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FTA and the food on our tables

Report by Yasuaki Yamaura

Consumers Union of Japan/Food Action 21

October 2007

The purpose of Free Trade Agreements (FTA) is to lower tariffs and reduce other barriers for products traded between two countries. Since 2002, Japan has concluded FTAs with Singapore, Mexico and Malaysia, and is also currently in the process of negotiating deals with South Korea, India and Australia.

I participated in two meetings sponsored by NGOs and experts that oppose FTA negotiations in Sydney, Australia, in parallel with the APEC Summit in September, 2007. People from different backgrounds in the Asia-Pacific region voiced their opinions and shared experiences of how their countries are dealing with trade liberalization, investment rules, intellectual property rights and other topics. I was also invited to give a talk about the problems related to agriculture and food systems.

Agriculture and Food Security under Threat from FTAs

During the meetings we heard about Pakistan's experience with trade deals. Pakistan's FTA with the United States has made it increasingly difficult for farmers to continue their age-old farming methods. Cheap US food products are flooding the countryside, where there are few other jobs. Also, US beef has been imported into the country without any country-of-origin labels, and consumers are worried about the safety.

From the Malaysian NGO Third World Network we heard about the complex issues related to intellectual property rights and patents. Due to Malaysia's FTA with the United States, patent laws were extended from 20 or 50 years to 70 years and in certain cases even 120 years. Farmers are especially concerned about patent rules for seeds, as large companies may take control over genetic resources in the country, with the result that the freedom of food production in every country is gradually going to disappear. This was also echoed in the presentation about India, where farmers are lured into contract farming to produce genetically modified crops for multinational corporations.

From Thailand's experience with FTAs, it was also clear that cheap agricultural products such as beef and dairy products are now flooding the local markets. Yet, free trade deals are being sought with China, Australia, the United States and Japan. US companies in particular have been relentlessly pushing for intellectual property rights, but farmers have to pay license fees that this would require. In its FTA negotiations with Japan, Thailand had to accept that rice would not be included, as this would have negative effects on Japan's agricultural sector, while sugar, shrimp and chicken can be exported.

In the case of Japan, increased imports have led to a decrease in food self-sufficiency. Japan's calorie-based food self-sufficiency rate is only 39%. This is further threatened by even lower tariffs on Australian foods as a result of the Japan-Australia FTA. We are concerned that this will have a very negative influence on farmers in Hokkaido, and that entire communities in northern Japan may collapse.

As seen from such examples, it is clear that FTAs are a threat to the food sovereignty of each country. For consumers, it means a loss of a stable food supply. In addition, as agriculture becomes an export-oriented industry, the local food supply is no longer a priority. There is also an increased concern about environmental issues among consumers.

Food Safety and FTAs

During the meeting, we heard how the United States forced Pakistan to accept imports of genetically modified foods. Food safety standards had to be lowered so that the GM crops could be imported.

Similarly, Korea had to accept US demands, such as changing the Korean import restrictions for US beef. After the Korean market had re-opened, a number of cases of violations occurred, and there is now a strong movement in Korea to stop US beef.

In Australia, each state has imposed a local moratorium so that genetically modified rape cannot be farmed. The central government is under pressure from the US government and the biotech industry to allow GM crops. In each state, such as Western Australia, there are campaigns to maintain the moratorium. In a special workshop, we also explained how Japanese consumers feel about GM crops, and expressed our strong support for the Australian states that do not allow GM crops. The No! GMO Campaign in Japan has been particularly active in its efforts to keep GMO foods off our food tables – which was applauded by the participants.

If a Free Trade Agreement between Japan and Australia is concluded, we are concerned that GM crops such as rape will be imported to Japan. Again and again, it is clear that food sovereignty for each country needs to be established, to guarantee the safety of our food. This is an urgent matter of international solidarity.

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The Japan Times: Plastic Incineration Rise Draws Ire

November 3, 2007

Plastic Incineration Rise Draws Ire

Environmentalists unswayed by limited tests, fears risks

(Quote:)

Yasuko Ueda, a writer and outspoken activist with the Tokyo-based Consumers Union of Japan, a nongovernmental organization, noted that the government has invoked the Containers and Packaging Recycling Law to require that plastics be re-used as “resources” to the greatest extent possible, but complained that her own ward, Setagaya, does far too little to either recycle plastic or curtail its production from the start.

