

Traceability and Food Labeling of Rice in Japan

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INTRODUCTION

Rice is a staple food in Japan. Consumers are sensitive about the variety of rice, its location, and time of harvest, when they are purchasing rice or foods containing rice from a retailer or if they are dining at a restaurant. However, these aspects are difficult to judge from the mere visual appearance of rice, alone. The government has a unique system of tracing and labeling rice to ensure consumer access to such information. This study provides an outline of this system.

Deregulation of the rice market and the *Osenmai* Scandal

Before discussing the modern system for traceability and food labeling of rice, a quick review of the history of the government's rice market policy¹ is useful.

Since 1942, the government had enacted strict regulations in the rice market based on the Food Control Act. The Food Agency, an extra-ministerial bureau of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, was in charge of controlling the rice market. Only traders licensed by the Food Agency could trade in rice and were required to report their trading plans and receive approval from the Food Agency. The Food Agency inspected rice harvests and issued a certificate of the location and time of harvest and the name of the variety of rice². Traders could not market rice without the Food Agency's inspection³.

The official explanation of the government was that these regulations were necessary for food safety. However, many experts such as Yujiro Hayami argued that these regulations were protection measures for the vested interests of rice traders and employment at the Food Agency⁴. Such criticisms pressured the government into deregulating the rice market.

A turning point in Japan's rice market came in 1995 when the Food Control Act was replaced by the Act on Stabilization of Supply, Demand and Prices of Staple Food, commonly called the Staple Food Act, which allowed the marketing of rice without the Food Agency's inspection. This was an epoch-making revision in Japan's rice market policy. However, various regulations remained. For example, rice traders could not label the variety of rice without the Food Agency's inspection. In addition, to purchase or sell rice with the Food Agency's inspection, rice traders required the status of "regular rice trader," given by the Food Agency itself. However, the deregulation of the rice market continued after 1995 through occasional revisions in the Staple Food Act. As a part of this deregulation, the government opened the door for private companies in rice inspection in 2001. This allowed individuals who had completed a course on rice inspection to inspect harvested rice and issue an official certificate. Such private companies are *Minkan Kensa Kikan* (private inspection organization). The rice inspected by *Minkan Kensa Kikan* or the Food Agency is *Kensa Mai* (inspected rice). Rice other than *Kensa Mai* is *Miken Mai* (not inspected rice). In 2003, the government implemented large-size deregulation of the rice market and dissolved the Food Agency. However, the *Minkan Kensa Kikan* and *Kensa Mai* system remained. As discussed further, even today, traders can only sell *Kensa Mai* with information on harvest time and location and the name of the variety of rice⁵.

One unfavorable side effect of this liberalization in the rice market was the entrance of

shady companies such as Mikasa Foods, Asai, and Ota Sangyo. They procured nearly 5,000 tons of uneatable rice, contaminated with pesticide, and was found that it could be used as material for producing glue. Using several resale traders as tunnel companies, these companies sold this rice as food. This fraud netted them undue profits from the margin between prices of eatable and uneatable rice. This scandal, commonly called the *Osenmai* Scandal (contaminated rice scandal), broke out in 2008, and shocked consumers nationwide ⁶.

Rice Traceability Act

As a response to the *Osenmai* Scandal, the government needed to alleviate consumers' anxieties of food safety. This resulted in the establishment of the Rice Traceability Act in 2009. The Rice Traceability Act targets not only rice but also eight other types of foods processed mainly from rice; namely, *Dango*, *Koji*, *Mirin*, rice cake, rice flour, rice snack, rice wine, and *Shochu* ⁷. This study uses "RTA commodity" as a general term for all commodities listed in the Rice Traceability Act. The Rice Traceability Act stipulates that all producers and traders who deal in RTA commodities, for example, importers, farmers, wholesalers, processors, restaurant owners, and retailers, must record the following seven types of information for each RTA commodity they handle.

- (1) The name of the RTA commodity
- (2) The name of the country in which the RTA commodity was harvested (for domestically grown rice, more specific names of places such as prefecture and municipality names are also possible).
- (3) The amount of the RTA commodity
- (4) Date of transaction (i.e., purchase or sale) of the RTA commodity.
- (5) The name of the counterpart in the RTA commodity transaction
- (6) Storage location of the RTA commodity
- (7) Limitation of use if specified (e.g., material for glue)

Such information should be preserved on paper or in an electronic device for at least three years.

When an RTA commodity is sold or served to consumers, the seller or the restaurant owner must clearly state in which country the rice was harvested (for domestically grown rice, it is optional to show more specific names of places such as prefecture and municipality) ⁸.

If rice harvested in different places is mixed into an RTA commodity, the name of the place should be noted in order of weight. If rice harvested in three or more places is mixed, it is compulsory to note the top two names while the other(s) can be noted as "other."

The Rice Traceability Act stipulates that consumers should be informed of names of places by one (or more) of the following four methodologies.

