

Agricultural Commissions in Japan

Yoshihisa Godo

Professor, Meiji Gakuin University, Japan

In Japan, the Agricultural Commission is a unique administrative organization system that manages various agricultural land issues at the local level. In spite of its importance, only a few English-language studies have discussed the Agricultural Commission. This study aims to fill a gap in the literature while providing fundamental information on Japan's Agricultural Commission.

1. The origins of the Agricultural Commission

The predecessor of Japan's Agricultural Commission was the Agricultural Land Commission, which was established in 1938 on the basis of the Agricultural Land Adjustment Act (ALAA). In the 1930s, small-size tenant-farmers dominated rural society. Tenant-union movements in favor of rent reductions and the establishment of stronger tenancy rights gained momentum, and landlords often retaliated by depriving tenants of their farmland. The purpose of the Agricultural Land Commission was to mediate in such disputes between landowners and tenant-farmers. The ALAA required that every municipal government have an Agricultural Land Commission, the members of whom were appointed by the economic departments of the prefectural governments.

During the Allied Forces' occupation period (i.e., 1945–51), agricultural policy underwent drastic reforms. In 1947, the ALAA was revised, and a popular election system was introduced for commission members. Moreover, the Agricultural Land Commissions became responsible for carrying out the Agricultural Land Reforms, which were backed by the strong power of the Allied Forces; in line with those reforms, the Japanese government worked to transfer agricultural land ownership from landowners to tenant-farmers. All absentee landowners (i.e., landowners who do not live in the village in which their properties are located) were forced to transfer the ownership of their agricultural land. Even landowners who lived in the village in which their properties were located were forced to transfer ownership of so-called unnecessary parts of their agricultural land. The Agricultural Land Commissions determined which parcels of agricultural land would be transferred.

Besides the Agricultural Land Commissions, there were two types of agricultural commissions at the local level during the occupation period. One was the Agricultural Extension Commission, which provided technical support to farmers; the other was the Agricultural Adjustment Commission, which was responsible for managing the rice rationing system. At that time, Japan was afflicted by food shortages. In collaboration with the Allied Forces, the Agricultural Adjustment Commission procured rice from domestic farmers.

The Agricultural Land Reforms were completed in 1950. In 1951, the Japanese government liberalized food marketing by abolishing most of its food-rationing system. Accordingly, the restructuring of agricultural groups became inevitable. Following heated arguments among politicians, the Act on the Agricultural Commission (AAC) was established in 1951. Based on this law, the three commissions—namely, the Agricultural Land Commission, the Agricultural Extension Commission, and the Agricultural Adjustment

Commission—were merged into the Agricultural Commission.

In 1952, the Agricultural Land Act (ALA) was established. While there have been many revisions to the ALA since then, it has retained its essential agricultural policy. In line with the ALA, the Agricultural Commission was (and still is) stipulated as the organization responsible for enforcing the ALA at the local level.

Municipal governments and the Agricultural Commissions

In principle, the AAC requires that every municipal government should have an Agricultural Commission. However, there are provisions for exceptional cases: municipalities that do not have any agricultural land in their jurisdictions, for example, need not have an Agricultural Commission. The same is true for municipalities whose total acreage of agricultural land is less than 200 hectares (or 800 hectares, in the case of municipalities within Hokkaido). If such a municipality decides not to have an Agricultural Commission, the mayors thereof are responsible for enforcing the ALA.

If the total acreage of agricultural land in a municipality exceeds 7,000 hectares, the AAC allows municipal government to have more than one Agricultural Commission: in such cases, the jurisdiction of a municipality is divided into two or more parts, and the municipal government assigns an Agricultural Commission to each part.

As of October 2001, there were 1,743 municipalities in Japan. Among them, 14 municipalities had no agricultural land in their jurisdictions. A total of 208 municipalities had fewer than 200 hectares each (or 800 hectares, in the case of municipalities within Hokkaido). Thirty of the 208 municipalities decided not to have Agricultural Commissions within their jurisdictions. The remaining 178 municipalities decided to have their own Agricultural Commissions (i.e., one agricultural commission for each jurisdiction). In all, 1,521 municipalities were obliged to have Agricultural Commissions. Among them, eight municipalities had more than one Agricultural Commission each; these municipalities had a total of 22 Agricultural Commissions among them. In summary, as of 2011, there were 1,713 Agricultural Commissions in Japan.

The legal status of Agricultural Commissions

An Agricultural Commission is a consultative administrative body that belongs to a municipal government. Municipal mayors are in charge of allocating offices and budgets to their respective Agricultural Commissions. Usually, the offices of Agricultural Commissions are located within municipal offices, and Agricultural Commissions' office workers are seconded from municipal offices. This is because the tasks of the Agricultural Commission and those of the municipal mayor are closely related. Nonetheless, the Agricultural Commission is not a subordinate to the municipal mayor; a municipal mayor is not allowed to intervene in the decision-making of the Agricultural Commission, for example, and the office workers of the Agricultural Commission are appointed and/or dismissed by virtue of Agricultural Commission resolutions, rather than by the mayor.

