Consumers Union of Japan

Japan Resources

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Contents:

From the Editors:

Food, Not Football

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

But… The country, and the world, is in the grip of football fever as the World Cup is promoted as never before. Large companies take this opportunity to splash billions of Yen not for the sake of encouraging healthy exercise but to push more junk food to the couch potatoes watching the games. Among them, food and beverage corporations Coca Cola, McDonalds and Budweizer probably do not make a single healthy product between them. Another sponsor, Mengniu is the Inner Mongolian Chinese dairy giant that is infamous for its melamine scandal in 2008, but it has had other food safety related problems as well since then.

Our list of demands for change is very long, and so is our history. Right now we have started to prepare for CUJ's 50th 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!

- Editors

Food Industry & Supermarkets: *Food Additives and Transportation Networks Helped Create Oligopoly Control over Our Food*

Much has happened since the first supermarkets opened in Japan. The first is said to be Kinokuniya in Tokyo (1953), followed by Maruwa in Kita-Kyushu (1956). The initial reaction was that they would sell cheap and bad food, with cynics sneering at the katakana name, “suupa” (short for super). The expansion of the country’s transportation network made it possible to create high growth and massive profits were made.

The other factor behind the success that should not be forgotten was the appearance of artificial food additives. Bread with up to 30 food additives became the norm, and could be sold cheaply because of its long shelf-life. Products could also be shipped and sold nation-wide. In 1962, before the supermarket boom, Japan had 14,823 bakeries. The industry was soon ruled by the giant company Yamazaki Baking, and the number of bakeries dwindled to 4190 by 1971.

Of course this kind of trend did not just happen to the bakeries. Japan’s Fair Trade Commission has released data indicating that three major companies now dominate all sectors in a way that we can call oligopoly control. For frozen food, the largest three control 59.7% (Nichirei alone controls 32.8%), instant noodles 61.3% (Sanyo 31.3%), instant coffee 94.8 (Nestle 67.7%), whiskey 94.7% (Suntory 64.3%), and soy sauce 43.0% (Kikkoman 31.2%). Over half a century since the trend of industrial production with food additives made highly processed food possible, supermarkets continue to sell these items in large quantities. There is no doubt that our children’s health is increasingly under threat.

By Amagasa Keisuke, CUJ

Concerns about Japan’s MagLev Train Project

Consumers Union of Japan went on a field trip to investigate the current problems surrounding the massive project to build a MagLev superconductive train system (known as “Linear” in Japanese). Before the trip, we talked to our guide, the director of Gauss Network, Mr. Kakehi Tetsuo, an expert on magnetic field radiation issues.

These are some of the main concerns:

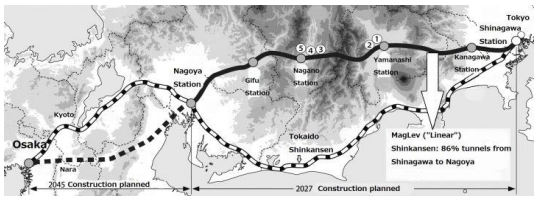
The system selected to run Japan’s Central Shinkansen MagLev train is to use refrigerated liquid helium at minus 269 C and make the resistance or impedance zero. This is based on superconducting magnets. But there is a possibility that the cooling system will fail. This abnormal termination is known as “magnet quench” and would certainly lead to accidents. For example, the high speed train may hit the walls of the tunnels. There are no examples of such a superconducting system having any practical use anywhere in the world.

The amount of energy needed for this supercooling apparatus is immense. As much as 3.5 times as much energy is needed compared to running one of the current, traditional Shinkansen trains, and it could be more according to some experts. They will need at least an extra nuclear plant just to provide the electricity.

A very strong magnetic field around the train will be generated by such a system. We assume that there will be some kind of shield or screen to protect the passengers. However, in March 2018, Mr. Atsushi Yamada, a Kofu City Council Member, measured 300 Milligauss during a test ride. It is thought that levels above 2-3 Milligauss can be dangerous, so that is indeed a very high number.

The tunnel being planned through Japan's Southern Alps will destroy the pristine nature of the local area. A large amount of rock and soil must be disposed of. We can expect large-scale environmental destruction, landslides and contamination of water, rivers and wells. Already, such changes in the ecosystem have been observed during the preparations for construction. The final disposal site for the estimated 56,800,000 square meters of tunnel excavation debris has not been decided. What valley or wetland will it all be buried at?

We know that passenger numbers on the current, traditional Shinkansen, the Tokaido Line, have already peaked. We know that the population of Japan will continue to decrease. We know that there is no real demand for this, and no profit to be expected, yet tax money is being invested.



