers' outlook toward food safety and the government's stand on food safety. Although JCCU has been a leading advocate for change for more than two decades with their nationwide movement to establish a social system to secure food safety and reform of the Food Sanitation Law, changes finally came about after the discovery of Mad Cow Disease in Japan in September 2001 and subsequent mislabeling scandals by major Japanese manufacturers.

In recognition of the need to make food safety a priority the New Basic Law on Food Safety Law and the Food Sanitation Law were revised on May 23, 2003. Furthermore in recognition that the health of the Japanese people is the government's top priority, the government formed a wholly new organization, the Food Safety Commission, directly under the office of the Prime Minister to take responsibly for risk assessment in terms of the nation's food supply. How to establish and implement the new system is now being discussed.

The Review of Consumer Co-operative Studies, April 2005 issue was devoted to "Evaluating the Food Safety System" in Japan. The issue included a summary of the Food Safety Commission of the Cabinet Office, *Progress Report on Food Safety*, along with five articles that discussed the current issues on food safety and risk assessment within the system. What follows is a brief summary of the main issues put forth in the journal.

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The Agenda of Major Food Safety Issues

Mad Cow Disease

Japanese authorities announced on September 10, 2001 that a case of BSE was found. This led to a drastic reduction in consumption of beef and the government was forced to take immediate measures to assure the public that Mad Cow Disease was not a threat. First, the Japanese government started the inspection of all cattle. Public outrage forced the government to take custody of all cattle and the government was to dispose of all foreign cattle that were suspect of BSE. To do this the government offered subsidies to all meat producers that used only domestic beef. A major scandal however occurred when authorities discovered that Snow Brand and Nippon Ham, while taking subsidies from the government, used foreign beef in products and sold it as domestic beef. Needless to say, consumer confidence was shattered and could not be restored even by the resignation of the top management in these companies and by closing down Snow Brand meat production plants.

As a result of the case of BSE, in 2003, the Ministry of Agriculture introduced a system of traceability for all domestic beef. They established a nationwide data base by tagging the ears of all 4.5 million dairy and beef cows in the country so that records of all domestic beef can be traced back to producers through 10-digit identification numbers. Under the legislation, every single cow consumed in Japan must be registered with documentary history of every transaction the animal ever went through. The implementation of this system and the assurance exporting nations implement the same system in order to export to Japan is now under evaluation. (See Diagram 1)

Although the risk of Mad Cow Disease is still being debated on the international scene, Japan has implemented the new registration system as a logical means of keeping a record on the production of beef. The government is now looking to expand this system to other livestock, such as pigs and poultry, fruits and vegetables and rice by the end of this fiscal year. Through the registration history consumers will be able to determine the producer, the locale, the date of harvest, the date of shipment and the fertilizers and other chemicals used. By introducing these new standards under the Japan Agricultural Standards JAS mark the government hopes to restore consumer's confidence by giving them the information to judge for themselves if the food is safe. Importers which can meet the same standards will be able to use the same JAS mark. The cost of managing and the efficiency of this system are now being debated.

