

# Consumers Union of Japan

## Japan Resources

No. 170

March 2018

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#### ***From the Editors:***

### What if...?

In this issue of Consumers Union of Japan's English newsletter we share articles about our recent activities.

What if... governments were fair and supportive of health and the environment, putting the welfare of consumers and citizens before profit?

What if trade policies did not favour multinational corporations, but rather supported local production and local consumption? What if health policies worked so that rather than spending huge amounts on treating disease,

people got the tools to stay healthy? What if education did not focus on getting kids to pass exams, but to "learn how to learn" and discover the secrets of the universe...?

Our list of demands for change is very long, and so is our history. Right now we have started to prepare for CUJ's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary which we will celebrate in 2019. We hope you will stay tuned and share our newsletter with friends, family, colleagues and others in need of some enlightenment!

## **Statement of Consumers Union of Japan:**

### **Japan's Consumers See No Merits from TPP**

March 9, 2018

With the controversial signing today of the TPP11 in Chile, Consumers Union of Japan is concerned that "consumers" are not mentioned even once in the formal agreement. "There can be no merits to our health or the environment, or to future generations, when only the interests of private corporations were taken into concern by the TPP negotiators," says Koketsu Michiyo, General Secretary of CUJ. "More trade in products like cars and beef will further harm the climate, and make life even more difficult for Japan's farmers, without any consideration of our democratic rights as citizens," notes Ono Kazuoki, Co-chair of CUJ. "We are not in favour of a trade agreement that erodes rather than strengthens consumers' right to know, for example if the imported food and feed is genetically modified or not," says Amagasa Keisuke, Co-chair of CUJ.

The lack of proper consultation with stakeholders by the Japanese government, the secrecy during the negotiations, and the rush to sign the agreement even after the United States pulled out, are further problems that Consumers Union of Japan have identified, together with other allies in civil society in Japan and in the 10 other countries involved.

Consumers Union of Japan

## **2018 GMO-Free Zone Movement Report**

*Report from the 2018 GMO-Free Zone Movement Event Held in Nagoya, Japan*

The 13<sup>th</sup> annual event to celebrate the Japanese GMO-Free Zone movement was held in Nagoya, Aichi prefecture, on March 3, 2018. During the past year, many groups participated in the preparation of the event, including members of the Seikatsu Club co-operative movement, local citizens and farmers groups in and around Nagoya, as well as the No! GMO Campaign.

Some 300 people joined this year's event. We welcomed five participants from South Korea's National Korean Anti-GMO Movement and two participants from Taiwan's Anti-GMO School Lunch Movement. Starting From Seed to Otowa Rice, the research council that promotes the Otowa variety of rice, the Aichi Network to Promote Sustainable Organic Agriculture, and the nationwide grass-root movement to test wild-growing GM canola reported about their respective activities in Japan. Also, the latest figures from Japan's growing GMO-Free Zone movement were announced.

The area that is officially registered as GMO-Free has increased by 1,310.27 hectares to a total of 95,526.27 hectares all over Japan as of February 1, 2018. That amounts to approx. 2% of the Japanese farmland. This may be regarded as small, but please recall that when we started this movement in March, 2006, we only had 4,716 hectares

registered, so this is an increase of over 20 times. This time, we also included the official registration of pasture areas and forests as officially GMO-Free.

Supporter registration has also increased. “Supporters” are individuals and corporations that pledge their support to farmers who have declared their land to be GMO-Free. During the past year since 2017, the number of individual supporters increased by 2,505 to a total of 13,351, while the number of corporate supporters increased by 38 to a total of 84 companies and businesses.

We are working towards more GMO-Free Zones in every region of Japan, and the trend is that the areal is increasing year by year. We have also noticed that it tends to increase a lot in the area where our annual event is being held. This year, the event was held in central Japan, and many new registrations came from Aichi, Gifu, Mie, and Shizuoka prefectures. We believe this trend will continue from now on. The next annual GMO-Free Zone event in 2019 will be held in Chiba prefecture, east of Tokyo.