Ueda said she estimated that waste plastic could be reduced by about half were the directive followed more aggressively.

”The amount of plastic that absolutely must be incinerated will be only a tiny amount and the (lifetime of dump sites) can be extended by 10 years and beyond,” Ueda said. ”If they just skip over those steps and categorize all that plastic as burnable,” she continued, “don't you think that's wrongheaded?”

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International Bad Products Award

November 14, 2007

Michiyo Koketsu from Consumers Union of Japan participated in Consumers International's Congress in Australia, October 29-November 1, 2007.

CI announced the winners of the International Bad Products Awards, as 400 delegates from national consumer organisations and governments convened in Sydney. The awards aim to highlight failings of corporate responsibility and the abuse of consumer trust by internationally recognised brands.

Coca-Cola, Kellogg's, and Mattel top the list of international brands guilty of abusing consumer rights, with Takeda Pharmaceuticals winning the overall prize for taking advantage of poor US regulation and advertising sleeping pills to children, despite health warnings about paediatric use.

”Japan has stricter rules and does not allow such TV commercials for pharmaceutical products,” notes Michiyo Koketsu. ”However, we are concerned about the risk that similar commercials will be approved in the near future. We will keep watching and expect more corporate social responsibility, not less.”

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What is Happening to the Tasmanian Forests?

Report by Yasuaki Yamaura

Consumers Union of Japan

November 28, 2008

Australia is a huge exporter of iron, coal, uranium, and farm products. Timber production is also active, and a large amount of woodchips are exported to Japan.

Tasmania, an island state, is located southeast of the Australian continent. Its area is almost the same as that of Hokkaido in Japan.

Tasmania is an island where the old growth and environmentally sensitive forests grow, forming a very unique ecosystem. You can find rare species such as wedge-tailed eagles and swift parrots. The forests, however, are being rapidly destroyed, because Forestry Tasmania (the manager of Tasmania's state forests) and Gunns Ltd. (a huge timber processing company and exporter) are irresponsibly harvesting timber.

In September 2007, delegates from Consumers Union of Japan and anti-globalization organizations visited Tasmania on the invitation of Wilderness Society, an Australian environmental group working on this problem, and had a chance to witness the destruction at some of the old growth forests.

On September 6, we met Bob Brown and Christina Milne, both senators of Australian Congress and members of Tasmanian state assembly. They belong to the Australian Green Party. Bob Brown was a driving force in forming the Australian Greens in 1992, and now serves as its leader. We heard the history of the ecology movement on this island which started in 1983 with a fight against the construction of a dam. Since then, the movement has developed to cover a wide range of environmental protection issues.

Thanks to their efforts, the mountainous region in the west was designated as a national park, and a part of the region was registered as a World Natural Heritage. Consequently the forests with old growth of more than 400 years were protected.

However, Forestry Tasmania and Gunns have interpreted the definition of old growth at their convenience. They have been cutting down precious old eucalyptus trees in the mountain foot region, making the excuse that it is not "clear cutting"

They insist that they have protected 40% of the area of the island. But the protected areas are mostly mountain regions or zones with only underbrush or bush growth. They are even deforesting public forests with old growth trees, after which they burn the area to open eucalyptus plantations.

Moreover, they built huge pulp mills in the northern part of the island in order to increase pulp production.

The atmosphere has been polluted by the operation of the factory. Water in the area has been contaminated.

Most of Gunns' woodchips are purchased by Japanese paper companies as raw materials for paper products including tissue paper and copy paper.

”It is clear that the forest certification system of Australia has caused this problem. Most woodchips are certified to conform with the Australian Forestry Standard (AFS) which stipulates criteria for forest protection. AFS was created by the government and lumbering industry, and is being conveniently operated for the benefit of the industry”, said Sean Cadman, the Wilderness Society's National Forest Campaign Coordinator.