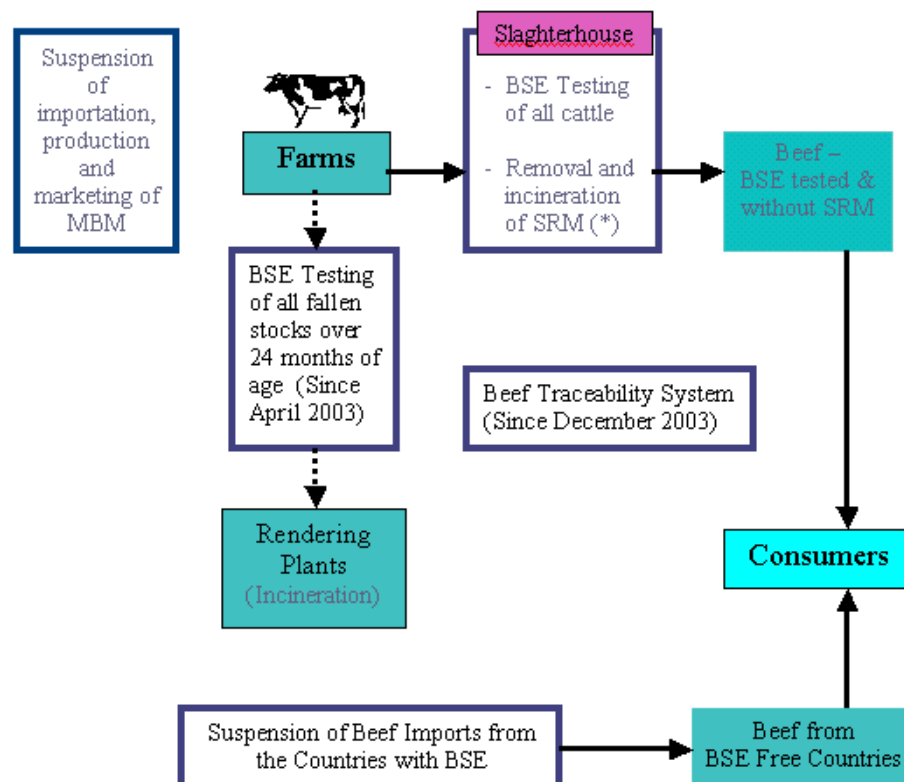
In Japan, although there is support for the total inspection of all imported cattle before they are allowed into Japan, specialists point out that the real problem lies in the fact that Japan imports a large percentage of its fertilizer and animal feed from the USA and the US allows SMR (see above) from pigs and fowl in the processing of fertilizer and animal feed. Even if Japan insists on animal free fertilizers, the manufacturer's processing lines are not separated and the fertilizer can easily become contaminated with SMR. It is also very difficult to control how the SMR powder is mixed into fertilizers. From the Japanese point of view this is a big problem. It is also a problem that Japan also imports fertilizer and animal feed from other countries which do not provide data on the product's origin.

It is also interesting to note the role of the media in shaping a story and forming consumer opinion when a problem strikes. With the detection of BSE and the banning of foreign beef, many businesses suffered great losses. One such company was

Yoshinoya, Japan's largest beef bowl chain restaurant. It was forced to discontinue selling its main menu item, a beef bowl made with US beef. In February 2005, however, for one day they offered beef bowls on the menu and sold a record number 1.5 million bowls in one day. The media coverage for this story, which was huge, conjured up nostalgia by reporting how beef bowls were a national dish which the Japanese truly missed eating, as could be seen by the record sales.

This incident shows the mass media's influence on consumer opinion and their lack of consistency in terms of the message they give the public. On the one hand, the media was reporting the dangers of BSE, and then they turned around and reported on a story encouraging people to eat beef bowls. The following day the media then returned to criticizing American beef and how unsafe it was. The role of the media in terms of risk communication is an issue that is now being widely discussed.

**Diagram 1: Beef Safety System introduced by the Japanese Government
(Since October 2001)**



(*) SRM (specific risk materials) include, among others, brain, spinal cord and eye-balls, as well as the distal part of the ileum, of every cattle regardless of the age.

With the 100% cattle testing under this new system, Japan has found another 10 BSE cases (as of April 2004).
(Source:www.us.emb-japan.go.jp)

Norovirus

In Japan, an outbreak of norovirus reported in December 2004 shocked Japanese consumers when 6 of 42 affected residents at a home for the aged died. Subsequently a total of 7821 people, mainly in homes for the elderly, showed symptoms of "stomach flu" in Japan since November 2004, of whom 12 died and among the patients, 5371 were suspected to be infected with noroviruses, known to cause stomach flu or gastroenteritis in humans. (Report released by the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare in January of 2005). Furthermore, noroviruses infected some 37,000 children in December 2004 according to a survey done by the National Institute of Infectious Diseases in January 2005.