## Who Pays for Genome Editing and Gene Drive Research?

Controversial new genetic engineering technologies are being explored by researchers. Many doubts remain and the critics want a ban or a moratorium, especially on gene editing on human embryos. There is strong concern about letting out animals or insects, like mosquitos, into the wild. Genetically modified mosquitos are in fact only one of the first in a long line of projects. For example, genome editing and gene drives can be used to eradicate entire populations of animals. There are “terminator” projects underway to alter cattle so that only male offspring are born. No females. It is not difficult to imagine that it would become possible to do the same with certain groups of humans.

Now we are learning the scary truth about the secret financial backing for gene drives and other forms of genome editing. In early December, 2017 activists at Third World Network could reveal emails reporting how the US military is the top funding agency, having spent 100 million US dollar on gene drive research. The emails show that the shadowy US Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) is the key funder of efforts to develop gene drive mice. Also, lobbying funding has come from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

“Gene drives are a powerful and dangerous new technology and potential biological weapons could have disastrous impacts on peace, food security and the environment, especially if misused,” said Jim

Thomas of ETC Group. Dana Perls of Friends of the Earth, U.S. notes: "Gene drives could have profound ecological, health and socio-economic impacts." It makes a lot of sense to step up our campaign against these dangerous technologies. I'm proud of Consumers Union of Japan for taking the lead in this battle. We need more people and consumers to become aware of this difficult issue.

### **"Consumer Rights" vs. "Consumer Life"**

In 1962 for the first time, consumer rights were advocated by President Kennedy in the US. Here in Japan, we had just entered the era when slogans such as "consumption is a virtue" became popular. In 1980, the International Organization of Consumers Unions (IOCU, now known as Consumers International) developed the idea further by establishing eight fundamental consumer rights. They are:

- 1 Right to Basic Needs
- 2 Right to Safety
- 3 Right to Information
- 4 Right to Choose
- 5 Right to Representation
- 6 Right to Redress
- 7 Right to Consumer Education
- 8 Right to a Healthy Environment

Currently, we are in the final stages of the debate about improving the GMO labelling system in Japan. We regard information about which foods are genetically manipulated to be an important and fundamental consumer right.

However, Japan's ruling party and the government do not seem to like this concept of "consumer rights." In Umeda Masami's book, *The History of Japanese Nationalism*, he explains how in 1982, the Education Ministry's textbook for writing changed its recommendation from "Do not use this term" to "Write like this." For example, "consumer rights" was no longer recommended, and instead, "consumer life" should be used. Other official recommendations were also made, including terms for writing about defense and the atomic bomb. Seen in this light, it becomes clear that the government dislikes the idea that consumers have rights, and we can understand why this concept is being systematically neglected.

By Amagasa Keisuke, CUJ

### **Soaring Cost of Vegetables Won't End Soon**

The soaring cost of vegetables is not about to end. I recently saw cabbage in the supermarket that was cut in quarters sold for 170 Yen, which is an unusually high price. Even at the Agricultural Co-operative store, where vegetables are sold directly to customers, most of the vegetables were small and off-colour. I could feel they had put a lot of effort into

harvesting, but even there, the prices were higher than usual.

Turning on the TV, there was an interview with a seller at a bargain grocery shop, who said prices won't come down soon. It is assumed that the reason is unusually bad weather, but I do not subscribe to that opinion. Instead, it seems there is something unbalanced in the structural model of demand and supply.

Regarding the so-called supply side, there is a decline in productivity. Farmers have already depended on foreign labour for quite some time. But industries like construction and the service sector are also increasingly hiring foreign labourers, thus squeezing the agricultural sector even further. As a consequence, the model of mass production, mass selling, and mass consumption has begun to malfunction.

Furthermore, the rapidly aging of farmers and agricultural workers means fewer people are involved in production. This has an immediate effect on markets, grocery stores and local restaurants that relies on local supply. In addition, there has been a sharp increase in the number of vacant houses in rural villages, showing how serious things have become. The entire production system might be close to collapse.

How about the demand side? Recently, the supermarket shelves with ready-cut vegetables have become a big thing. People seem to prefer not to spend time or effort preparing and cooking food. Are we getting to the point where robots will enter Japan's food factories and do

the work for us? So, what can be done? I think this is a problem the consumer movement will need to consider from now on.

