

Consumers Union of Japan

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From the Editors:

Back to the Future?

Welcome to issue No. 177 of Consumers Union of Japan's English newsletter. This spring has of course been very unusual for everyone. We had to work from home and cancel many events and meetings.

However, CUJ has been able to hold live events using the internet, with many participants from all over Japan and abroad.

This summer, we will continue covering topics including genom-editing and 5G. We are also publishing new books and pamphlets, while stepping up our efforts to get new members.

We hope you will stay updated with CUJ's activities and news on our English website!

- Editors

New Campaign: Organic and Pesticide-free Ingredients for School Lunches

In order to protect the health of children, there is a growing movement to incorporate organic and pesticide-free ingredients into school lunches. It is the responsibility of each local government to provide school meals. Therefore, the residents themselves can decide what kind of school lunches they want to have.

However, organic agriculture in Japan accounts for only 0.2%* of the total arable land, so it is not easy to promote the use of organic farming in school lunches, including in terms of price. Starting this campaign, we will discuss what is needed to make organic and pesticide-free school lunches a reality.

*Area certified as organic by JAS



Urgent Request for Countermeasures Against the New Coronavirus

To: Kato Katsunobu, Minister of Health, Labour and Welfare

April 14 2020

Urgent Request for Countermeasures Against the New Coronavirus

The government's measures against the new coronavirus during this period lack the perspective to protect the lives and livelihoods of citizens. From the standpoint of all Japanese citizens, we call for a review of the new coronavirus countermeasures at the government's expert meeting.

1. Please introduce a simple test kit as soon as possible for early diagnosis

The new coronavirus is so contagious that it can be transmitted even if no symptoms are present. At the very least, patients who complain of fever, cough, or taste disorder should be diagnosed promptly and preventive measures such as isolation should be taken. If a simple test kit that has already been developed overseas is introduced as soon as possible and all suspected cases are tested in the same way as for influenza, PCR testing can be performed based on the kit to more accurately assess the status of infection and prevent the spread of the disease.

Early diagnosis with a simple test kit is also recommended for early treatment. Also, please withdraw the suggestion to stay at home for 4 days for healthy people and 2 days for the elderly, and encourage them to receive medical examinations as soon as possible.

2. Please secure and utilize masks that are effective in preventing infection

Although masks are believed to be effective to some extent in preventing the spread of infection, the shortage of masks in many cities is causing a great deal of anxiety among citizens. With the current domestic production capacity, it is unlikely that citizens will be able to afford the masks they need. In addition, gauze masks distributed by the government to each house are considered to have limited effectiveness in preventing infection.

We believe that the public should be made aware that non-woven masks, which have a certain degree of viral shielding ability, are not disposable and can be used repeatedly by washing and disinfecting in the sun. In particular, we request that masks necessary for medical facilities and facilities for the elderly be urgently secured and supplied.

3. Reduce the risk of diagnosis and treatment

Although chest CT scan is often used for diagnosis, the new type of

coronavirus can be diagnosed by PCR or a simple test kit. We think that simple chest radiography and an interview are sufficient for the diagnosis of pneumonia itself. There is no need for CT scan imaging that is two orders of magnitude higher in exposure, and medical institutions should be instructed not to expose patients to more radiation than necessary.

Thoroughly evaluate and consider the side effects of the medication. The development of a cure is rushed, but please do everything you can to ensure that there is no side effects. We believe that Avigan should be used with caution in light of its side effects.

New coronaviruses, which are RNA viruses, mutate quickly, so the effectiveness of vaccines is likely to be limited. Either way, it doesn't help in the immediate future. There are also adverse reactions. We would like to request that you consider countermeasures without over-confidence in vaccines.

4. We demand measures that will save everyone

Although it is likely that homeless people living on the streets and the needy have low immunity due to poor diets, etc., and are at higher risk from infection, nevertheless, even if masks are distributed, for example, they are not distributed to such people.

In addition, there has been widespread layoffs of casual, temporary, and part-time workers under the pretext of the Corona economic recession. Many of these people lose their jobs and the place to live at the same time. Many people have already been forced to spend the night in online cafes and all-night shops. The semi-mandatory self-imposed restraint of business that is being declared a state of emergency will throw these people out into the streets. As people leave town and eateries close, hunger will affect them in addition to the risk of infection.

At the same time, we demand that unemployed people, regardless of whether they are regular or irregular, be immediately covered by employment insurance and that the period of receipt of benefits be specially extended.

The weight of life is the same. We would like to request that you, as the person in charge of health and labor policy, pay sufficient attention to the bottom line of society and take measures to ensure that everyone's right to life is fulfilled.

Amagasa Keisuke

Ono Kazunori

Consumers Union of Japan

CUJ: Concerns Regarding Genome Editing of Fish

An article appeared in Tokyo Shimbun on 24 January 2020 that reported on the use of genome editing to exterminate invasive fish. The research is being pushed forward as a study by the National Research Institute of Aquaculture.

The article noted that Bluegill was introduced from North America to Japan in around 1960. It fed on everything from crustaceans and insects to young fish and aquatic plants, and had a major impact on the ecosystem, including the disappearance of native species.