While at first, authorities thought these outbreaks were caused by a new virus, investigation revealed that it was an old, well known and well documented virus -- norovirus. Where in the past, the cause of food poisonings was often difficult to pinpoint because testing foods for viruses was technically very difficult, current molecular diagnostic tests now enables the virus to be detected even in clinical settings, and the source can be traced back to contaminated food and water. In fact, two thirds of the food poisonings in the US are now known to be caused by Norovirus. We also now know that raw oysters are known to be a food vehicle for the virus and a common cause of gastroenteritis. So the many documented cases of food poisoning caused by eating raw oysters were actually caused by the norovirus. We also know that that norovirus is transmitted primarily through the fecal-oral route, by consumption of food or water contaminated by feces, or directly from person-to-person. The illness can also be contracted through contact with a contaminated object. However, there's no evidence to suggest that infection occurs through the respiratory system.

Norovirus is in the same family of viruses that share the same RNA as the SARS virus and this type of virus is known to make sudden mutations. For this reason it is difficult to develop immunity to the virus. It has high potential for spreading and therefore can be very fatal. Therefore the spread of the norovirus is a very serious threat to food safety.

With food safety problems such as these, first of all the public is not aware of it until the media picks up on it and then the public only knows what the media reports, which may or may not be scientifically based and the public may not be getting the best information from the point of view of food safety. The new food safety system is looking to use risk assessment and specifically risk communication to effectively tackle this issue.

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Food poisoning is a long-standing challenge for the food safety system. Numerous incidents of food poisoning throughout the 1990s have been a major cause for concern although the cause has not always been known. For example, there were some 1,960 incidents reported in 1997, some 3,000 incidents in 1998, and some 2,700 thousand incidents reported in 1999 according to the Ministry of Health Labour and Welfare. In particular the case of the powdered skim milk contaminated with enterotoxin in Osaka in 2000 that affected 15 thousand people, and the case of fresh radish sprouts contaminated with *Escherichia coli* O-157 that affected 10 thousand people and caused 121 deaths drew much attention to the serious issue of food poisoning. The risk of food poisoning is a prime issue that the government is assessing in terms of developing effective risk communication.

Labeling and Food additives

There have been many incidents reported in recent years of false food labeling. These range from companies trying to pass off cheaper imports of, for example, chicken as local high priced domestic chicken, to products such as low grade tea being sold as a famous high grade tea. The incident that received a lot of attention was in April 2003, when Snow Brand and Nippon Ham fraudulently sold foreign beef under the label of domestic beef, after the Mad Cow Disease scare. Hayashine Sangyo Company in 2003 was also charged for false labeling when it mixed cheaper imports with local pork and labeled it as domestic meat. Furthermore this company was also caught used additives specifically banned by its contracts with retailers.

In February 2003 the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, and the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry agreed to unify the label requirements in order to make food labeling easier. They did this following a survey done by Public Management, Home Affairs, Posts and Telecommunications Ministry which found that more than 10% of labels did not include the place of origin that is required under the Food Hygiene Law and the Food Sanitation Law

Furthermore, food additive violations were occur when companies are found to be using foreign imported products not acceptable under the Food Sanitation Law. For example, Suntory recalled all beverages containing additive N-ethyl-4-menthane-3-carboxamide, an additive not approved in Japan, but approved in the US and Europe. Glico, had to recall chewing gum which contained the same additive. Also, shrimp and spinach imported from China in 2003 were found to have residuals of antibiotics and agrichemicals, which violated Japan's Food Sanitation Law.

Whereas in the past the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, and the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry were solely responsible for dealing with food safety issues as noted above, now the new Food Safety Commission together with the ministries is responsible for safeguarding Japan's food supply through a new system based on the principles of risk analysis.