By Ono Kazuoki, CUJ

### **E-cigarettes: A new health risk, and the same old story?**

After many years of battles against the tobacco industry and their marketing tactics, as well as outright lies, smoking rates have been declining significantly. Japan seems belatedly to be trying to limit smoking, even though the government still owns, and profits from, Japan Tobacco (JT). Internationally, this company has lobbied hard against stricter regulations for example in the EU.

Then suddenly, it seems to me at least, there has appeared a new type of nicotine delivering device. You can't walk into convenience stores like Seven-Eleven or FamilyMart without seeing the large displays. The stores must be making brisk business from E-cigarettes. Advertising in magazines and newspapers have reached new levels. Is this really going to replace old-fashioned cigarettes?

The problem is that not enough research has been done on the health risks associated with E-cigarettes. Using the precautionary principle, it would be wise not to allow marketing of these devices, and they should of course not be sold to children. Nicotine is harmful, and highly addictive, which is why E-

cigarettes need to be regulated as strictly (or even more strictly) as usual cigarettes, and should have proper product warning information. Or why not just ban them? The battle against smoking has clearly entered a new era.

By Martin J. Frid, CUJ

### **CBD Ad Hoc Technical Expert Group on Synthetic Biology**

A report was published by the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) on December 9, 2017 with the results from a meeting held in Montreal, Canada. Experts on synthetic biology gathered to discuss the recent technological developments in the field of synthetic biology, and the potential effects on biodiversity.

The experts acknowledged that synthetic biology is advancing at an accelerated rate. Synthetic biology, they noted, include synthesis of genomes. This can have significant implications on the way modification of organisms is done. Gene editing tools enable researchers to target many locations within a genome, in one step. Engineered gene drives are being developed and used, for example on insects and rodents. It is also getting near the time when organisms might be introduced into the environment. It was noted that there are challenges to conduct risk assessment in some countries. What are the possible impacts on biodiversity and human health?

Biosecurity concerns might be raised, just like for classical genetic engineering and living modified organisms (LMOs). The experts considered that the potential positive and negative impacts of synthetic biology might be broader and more-ranging. But beyond the experience gained from LMOs already released into the environment, there is only limited evidence of the effects on biodiversity from synthetic biology.

The experts noted that organisms with engineered gene drives should be considered as particularly relevant, especially in the light of their impact on conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity, as well as the knowledge of indigenous peoples and local communities. There are uncertainties related to the safety of engineered gene drives, for example for population replacement or suppression. The experts suggested that a precautionary approach and cooperation with all countries and stakeholders will be necessary. Also, free, prior and informed consent of indigenous peoples and local communities is necessary. How would synthetic biology impact the relationship of indigenous peoples and local communities with Mother Nature?

One important conclusion of the meeting was that most living organisms developed or under development using the techniques of synthetic biology, including organisms containing engineered gene drives, fall under the definition of LMOs in the Cartagena Protocol.

Furthermore, the experts noted that there are many knowledge gaps, such as assessing unintended effects, and a lack of experience with organisms containing engineered gene drives when they are introduced into a natural population of other organisms. The step of release into the environment might be irreversible, and therefore, a precautionary approach might be needed, according to the report from the meeting. There will be another meeting on July 2-7, 2018 to consider the outcome from this Ad Hoc Technical Expert Group on Synthetic Biology.

#### **Anti-Fragrance Campaign Booklet & Poster Published**



Consumers Union of Japan is stepping up actions against chemical fragrance products that cause allergic reactions and discomfort. We have just published a booklet with an easy-to-understand poster to introduce this issue and raise awareness about the problems (500 Yen, in Japanese only).

## **Consumers Union of Japan**

**CUJ is a politically and financially independent non-governmental organization (NGO). We are funded by membership fees, sales of publications and donations.**

**CUJ was founded in April 1969 as Japan's first nationwide grassroots consumer organization. CUJ is officially certified as a non-profit organization by the Japanese NPO legislation.**

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