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From the Editors:

Growing Movement

Welcome to issue No. 185 of Consumers Union of Japan's English newsletter. The theme of this issue is "Exposing Fragrance Pollution in Japan" where we discuss the problem and the growing movement trying to deal with it. CUJ and other organisations have been acting as a principal driver of the movement for the last several years.

We also have an update on the Japanese government's assault on consumers' right to know and choose,

as it moves to make certain popular – and useful - food labels illegal.

We hope you will stay updated with CUJ's activities and news on our English website, as well as on our English Twitter account:

<https://twitter.com/consumerunionjp/>



Exposing Fragrance Pollution in Japan

By Yuri Kitagawa

A large number of people in Japan suffer from fragrance pollution. The main culprits include laundry products, especially scented fabric softeners, but also fabric refreshers, air fresheners, and antiperspirants.

The number of those affected is thought to be a few million and possibly as many as 10 million. Symptoms are headaches, nausea, diarrhea, asthma, dizziness, eye-ache and worse. Some people reach points where they are unable to go to school or work and in extreme cases, they are forced to escape to uninhabited areas and live deep in the mountains.

In 2017, Consumers Union of Japan (CUJ) and its Soap/Detergent Group set up a Fragrance Pollution Helpline, which led to the creation of the Network to Stop Fragrance Pollution with six other citizen's organisations,

and together the Network has engaged in numerous activities.

Even if one is not a user of scented products, fragrance pollution is impossible to escape as polluted air reaches inside homes from laundry being dried in neighbours' gardens and on balconies, or from exhaust vents connected to clothes dryers. Also, cold water is commonly used in washing machines which can be the cause of leaving more garment softener chemicals attached to the clothes' fabric. Since the whole atmosphere, especially inside buildings, is polluted, going out means coming back drenched in fragrances and other chemicals.

Fragrance Products Using Microcapsules

The problem of fragrance pollution started around the latter half of the 2000s when P&G's Downy, characterised by its strong fragrance, was imported. The three main producers of scented laundry products in Japan are P&G, Kao and Lion. One manufacturer noted that after 2005, consumers cited "scent" as reason for using garment softeners rather than the product's original objective of making garments soft. In a 2011 poll, 70% cited "scent" as reason for using the product.

Modern fragrance products are designed in a way that fragrance chemicals are enveloped in microcapsules made of substances such as urethane and melamine resins. The microcapsules serve the purpose to delay and continue release of the fragrance and to stick everywhere. Merchandise in shops is similarly contaminated by these fragrance capsules which spatter around from clothes of customers and shop staff. Paper items, such as toilet paper and tissues are especially vulnerable as paper is porous and absorbs well these tiny capsules. Fresh foods are not exempt from contamination and plastic wraps used to package food items is another item which attracts these capsules as they are also petroleum-derived products.

A study showed that over 70% of people use garment softeners, while shipments of garment softeners increased from 248,000 ton in 2008 to 370,000 ton in 2019. Of special concern are schools and child care facilities where the smell of these products fill classrooms. At hospitals and clinics, those vulnerable to the products suffer. Japanese urban transportation, such as trains, is often crowded which means that the level of fragrance pollution is high.

Fierce advertising campaigns by manufacturers of products using celebrities play a major role in brainwashing people to believe that scented laundry products are good and even a must. Also, peer pressure

characteristic of Japanese culture aggravates the situation to the extent that we hear stories that kids not using scented laundry products are being bullied.

The sense of smell is one which is easily lost, thus the users of scented products often experience nose blindness with regards to the smell. Under all these circumstances, a situation often arises where when an individual who suffers from other people's use of scented products point to the problem, the users do not understand what is at stake. Many victims cite experiences of being ignored and told that individuals are free to choose what they use and that the problem is the victims' body constitution.

A Growing Movement

As for actions taken by the Network to Stop Fragrance Pollution since its creation in 2017, they include a questionnaire in 2019-20 which received over 9330 replies. 79% replied that they have experienced feeling sick because of fragrance pollution and 18.6% said they experienced not being able to go to work or school. 86.6% cited garment softeners as the cause for feeling sick.