Risk Assessment/ Risk Communication and Food Safety

The food safety scares have brought to light the fact that in Japan there is not enough scientific research being done on food safety. Also Japan has a serious shortage of non-profit organizations that act as watchdogs over big business and government. This was brought to light recently by the cases of O-157 ecoli poisoning and the case of BSE. These incidents totally shook up Japan and rattled Japanese consumer's perception of food safety. The concern about food safety that consumers are now showing is a new phenomena in Japan; a nation where consumers had faith that the system would protect them and give them safe food.

Thus for the first time in history, there is a new phenomena. This is that consumers are concerned about food safety. They are concerned about food poisoning, Mad Cow Disease, and additives as well as GMOs. They are also concerned about the safety of imported foods. This is of great concern considering that Japan imports 60% of all its food.

Consumers and the government are now aware that food safety is not black and white. Food safety is better described as being in a grey zone where the potential risks need to be evaluated. Recent food safety incidents have showed just how com-

plex food safety is.

Recognizing that food safety is a top priority, the Japanese government introduced a new scheme that bases its food safety policy on science and risk communication. The Basic Principles of Japan's Food Safety Policy, as stipulated in the Food Safety Basic Law: (May 23, 2003) are "The Protection of the Health of the People shall be a top priority." - "The Necessary Policy Measures shall be taken at each stage of the Food Supply Process." - "These Policy Measures shall be taken on the basis of Scientific Knowledge and in consideration of International Trends and the **People's Opinions.**" To administer this policy the government was created a new Food Safety Commission. This commission is independent from the long established risk management organizations of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, and the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare.

The Food Safety Commission is headed by seven commissioners who are experts on food safety issues. Under the commission there are 16-Expert Committees. The Expert Committees include: the Planning Expert Committee, the Risk Communication Expert Committee, the Emergency Response Expert Committee, and the other 13 Expert Committees, including the Food Additives Expert Committee, Pesticides Expert Committee, and Microorganisms Expert Committee. The Secretariat is comprised of four divisions: the General Affairs Division, the Risk Assessment Division, the Recommendation and Public Relations Division, the Information and Emergency Response Division, and one director for risk communication.

Basically the new food safety system has three components: 1) Risk assessment, 2) Risk Management and 3) Risk communication. (See Diagram 2) It is interesting to note that there is no word in Japanese for "risk communication" and the Japanese have adopted the English phrase "risk communication" into their vocabulary.

The Food Safety Commission is responsible for risk assessment and risk communication while the ministries and local governments are responsible for risk management. Thus the Food Safety Commission's three main tasks are (1) Conduct risk assessment on food in a scientific, independent, and fair manner, and make recommendations to relevant ministries based upon the results from the risk assessment, 2) Implement risk communication among stakeholders such as consumers and food-related business operators, and 3) Respond to food-borne accidents and emergencies.

A major issue that Japan now faces is the lack of provision for risk assessment and developing an effective system for risk communication. In terms of risk assessment, this is an area where universities need to step-up their research and non-profit organizations need to expand their capabilities. Risk assessment is necessary to determine the dangerous and hazardous materials in order to prevent them from entering the food system. In terms of BSE, there is criticism that the government has exaggerated the dangers of BSE and that the real risk is in the animal feed which contains SRM the possible cause of the BSE. More scientific research is needed on the risks of BSE.

Risk management, although primarily the means to adopt and administer policy, must also include a structure for "risk communication" that enables exchange of opinions by all concerned groups, risk assessors, producers and consumers, in the entire process in order to maintain transparency in the food safety system.