AFS allows the industry to clear valuable forests including the old growth, burn them out, and kill the scarce plants and animals living there using a biocide. Animals such as Tasmanian devils are affected by the poison and have been found to suffer from cancer.

The members of Wilderness Society find the certification scheme of the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) more acceptable than AFS.

On September 7, Jeff Low, member of the Wilderness Society, took us to see the old growth in the Sticks and the Florentine Valleys. Both are only 90 kilometers away from the capital Hobart.

After driving on forestry roads in his car, we went into the forest on foot where big trees called King Eucalyptus grow. They are more than 400 years old, and over 95 meters high. Their trunks, more than 5 meters in the diameter, are covered with moss, and a lot of big ferns were growing around the roots.

Forestry Tasmania has permitted Gunns to cut these rich and beautiful forests down because they were situated just outside of the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage area. In 1999, the Wilderness Society started a campaign to find old and large trees that could qualify the forest as Old Growth, and to protect the forest zone within 100 meters from each of the trees, thus adding these zones to the World Heritage area. Thanks to these efforts, a large area of forest zones were saved from being destroyed.

We left these forests to go to the Upper Florentine Valley, also spreading around the Tasmanian World Heritage area, where many King Eucalyptuses worth being specified as Old Growth are growing. In this rain forest area, there are several unique and precious vernacular plants and animal species. Forestry Tasmania, however, is planning to extend forestry roads so that they can expand the areas where lumbering is permitted.

Local environmental groups are acting against this plan, and giving pressure to UNESCO to designate these areas as parts of the World Heritage Area.

Bob Brown and Christina Milne emphasized that these forests are wonderful resources for tourism, and it would be much more beneficial for people in this island to welcome visitors from all over the world than to cut the forests down. They also pointed out that good quality timber should be used in reasonable quantity for furniture or wooden boats. The climate of this island is relatively mild, and very rich in fruits. Beer, wine and other food products are made locally. They are exported to the Australian mainland and to many countries over the world.

Tasmanian wilderness is attracting more and more Japanese nature-lovers, but not many of us, Japanese consumers, are aware of all these problems hidden behind the tissue and copy papers we use every day. Protection of these irreplaceable forests is also our responsibility. In response to this, Consumers Union of Japan has started to tackle the corporate social responsibility of Japanese paper companies purchasing Tasmania wood chips.

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Protest Against Decision to Cancel the GM Moratorium

December 12, 2007

Japanese consumers have written to Victoria and New South Wales in Australia, to protest against the two states' decision to start allowing genetically modified crops:

The No! GMO Campaign would like to take this opportunity to strongly protest against the decision that your state has taken to cancel the moratorium against GM crops.

In October 2007, The No! GMO Campaign submitted a request to your states that the GM moratorium should be kept in place. This request was signed by 155 different organizations, representing some 2,900,000 consumers. We have concluded that since cultivation of Genetically Modified crops inevitably will lead to GM pollution of the environment, it will become a serious problem for Japanese consumers to continue buying canola products from Australia.

By canceling the GM moratorium we cannot but feel that you have ignored the request of Japanese consumers. We are angry that you took such a regrettable decision in spite of our efforts to communicate our wishes in a sincere manner. Starting the cultivation of GM canola in your state will not only create problems for Japanese consumers, but also for Australian farmers and consumers. In conclusion, we strongly hope your state will reconsider this unfortunate decision and once more take action to restrict the cultivation of GM crops.

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Japan Resources is published by Consumers Union of Japan (CUJ). CUJ was founded in April 1969 and was officially certified as a non-profit organization on May 1, 2006 by the new Japanese NPO legislation. We continue to be a non-political and financially independent organization (NGO). CUJ is funded by membership fees and donations. The main concern of CUJ and its members is to realize a world of liberty and equality, a world free of economic, social and legal discrimination, and to preserve a safe and healthy environment for our children's future.

CUJ pursues the following goals on behalf of consumers: (1) To secure for ourselves and our families safe and healthy lives, (2) to establish systems/laws to protect the rights of consumers, (3) to promote peace, social justice and economic fairness, (4) to support and empower consumers who care about the environment, and (5) to cooperate with foreign consumer groups/organizations.

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