Since 2018, the Network has conducted annual meetings with the ministries concerned with the regulations, including the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Industries, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Environment

and the Consumer Affairs Agency. Although some progress has been made, to this day, the reply from the Ministry of Health remains that they do not intend to regulate the products since there is no proof that fragrance pollution from the products is the cause of the symptoms.

There have been well over 300 cases of questioning in national and local assemblies over the past years. So far the replies stop at saying that the authorities will look into the issue and that they will deal with individual cases at schools, often meaning that they will prepare a separate room for the pupil to sit during the day resulting in these pupils being left to spend time on his/her own.

In August 2021, upon the Network's request, the four ministries and the Consumer Agency prepared a joint poster calling for caution on using scented products. It was a milestone, but unfortunately since the text on the poster says to *use* the scented products while paying attention to the quantity, the effect of the poster is expected to remain limited.

Many other actions have been conducted by CUJ and the Network, including making of a booklet featuring fragrance pollution (CUJ), conducting questionnaires addressing Co-ops all around Japan (Network), and filing a request to major delivery services (Network). Ahead of major elections, the Network conducts a

survey of political parties' views on fragrance pollution.

Finding Solutions?

To this day, no country bans the production and sale of these products. However, some actions in the EU and North America provide good examples of what could be done in Japan too. The EU Regulation 1223/2009, which applies to cosmetics products, requires the labelling of 26 allergenic fragrance substances on their list. The Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety publishes on its homepage a guideline for a scent-free policy for the workplace. Many workplaces and municipalities in North America have introduced fragrance-free policies such as in the cities of Detroit and Portland in the US, Halifax in Canada, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and Stanford University.

As for the disclosure of ingredients, while laundry detergents and bleach products are covered by Japan's Household Goods Quality Labeling Act, garment softeners are not. Following examples in Europe and the US, since 2020, the industry in Japan started voluntary disclosure of fragrances used in garment softeners. However, disclosure of ingredients other than fragrances are only partially conducted.

In 2021 a group of victims of chemical products, such as scented garment softeners, called the Canaria Network

All Japan, was set up. So far it has gathered over 500 members who will work together to solve the problem.

A ban on the products causing fragrance pollution might not be a realistic goal at least in the immediate future, but introductions of fragrance-free policies starting with the most critically needed institutions such as childcare facilities, schools, and medical institutions are urgently needed. Fragrance pollution is not only lowering the quality of life of many people and depriving them the right to breath non-polluted air, but it is also a loss to the economy as their efficiency at work is affected or worse. As for children and young people, it seems that their right to a happy and safe future is put at stake.

More on the issue of fragrance pollution in the news (in English):

<https://www.nippon.com/en/in-depth/d00703/>

Violating Consumers' Right to Know and Choose

By Michiyo Koketsu, Co-Chairperson, Consumers Union of Japan

In Japan, the food labeling system has been undergoing continuous deterioration over the past several years. How is it that the government has

gone from leaving consumers scratching their heads over unclear labels, to violating our right to know and choose? It all started in 2015, when the food labeling system, which previously fell under a number of jurisdictions, was consolidated into the Food Labeling Law and placed under the Consumer Affairs Agency. They promptly established study groups to discuss the labeling of the origin of ingredients in processed foods, the labeling of food additives, and the labeling of genetically modified foods, but neither took into account the demands proposed by Consumers Union of Japan (CUJ). The Consumer Affairs Agency has ignored our calls for a better labeling system for consumers while making the labeling system convenient for corporations.

The Problem of Labeling the Origin of Ingredients in Processed Foods: "Manufactured in Japan" Claims are Misleading Consumers

A case in point is the labeling of processed food, which has changed since April 2022.

The country of origin of the most commonly used ingredients in foods must now be indicated. Although it appears to be a step forward that labeling of the country of origin of raw materials, which was previously limited to certain foods, is now required for all foods, many loopholes were created by the study group. For example, if a product has origins in three or more countries, there is now no need to indicate the name of the country and it can be labeled as "imported." This means that consumers have no idea where the ingredients originated.

