

# Amendments of the Agricultural Land Act and Measures for Tackling the Idle Farmland Problem

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## INTRODUCTION

The idle farmland<sup>1</sup> problem is one of the most significant policy matters in Japanese agricultural policy. The increase in idle farmlands makes difficult to achieve the target of food self-sufficiency ratio (on the calorie basis, 39% → 50%, by 2020), and prevents principal farmers from expanding their farm scale.

The Agricultural Committee (AC) is the independent administrative commission established in every municipality. This begins to play an important role in tackling the idle farmland problem. After the amendment of the Agricultural Land Act in 2009, an investigation of the situation of regional farmlands utilization happens once a year. The same can be said with counsel landlords who have idle farmlands to correct. After the 2013 amendment, this measure was simplified to promote rapid actions to increase idle farmlands.

The new scheme is the part of the system of the Organization for Temporary Farmland Management (OTFM)<sup>2</sup> explained in my previous article on this FFTC-AP Database website (uploaded on 5<sup>th</sup> May 2014, [http://ap.fftc.agnet.org/ap\\_db.php?id=245](http://ap.fftc.agnet.org/ap_db.php?id=245), and 16<sup>th</sup> July 2014, [http://ap.fftc.agnet.org/ap\\_db.php?id=268](http://ap.fftc.agnet.org/ap_db.php?id=268)). I hope you to refer them occasionally. In this article, I will introduce the change of measures for tackling the idle farmland problem after the 2013 amendment.

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<sup>1</sup> Both “idle farmland” and “abandoned cultivated land” express the farmland which is given up for cultivation because of aging farmers and their low profitability. Meanwhile “idle farmland” is stipulated in Item 1 Article 32 the Agricultural Land Act, as “abandoned cultivated land” and is defined in the Census of Agricultural and Forestry. There are 396,000 “abandoned cultivated land” in 2010 and 153,000 “idle farmland” in 2012. The reason why the size of “abandoned cultivated land” is larger is that it contains farmlands which can’t be recovered in the future. By the way, as the total amount of farmlands grasped by the 2010 Census is 3.63 million hectares, about one-tenth of farmlands have already become “abandoned cultivated land” in Japan.

<sup>2</sup> The Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries in Japan (MAFF) translates as “Regional Government Supported Institutions” in the Annual Report on Food, Agriculture and Rural Areas in Japan FY2013.

I will summarize important points about the 2013 amendment from the MAFF's website<sup>3</sup>, and translate it into English. Finally, I will add a brief comment as "conclusion".

## **OLD SCHEME**

All the AC have to investigate the situation of regional farmlands utilization once a year, and grasp the size and location of idle farmlands. The idle farmland is defined by two provisions. The first provision cites the farmland which is unused for cultivation and expected to remain unused. The second cites the farmland which is used far less than other farmlands in the local area.

There are multi steps for regenerating the idle farmland. First, the AC leads the landlord who has idle farmlands to utilize suitably. The AC gives the landlord a chance to recover voluntarily. In case the landlord doesn't take any actions, the AC progresses to the next stage. Officially, it notifies the landlord the fact that his farmland is idle, and counsels to take necessary measures.

But if there aren't any changes, the AC takes stronger measures. It starts to consult with the landlord to transfer his land ownership or to lease his idle farmland to someone, for utilizing effectively. Nevertheless, if he doesn't improve, the AC applies the settlement to the prefectural governor. Finally, the prefectural governor makes a decision which the idle farmland has to be transferred for effective utilization. This is done in a compulsory way.

To speedily promote this process speedy, the AC categorizes idle farmlands into "renewable" or "nonrenewable", when it investigates the situation of regional farmland utilization with the municipality bureau. If the AC judges declare it as "nonrenewable", it takes the procedure of "non-farmland judgment". Once it is judged non-farmland, the subject land is removed from the farmland registered book. Then it notifies this fact to the landlord, the legal affairs bureau, the municipality bureau and the prefecture bureau. If the landlord insists to keep it as "farmland", the AC does a survey about utilization.

## **NEW SCHEME**

In the new scheme, the role of OTFM became stronger compared to the old one.

In the survey of regional farmlands utilization, the AC grasps not only idle farmlands but also farmlands which are feared to be abandoned because of, for example, ownership inheritance. Procedures after the survey became drastically simple. Firstly, the AC does the utilization survey to the landlord. In this survey, the landlord shows his intention of cultivating by himself, using the OTFM, or leasing someone. If the AC can't find the landlord, it has to make a public

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<sup>3</sup> I referred to this MAFF's website. <http://www.maff.go.jp/j/keiei/koukai/pdf/26sochi.pdf>

announcement about this fact. The prefectural governor makes a decision which the subject farmland is leased to the OTFM in a compulsory manner.

If the landlord doesn't make any actions even though he answered to cultivate by himself or to lease it to someone, the AC consults with the OTFM about taking measures. Nevertheless if there aren't any changes, the prefectural governor makes a decision of the compulsory transfer. Compared to the old scheme, the process from the farmland survey to the governor's decision became simpler and shorter. It is expected that this simplification will contribute to the smooth farmland transfer from the landlord to the principal farmer.

In the new scheme, the AC is recommended to strongly lease "renewable" idle farmlands to the OTFM. If these farmlands locates in the agricultural promotion area, it is certainly leased to the OTFM. The OTFM has to search for farmers who hope to rent these farmlands, including general corporations which enter into agriculture, and those that consider using the farmlands as training farms for new farmers. Until finding farmers who hope to rent, these farmlands may be managed by way of not using the OTFM's expenditure. For example, by the landlord or voluntary co-actions by rural community, using the Japanese-typed direct payment for preserving community functions.

## **CONCLUSION**

To solve the idle farm problem is the urgent task of raising the food self-sufficiency ratio and rearing principle farmers. The 2013 amendment of the Agricultural Land Act simplifies the process of regeneration of idle farmlands by using the OTFM. This amendment might contribute to preserve the amount of farmlands and to keep them in good condition. However, the reinforcement of tackling the idle farmland problem imposes heavy burden to the AC which has limited human and financial resources. If policymakers hope that this new scheme can perform effectively, they have to reinforce the organization of the AC.

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