Risk communication is the process whereby there is a process for the exchange of

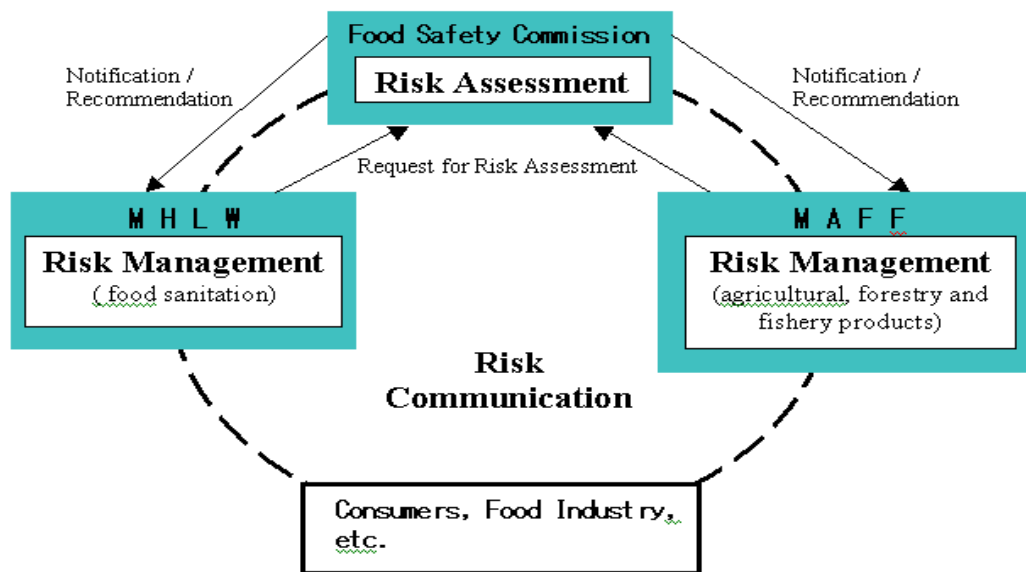
information and opinions where risk assessors whether they be government or independent researchers, administrators and manufacturers can explain the risks to consumers. There must be direct forms of communication among all groups involved and consumers must be a vital part of the communication ring. A primary goal of risk communication is communication between risk assessors and risk managers and consumers. This includes communication through the mass media as well as through with non-profit consumer organizations that participate in the system.

In terms of risk assessment/ risk communication it is very important that there is traceability for every product in the food system. Traceability is necessary in order to react to crisis situations. The system of tracability must include the origin of materials and production of the product all the way from the farm or manufacturer to the retailer. The problem, however, we are told, is that the development of such a comprehensive system is very costly. In the age of computers and cell phones, however, Professor Yukiko Kunugi thinks that the system does not necessarily need to be prohibitably expensive. Shared data among all major players in the chain and effective communication all the way to the consumer is essential.

In terms of Japan, consumer involvement is very poorly developed in terms of risk assessment/ risk communication, because they have not developed forums for citizens to participate outside of government created organizations. There is a need in Japan to develop citizen based public hearing in order to have meaningful risk communication. In order to do this we must have a well informed and educated public.

In light of consumer's concerns about food safety, Japan is now looking to develop an effective system for communicating risks associated with food safety to the public. The development of a risk communication system must be a top priority for the government and it must seriously take public opinion into account. In the USA, for example, the FDA has a program called "Let us Hear from You," which is an open-door forum for communication that allows all consumers to air their findings, grievances and concerns to the government. Programs such as this and citizen-based public hearings, common in Europe and the USA are an essential part of risk communication that is now lacking in Japan. Also in the USA, there is the office for toxic substance and a national registry which is open to the public. In Japan there is no such office. In fact there is a shortage of trained personal to develop these types of programs and training future leaders for this role is a very important task. Due to consumer pressure at the local level, some communities are now working to establish programs and offices through which consumers can engage in question-and-answer forums.