Even more problematic is the labeling regarding domestically made flour. Bread and pasta are labeled "Flour (Domestically Made)," but if you think they are made from domestically produced wheat, you are mistaken. Unless it says "Made with Domestic Wheat," it is almost certainly made with imported wheat. Imported wheat is milled into flour in Japan, so it can be labeled as if it were domestically produced. The baking industry claims that it is "not feasible" to label the country of wheat production

because wheat needs to be blended with multiple flours, potentially from several countries, to stabilize the quality of bread, but this is exactly the kind of labeling that CUJ thinks will mislead consumers.

Food Additive Labeling Issues: "Synthetic" and "Artificial" Prohibited

As if that is not bad enough, starting in April, it is no longer possible to label products as "Free of Synthetic Preservatives" or "Free of Artificial Sweeteners." According to the Consumer Affairs Agency, consumers tend to avoid products with "Synthetic" or "Artificial" labels. As the additives used are those recognized by the government as safe, the agency claims the ban of "Synthetic" and "Artificial" labels will prevent misleading consumers. This means that food manufacturers who are striving to meet the wishes of consumers who do not want to consume chemically artificial preservatives and sweeteners, will not be able to tout the features of their products.

Furthermore, the labeling of "Chemical Seasonings" itself is no longer allowed. The Consumer Affairs Agency claims the reason for the ban is that the term is not in the law and its definition is unclear. CUJ does not agree as this expression has been used for more than 60 years since the mid-1950s; It is only a matter of clarifying the definition.

GMO Labeling Issues: Will "Not Genetically Modified" Disappear?

The "Not Genetically Modified" labeling is beginning to disappear from tofu and natto. This is due to a change in the condition for the contamination rate for which the GMO-free labeling is allowed, from "Less than 5%" to "Non-detectable (Practically Zero Percent)". The new system will come into effect in April 2023, but some food manufacturers have already stopped using the "Not Genetically Modified" label ahead of schedule. In its place is the "Segregated Production and Distribution Controlled" label. This means that non-genetically modified soybeans have been

segregated and controlled from the production stage in countries where genetically modified soybeans are grown, such as the United States, to the distribution stage when they are imported into Japan and made into products. However, this labeling does not tell consumers what it is that has been segregated.

Some people say that it is strange to be able to label products as "Not Genetically Modified" even if they contain nearly 5% genetically modified ingredients, and that this revision is justified. On the other hand, edible soybean oil made from 100% genetically modified soybeans is not required to be labeled "Genetically Modified," while tofu, which contains less than 1% genetically modified soybeans, cannot be labeled "Not Genetically Modified." In this way, even with the government imposing changes in labelling requirements, as consumers we are still very much deprived of our right to know and choose what we buy and eat.

Essay: Unexpectedly...

By Kaori Hirouchi

I was surprised to overhear my father muttering, "I guess I should spray herbicide" Although there is only a small portion of soil around the house, there is still enough space for various weeds to grow. I always noticed that my father was weeding, and although I felt bad about it, I could only help him on weekends.

I think it's fine if there are a some weeds growing, but my father has been paying more attention to weeds recently.

I do not want to spray herbicides around my house, as I have learned about the problems of herbicides from Consumers Union of Japan. "It hurts my back and it's hard work," my father said. "But I don't think herbicides are good for your health either," I argued. "I don't know, but they sell them at our local garden store."

Little by little, I have started talking with my father about what he seems to be concerned about. I think it's okay if there are a few weeds growing. Interesting flowers bloom suddenly. I managed to settle it by saying, "I'll weed more too." I think that was the main issue, my laziness to get out there and actually do some proper weeding.

Surprisingly, we don't talk about important things with those closest to us. I realized that I need to learn more about how to deal with weeds in a practical way so that 20 years from now, when I am not as strong as I am now, I will not be buried under weeds.

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.

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