- (1) Label on the RTA commodity.
- (2) Menu, poster, and booklet distributed at the restaurant or store.
- (3) Homepage and catalog (for Internet or mail order sale)
- (4) Oral report by call center staff, restaurant, or store (under the condition that staff is well trained and an oral report manual prepared).

Food Labeling Standard guidelines

In 2015, the government implemented a food labeling guideline for retailers called the Food Labeling Standard. The Food Labeling Standard stipulates special treatments for rice as shown below. Currently, retailers must observe regulations of both the Rice Traceability Act and the Food Labeling Standard guidelines.

The food labeling format differs between loose rice (rice sold by weight) and packaged rice. For loose rice, only two types of information are necessary; namely, commodity name and the rice harvest location. The name of commodity should be from the following four choices:

- (1) *Mochi Seimai*, defined as milled glutinous rice.
- (2) *Uruchi Seimai*, defined as milled non-glutinous rice as the percentage of rice-grain weight after milling is less than 80%.
- (3) *Haiga Seimai*, defined as milled non-glutinous rice as the percentage of rice-grain weight after milling is more than 80%.
- (4) *Genmai* or hulled rice.

For domestically grown rice, a prefecture name or a specific name of a place which is popular among consumers should denote the harvest location. Imported rice should show the name of the country or specific names of places, which are popularly known among consumers.

Packaged rice is the most popular type of rice among consumers. The Food Labeling Standard requires more information for packaged rice than loose rice. There are two types of packaged rice. One is *Tan-itsu Genryo Mai* (single type of packaged rice), which is *Kensa Mai* having the same harvest location, year, and variety. The other is *Fukusu Genryo Mai* (various types of packaged rice), which is defined as packaged rice other than *Tan-itsu Genryo Mai*.

The following six types of information are necessary for labeling of packaged rice.

- (1) Commodity name

Similar to loose rice, there are four name categories of packaged rice: *Mochi Seimai*, *Uruchi Seimai*, *Haiga Seimai*, and *Genmai*.

- (2) Classification by *Tan-itsu Genryo Mai* or *Fukusu Genryo Mai*

- (3) Time and location of harvest and the name of the variety of rice (only for *Kensa Mai*).

For *Tanitsu Genryo Mai*, the certificate issued by the *Minkan Kensa Kikan* notes the harvest time, location, and name of the variety. For *Fukusu Genryo Mai*, the percentage of domestic rice should be noted. If packaged rice contains imported rice, it is necessary to mention the names of countries and percentages in weight. If a pack of *Fukusu Genryo Mai* contains *Kensa Mai*, it is optional to show the percentage of *Kensa Mai*, its harvest location, time, and variety name⁹. For *Miken Mai* in a package of *Fukusu Genryo Mai*, it is prohibited to show harvest year, more specific place name than country name, and the name of the rice variety.

- (4) Weight

- (5) The date of preparation.

For *Mochi Seimai*, *Uruchi Seimai*, and *Haiga Seimai*, the date of milling should be shown. For *Genmai*, the date of hulling should be shown. If there is a discrepancy in the date of hulling or milling date in a package, the oldest date should be shown. For imported rice, the date of import should be shown.

- (6) The person in charge (name, address and phone number)

FOOTNOTES

1. This study provides an overview of the rice market. For further details, see Godo, Y., "The History of Japan's Post-Pacific-War Rice Policy", *FFTC Agricultural Policy Platform* (Food & Fertilizer Technology Center for the Asian and Pacific Region) November 1, 2013 (downloadable at http://ap.fftc.agnet.org/ap_db.php?id=107).
2. The Food Agency had branches at the prefectural level nationwide. These branches inspected rice and issued certificates. The Food Agency classified rice into three

categories according to quality. The government set its procurement price of rice for each category based on the Food Control Act.

3. The Food Agency's inspection is not necessary for self-consumption by farmers.
4. Hayami, Yujiro, *Japanese Agriculture under Siege* (London: Macmillan, and New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988).
5. As discussed in Section of "Rice Traceability Act", the country name should be shown even for *Miken Mai*.
6. No human casualties were reported in the *Osenmai* Scandal. This is possibly because, exercising great caution, the government set the upper limit of contamination in rice at low levels.
7. *Dango* is a boiled and or steamed ball of rice flour. *Koji* is a preparation obtained by growing a kind of mold on boiled rice, used as a starter for fermentation in rice wine and soy sauce production. *Mirin* is sweet rice wine used as seasoning. *Shochu* is spirits distilled from rice.
8. Note that "harvested in Japan" is sufficient information to satisfy the Rice Traceability Act. This reflects that consumers often react negatively to imported rice. In their emotional thinking, the most important information (and sufficient) in judging the quality of rice is whether it is domestically grown or not.
9. If various types of *Kensa Mai* were mixed into packaged rice, such information should be shown in the order of weight of each type of *Kensa Mai*.

Date submitted: May 4, 2017

Reviewed, edited and uploaded: May8 16, 2017