Japan-Korea-Taiwan Non-GMO Asia Forum established

On 8 May 2018, a symposium was held in the Taiwanese capital Taipei on the theme of GM food. The symposium was organized by the School Lunch Project 22 and the GMO Free School Campaign. 22 is the number of major administrative divisions in Taiwan. Homemakers Union Consumers Co-op and the GMO Free Campaign in Taiwan also cooperated with the event in a gathering aimed at making school lunches GMO free. At the gathering, Honorary Professor of Taiwan University Warren Kuo reported on the history of GMOs in Taiwan and explained how Taiwan's GMO food labeling and restrictions were once behind those of Japan and South Korea but are now the most advanced. The gathering ended with the announcement that "Yesterday, May 7, Taiwan's parliament passed an Organic Agriculture Promotion Act. As similar acts have now also passed in Japan and South Korea, if three of the six countries that use the largest amounts of pesticides per unit area, Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, promote organic farming, it will be possible to bring about a large reduction in the amounts of pesticides used in the world." On the same day, a ceremony for the establishment of the Non-GMO Asia

Forum was held and it was agreed that in the future the citizens of the three countries would maintain close contact with one another and coordinate their actions.

Japan's Soy Sauce Makers Replied to Our GM-Free Labelling Questionnaire

Consumers Union of Japan

Food Safety Citizens' Watch

NO! GMO Campaign

Japan is considering changing its mandatory labelling system for genetically modified (GM) food. Currently, a processed food can contain as much as 5% GM ingredients but still be labelled as GM-Free. At a Consumer Agency meeting on February 16, 2018, a new strategy to deal with GM labelling and such contamination issues was discussed.

One of the draft proposals was to set the limit at 0% (below detection limit). If such a strict rule is introduced, it will probably be very difficult for food companies to avoid contamination, even if identity preserved handling is adhered to. This would most likely mean that the current GM-Free label, which is quite common in Japan, would disappear.

On March 1, we sent a questionnaire to six major food companies to ask them about their opinion and how they respond to consumers that do not want to eat GM food. The six companies were Kikkoman, Yamasa, Masada, Higeta, Higashimaru and Morita. These companies use the GM-Free label, or「遺伝子組換えでない」in Japanese on some of their products.

We received the following replies from five companies that make soy sauce and use identity preserved handling to avoid GM soy.

Question 1: Do you agree or disagree with the proposal to change the rule for the GM-Free label, so that it can only be used if the contamination is 0% (below detection limit)?

(1) We agree (2) We oppose (3) Other

Replies:

Kikkoman: (2) We oppose

Yamasa (2) We oppose

Masada (3) Other (Administrative policy decision)

Higeta: (2) We oppose

Higashimaru (3) Other (We will follow the labelling law when it is introduced)

Question 2: If the GM-Free labelling rule is changed to limit contamination to 0% (below detection limit), how do you expect the current labelling on your soy sauce products will change?

(1) If the detection limit is changed to 0%, the GM-Free label will be impossible to use, so we will stop

using it. In that case, we would stop importing soybeans that are IP handled and change to start using GM soybeans that are not kept separate from GM-Free soybeans.

(2) We will change the label on our soy sauce explaining that "We use GM-Free soybeans that are kept separate from GM soybeans" and continue import using IP handling.

(3) Other

Replies:
Kikkoman (3) Other (Correspondence is currently being considered)

Yamasa (3) Other (We will continue import using the present IP handling but will consider it again in the future and have not decided)

Masada (3) Other (We will follow the administrative guidelines)

Higeta (3) Other (Correspondence is currently being considered)

Higashimaru (3) Other (We will make a judgement after the legal revision)

Question 3:

What kind of additional information regarding GM ingredients would you like to share with consumers that are considering buying your soy sauce?

Replies:

Kikkoman: The labelling space is limited, so we are considering concise and plain expressions that do not cause misunderstanding to be desirable.

Yamasa: We are listening to the detailed suggestions from the Consumer Agency. We wish that our customers will see the label and understand it.

Masada: We will make a judgement after the legal revision.

Higeta: The most important thing is that the consumer understands the label.

Higashimaru: We will make a judgement after the legal revision.

Channel Nishoren Now on Youtube!

CUJ has started making videos and making them public on Youtube, on Channel Youtube. So far, we have made videos about the following topics available to the public (in Japanese only so far):

- Amagasa Keisuke Explains: Genome Editing
- Amagasa Keisuke Explains: Seeds and Genetically Modified Foods
- Symposium about CUJ's Telephone Hotline for People Who Suffer from Artificial Fragrances
- The Problem with Artificial Fragrances: A Kamishibai Presentation

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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