Professor Jun Seikizawa believes that risk communication is of utmost importance. He has worked diligently to research how to develop risk communication and despite what appeared to be lack of support at times, he has persistently stayed the course. In the past he has tried to get funding from the government and while doing research at a national university he was told by his supervisor to stop the research. Despite the many obstacles he has continued to do research on risk communication. He identifies three stages of risk communication. These are (1) revealing all the data, (2) providing the information and (3) providing a common base and exchange of information among all the various people involved. In his opinion Japan is now mostly focused most on number one and two and needs to address number 3 in the near future

Diagram 2: Food Safety Agencies in Japanese Government (Since July 2003)

(Source: www.emb-japan.go.jp)

A Closing Thought

The Tokyo Metropolitan area is among the most densely populated cities in the world and its food system is among the most highly organized. In 1989, half a million citizens in Tokyo petitioned the government to pass a new law governing food safety in Tokyo. The government shot-down the citizens' proposal for tighter regulations, stating that the existing laws were sufficient. The citizens of Tokyo, did not give up and were vindicated in 2003 with the passing a new law specially governing food safety in Metropolitan Tokyo.

The importance of consumer education and consumer participation in terms of food safety cannot be overstated enough. Citizen based public forums that give power to the voices of citizens is essential in building a food safety system. The case of the citizens' of Metropolitan Tokyo petitioning the government and being turned down for requesting stricter laws regarding food safety in the Tokyo Metropolitan area is proof of this. Had the system been different, and had there been a more meaningful forum for citizen opinion to be aired back in 1989, perhaps the laws would have been changed earlier. Instead, it took food poisoning scares and BSE findings to get the government to take the opinions of consumers seriously.

It is reassuring to see that consumer opinion led the way both in the case of Tokyo as well as the nation with the amending the National Food Sanitation Law and the creation of a new food safety system. Although it took scares and scandals to provoke change, consumers already knew that change was necessary. In fact, the 22.5 million members of the Japanese Consumer Co-operative Union have been a major force behind the changes in food safety system. Now the challenge is to develop a food safety system which incorporates meaningful consumer participation.

CCIJ Published a volume entitled In Search for Consumer Co-op Studies

The CCIJ's 3rd Mid-term Plan (2001-2003) set a goal of creating 'Consumer Co-op Studies' as a new field of enquiry. It was an expression of CCIJ's determination to promote concentrated studies in the field, which had not been fully explored, responding to Prof. Ian MacPherson's appeal to create 'Co-operative Studies'. Several study teams have been organized under the auspice of the CCIJ, covering such subjects as the institutional framework of co-ops and nonprofits, alliances and consortia among co-ops, co-op's corporate governance and social responsibility, 'co-operation through living' and so on. Based on research such as this, CCIJ decided to publish two volumes, i.e. a practical and a theoretical volume. The first volume was published by Co-op Publishing, Co..in June. Sixteen researcher contributed to this work..

ISCS Discussed on Current Status of Asian Co-operatives

The JSCS Spring Conference was held on May 21st in Azabu University in Kanagawa Prefecture. For the first time it featured Asian co-operatives; their characteristics, roles and perspectives. The following papers were presented;

- Chinese Supply and Marketing Co-ops by Prof. Hitoshi Aoyagi, Niigata Univ.
- Reforms of Korean Agricultural Co-ops by Prof. Y. K. Woo, Sangji Univ. (Korea)
- Sustainable Development and Fishery Co-ops in Southeast Asia by Prof. Masahiro Yamao, Hiroshima Univ
- Credit Union in the Philippines by Mr..Jun Mera, Japan Credit Unions

Following the presentations, comments were made by discussants and then the floor was opened up for general discussions.

Mr. Hisaomi Kaneko Passed Away

It is regrettable to convey the sad news that Mr. Hisaomi Kaneko, a researcher of CCIJ, passed away on June 12th in Sapporo. He was formerly the CEO of Hokkaido Univ. Co-op and Executive Director of the National Federation of University Co-ops. He moved to JCCU and served as General Secretary of COMO Japan. He was appointed as CEO of the ailing Kushiro Co-op. After struggling to revive it for several years he joined CCIJ in August 2003. He made a great contribution in planning and running study group

Ms. Chie Sawa joined CCIJ

Ms. Chie Sawa joined the CCIJ in May and is in charge of planning and running of study team on the food system. She is majoring in agricultural structure and policy in graduate school of the Agricultural Department, University of Tokyo.