The tasks of an Agricultural Commission

An Agricultural Commission is entitled to make various important decisions vis-à-vis

agricultural land issues. For example, an individual wishing to purchase and/or rent agricultural land within a municipality must obtain permission from the Agricultural Commission of the municipality in which he or she lives, by demonstrating competent farming skills and sociability. The Agricultural Commission is also responsible for protecting tenant-farmers' interests. If an owner of agricultural land wants to terminate an existing agricultural land-lease contract with a tenant-farmer, for example, the owner must receive permission from the governor of the prefecture in which the agricultural land is located. The application for permission to terminate the tenant-farming contract must be submitted through the Agricultural Commission of the municipality in which the agricultural land is located. The Agricultural Commission is obliged to make a recommendation to the governor, after investigating whether or not the termination of that contract will inflict serious damage on the income of the tenant-farmer.

The Agricultural Commission plays an important role in protecting high-quality agricultural land from being converted to non-agricultural purposes. The Agricultural Commission investigates each parcel of agricultural land and provides advice to municipal mayors and prefectural governors about which parcels of agricultural land should be protected.

The Agricultural Commission is also in charge of promoting the local agricultural sector. For example, if a farmer is very determined and has the capability to expand his or her farmland, the Agricultural Commission in the municipality will typically help him or her by seeking out adjacent farmers who may be willing to reduce their farm size or exit from farming. This intermediary activity involves what is called the "liquidation of agricultural land." The Japanese government is adamant that the liquidation of agricultural land is critical to improving the productivity of Japan's agricultural sector, and they actively promote it as such.

Commission members

An Agricultural Commission comprises two types of members: elected commission members, and appointed commission members.

Elected commission members are elected by farmers. Voting rights and the eligibility to be elected to an Agricultural Commission are conferred upon those who are aged 20 or over and satisfy at least one of the following three conditions: (1) a person who is engaged in farming on agricultural land of more than 0.1 hectare (over 0.3 hectare, in Hokkaido), (2) a person who is engaged in farming more than 60 days per year, *and* lives together with a person who satisfies condition (1), or (3) a person who is engaged in farming for more than 60 days per year, *and* belongs to an agricultural legal person. The Public Offices Election Law is applied to the election of commission members, and the office tenure of elected commission members is three years. The AAC stipulates the maximum allowable number of elected commission members, according to the total acreage of agricultural land and/or total number of farm households in a municipality. For municipalities where the total acreage of agricultural land is less than 1,300 hectares or the total number of farm households is less than 1,100, the maximum allowable number of elected members is 20. For municipalities where the total acreage of agricultural land exceeds 1,300 hectares and the total number of farm households exceeds 6,000, the maximum allowable number of elected members is 40. For municipalities that do not fully satisfy either of these two sets of criteria, the maximum

allowable number of elected members is 30. While observing these maximum numbers, each municipality determines its allotted number of elected commission members, by virtue of a municipal ordinance.

Recommendations vis-à-vis appointed commission members are jointly made by the municipal assembly, and by three agricultural groups within the jurisdiction of the municipality: an agricultural cooperative, a mutual agricultural aid association, and a land improvement district. The office tenure of these member ends when the term of the elected commission members expires.

Municipal mergers and Agricultural Commissions

In 2004, the Act on Special Provisions of the Merger of Municipalities was enacted. Based on this law, the Japanese government provides various incentives to local governments to consolidate into larger ones. As a result, the total number of municipalities decreased sharply, around 2005 (Table 1).

When municipalities merge, their Agricultural Commissions must also merge, after a transition period that is not to exceed three years. Accordingly, the total numbers of Agricultural Commissions, commission members, and office workers declined drastically after 2005 (Table 1).

Year ^{a)}	Total number of Agricultural Commissions	Total number of members of Agricultural Commissions	Total number of full-time workers at the offices of Agricultural Commissions	Total number of part-time workers at the offices of Agricultural Commissions	Total number of municipalities ^{b)}
2003	3,172	57,875	5,392	5,006	3,212
2004	3,035	56,348	5,217	4,863	3,132
2005	2,223	45,739	4,793	3,973	2,521
2006	1,843	39,997	4,487	3,637	1,821
2007	1,818	38,579	4,347	3,697	1,804
2008	1,793	37,456	4,205	3,604	1,793
2009	1,776	36,903	4,162	3,653	1,777
2010	1,732	36,330	4,103	3,772	1,727
2011	1,713	36,034	4,023	3,733	1,724

Note a) Data for Agricultural Commissions are measured as of October 1. The total number of municipalities is measured as of March 31 for each of 2001–2010 and as of April 1 for 2011.

b) The total number of municipalities does not include the number of special wards in Tokyo.

Source: Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries; Local Authorities Systems Development Center.

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