There was a huge influence in particular in Lake Biwa in Shiga prefecture, where the damage was enormous. The National Research Institute of Aquaculture succeeded in analyzing the genome of the Bluegill and succeeded in cutting the corresponding genes for infertility in males. In the future, they will create a near-natural environment in a controlled quarantine area and collect data for three to five years. The goal is to raise them in an outdoor reservoir and eventually release them into Lake Biwa, according to Tokyo Shimbun.

Consequently, Consumers Union of Japan wrote to the research center on January 29 to express our concern and to ask a number of questions. We consider that this type of genome editing can have a large impact on

related species, the natural environment, as well as the entire ecosystem. This impact due to the release of genome-edited fish must be analysed very carefully. On February 17 we received a reply from the research center. Here follows the questions and answers:

Question 1: Please explain briefly how the sterilization will be made using genome editing, in order to exterminate invasive fish (Bluegill) and how you intend to assess the environmental impact as a result of releasing such fish.

(Answer) We are at the advanced stage of creating infertile fish that will be released. The research institute is going to carefully assess the impact on the environment after the release of the sterilized fish and the influence on the biota in the water as well as the predation and the multiplication.

Question 2: Although the fish will be made infertile, is there a possibility that the genes for sterilization can spread to other related species including native fish and its offspring through cross breeding?

(Answer) There are no native fish of the same species as Bluegill (Sunfish family) in Japan. Because of this, we think the possibility that the sterilization genes will spread through cross breeding is zero. Also, Largemouth bass belongs to the Sunfish family but there are no reports of Largemouth bass cross

breeding with Bluegill in the natural environment. Even so, we are consulting with related public administration and experts to get their opinion on whether such cross breeding is possible or not.

Question 3: Regarding sterilization, are you considering what may happen if offspring from such fish spread for example through artificial causes to water areas where they are a native species, such as North America?

The possibility that offspring of such fish will move to other water areas in Japan is being considered. It is also not impossible to imagine that eggs etc. from such fish will be transported by someone and discharged in North America. However, the sterilized populations we plan to develop will not reduce Bluegill populations in such waters unless we continue to release significant numbers into the same waters for decades. Therefore, we believe that the impact on Bluegill populations in a given body of water will be temporary, even if they move or are released. We expect to cover this point in the environmental impact assessment. Indeed, if infertile individuals are deliberately released in large numbers to their place of origin or elsewhere on an ongoing basis, this may lead to a decline in Bluegill populations in their original habitat. We plan to ask for the opinion from related public administrations and experts in order to get a clear

picture of what may or may not happen and what measures need to be taken.

Question 4: Gene drive technology can be used to create sterilization. Are you considering the possibility of using gene drive technology?

(Answer) It would be very dangerous if offspring of such fish with sterilization from gene drive technology were to spread to the place where they are a native species as it can lead to extermination. Therefore we are thinking that it would be improper to use gene drive technology to exterminate invasive fish in Japan. We are not planning to use it in the future either, even if there are technical developments in that field.

Question 5: If such fish and their offspring with infertility genes were to be caught, there is a possibility that they would be eaten by humans. Have you considered the food safety issue or do you plan to do such assessment?

(Answer) We are considering the possibility that such infertile fish or their offspring could be eaten. We cannot say that it would not happen. We are planning to ask related public administration and experts for their assessment of the food safety issue, once we are at that stage of development of sterilization.

Almost Half a Million Signatures Supporting Our Gene-Editing Petition

14 February 2020

In 2019 Consumers Union of Japan started a petition campaign and collected signatures demanding regulation of all gene-edited foods. Here are the results of the initial stage of the campaign which we have now ended.

From May 2019 to November we collected no less than 447,725 signatures in support of the petition. We did not reach our target of 1 million signatures, but we feel strongly that almost half a million signatures in such a short time is a great success, especially since almost no one in Japan seems to have heard of gene-editing or genome editing.

We organized an event at the Japanese Parliament Building on 30 January 2020 and had the opportunity to hand over the signatures to the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, the Ministry of the Environment and the Consumer Agency. We made sure that everyone's personal data was protected.

From abroad, we collected signatures from Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, Germany, the UK, Australia, New Zealand, USA, Brazil and Taiwan, in addition to 13 organizations and 10 researchers and university professors. We are very grateful for everyone's cooperation and support.

However, in spite of almost 450,000 signatures being presented to them at the event, the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare continued to argue that gene-editing is not genetic modification and thus does not need regulation or safety assessment, ignoring its effects on the natural environment.

In the same way, the Consumer Agency is ignoring the call for mandatory labelling of gene-edited foods, arguing that they are indistinguishable from mutations that may happen in the natural world.

Many consumers, however, are deeply unhappy with this state of affairs. We are saying, "We do not want to eat food which is the result of gene-editing and genetically modified organisms which have been created by the use of such technologies." And we are demanding both safety assessment and mandatory labelling of such foods.

It is believed that gene-edited food was allowed to enter Japan by October 2019, but so far, they do not seem to go on the market. We cannot be entirely sure about this since there

has been no safety assessment and no mandatory labelling.

Our movement is strong and we will continue to demand regulation of gene-edited food and mandatory labelling.

We also appreciate your continued support.

Thank you!

Michiyo Koketsu, Secretary General,
CUJ

Martin J. Frid, CUJ

Consumers Union of Japan

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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