Rumors and Prejudice Plague Fukushima Farmers Two Years Later

The produce might be safe, but lingering radiation fears keep customers away.

Olga Belogolova  Mar 22 2013, 11:41 AM ET

A radiation monitor indicates 114.00 microsieverts per hour near the No.4 reactor at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant in Fukushima prefecture, Japan, on March 6, 2013. (Issei Kato/Reuters)
NIHONMATSU, Japan - Shinichi Ouchi's family has farmed this land for at least 300 years and for 16 generations, he told us as we sat, legs crossed, on the floor of his parlor, where the walls are lined with black- and-white photos of his ancestors. Ouchi, 71, an organic farmer in the Fukushima prefecture town of Nihonmatsu, greeted us in the driveway of his modest home, where my interpreter, another journalist and I removed our shoes and then handed him a finely wrapped box of candies - our omiyage (a traditional Japanese gift offered to thank a host for his or her hospitality).

Ouchi chairs the Nihonmatsu Organic Agricultural Study Group, part of Yuuki-Net - the Fukushima Organic Agricultural Network, a group aimed at fostering collaboration and an exchange of sustainable practices among farmers in the region. Since the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear accident two years ago, Yuuki-Net farmers have lost 60 percent of their business, Ouchi told us. The accident, triggered by the one-two punch of an earthquake and tsunami in March 2011, devastated homes and displaced residents all along the coast in Fukushima. But in places like Nihonmatsu, about 40 miles from the crippled nuclear facility, the real destruction is less visible. Ouchi and his friends are more concerned with what lies beneath the soil and in the minds of their consumers.

"All the product from Fukushima cannot be sold - the people don't buy them, so the biggest difficulty is...the rumors."

"All the product from Fukushima cannot be sold - the people don't buy them so the biggest difficulty is the damage by the rumors...Even though the radiation level is very low, but the still the products are not sold," Ouchi said, explaining that most people just shudder at the word Fukushima and discriminate accordingly.

"Even though I explain the actual numbers, they don't even care or listen to me," Ouchi told us, detailing some of his difficult interactions with customers since the accident. "People who left us don't care how low is the radiation - they just don't want to eat the vegetables or the rice from Fukushima."

Ouchi, a short man with gray hair and wrinkles on his forehead, joined the family farming business when he was 18 years old. His hands show the wear and tear of manual labor on the 12 acres of farmland that surround his home, where he grows more than 50 kinds of vegetables and other organic products. Ouchi wakes between 4 or 6 in the morning, depending on the season, in order to work his land and bring his produce to the local cooperative shop. He works "until it gets dark in the afternoon," he said, but sometimes, he finds the time to "take a rest" during the day.

Two years ago, when the Great East Japan Earthquake shook the region, Ouchi had never felt a "such a strong shake" in his life. But he knew that his land, which sits atop solid bedrock, is firm and can withstand the shake. What he didn't know was that the subsequent meltdown at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear facility would shake the foundation of his livelihood.

"If this nuclear plant accident didn't happen, then this area was really safe," Ouchi said. And he isn't alone. The Fukushima region is known for its agricultural and fishery industries. The prefecture has the fourth largest farmland area in Japan and many of Japan's agricultural products, including rice, are grown there due to the favorable climate. The region is among the country's top producers of tomatoes, cucumbers, apples, and pears. But since the accident in March 2011, almost 100,000 farmers in Fukushima have lost 105 billion yen, according to a Bloomberg report. Much of that lost revenue comes from false rumors, lingering radiation fears and discrimination against Fukushima products, but the accident has also forced the region's agricultural community to adopt new farming practices and regularly check radiation levels. Ouchi checks all of his own produce and explained that the prefecture and a local research institute check radiation levels regularly as well. The agriculture
association checks all the rice, package by package, Ouchi added.

The drop in sales has, naturally, angered many in the farming community, who are now actively opposing nuclear power in Japan.

At a Tokyo-wide protest in November, which marked the 20-month anniversary of the nuclear accident, farmers were among the thousands of protesters who took to the streets.

Yuki Iino, 35, was one of the first to arrive at the protest in front of the headquarters of Tokyo Electric Power Co., which owns the now-crippled nuclear facility in Fukushima. Iino's farm is actually in the neighboring Ibaraki prefecture, but his business has also felt the sting of the nuclear meltdown, he said.

"We got the real damage due to this accident," Iino said. Proudly donning his straw farmers hat and an anti-nuclear sign, Iino said that "nuclear plants are completely opposite from the agricultural society" and that he hopes Japan will move away from nuclear power.

"I want all the nuclear plants to disappear. There is no safe nuclear plants," he argued, before joining the growing crowd of thousands protesting in front of the utility, shouting "Stop nukes immediately!" and "Shame on you, TEPCO!"

Ouchi has mixed feelings - he is simultaneously bitter and hopeful, he said, as he drove us through his acreage of farmland in his rickety white van, periodically stopping to pick cabbage, green onions and radishes.

"Do you want to come pick a radish?" he asked, getting out of the van and walking into the field. I happily obliged, pulling the large radish out of the soil with ease. The daikon radishes are very sweet, often attracting a slew of insects, Ouchi said, but added that he has managed to ward them off without any chemicals, organically - by just planting the radishes after green onions, which are too bitter for the insects.

"Of course I have lots of anger in myself," Ouchi said of his feelings about the nuclear accident two years ago. "But now we have to...what we have to do is make safe products and also produce our own energy."

"As long as we don't change our way of life as a Japanese people, we don't have any other choice other than depending on the nuclear power...this is the momentum to start to produce our own energy," he added.

To that end, Ouchi is looking to ways in which he can simultaneously reduce the radiation in his soil and self-produce oil from plants. He has been planting soybeans, rapeseed and sunflowers, which are not only known for absorbing radiation, but can also be used to produce cooking oil and diesel fuel.

"It can replace the light oil...using that oil from the vegetables, then we can even generate the electricity through the diesel," Ouchi explained.

There's another benefit.

After the Fukushima accident, Ouchi said that many rice paddies and and vegetable fields lie unused or abandoned due to radiation fears. "That is very sad to see," he said of the vast empty fields in his prefecture. But, now, there may be a ray of yellow light.

Sunflowers and rapeseed, similarly planted in Ukraine to remove radiation from the soil after the Chernobyl
nuclear accident in 1986, also produce beautiful yellow flowers.

"I would like to decorate the Fukushima prefecture with those flowers," said Ouchi.

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Presented by

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Robert Hargraves

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The welcome growth of the global middle class increases energy demand. If the world’s economy prospers enough to allow everyone to enjoy just half of the electricity benefits that Americans now take for granted, world electric power generation will triple. Most electricity will come from coal burning, which grew 8% worldwide in 2011. Germany leads the way, building more coal plants. Wind and solar power are too intermittent and too expensive to displace coal worldwide.

Nuclear power is the solution within reach; it’s safe and affordable, with low environmental impact. Yet opposition to it borders on superstition, defined by Merriam-Webster as a "belief or practice resulting from ignorance, fear of the unknown, trust in magic or chance, or a false conception of causation ... a notion maintained despite evidence to the contrary". Let’s explore evidence.

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