

KOCKEROLS Pierre (JRC)**From:** KOBAYASHI Megumi (EEAS-TOKYO)**Sent:** Tuesday 8 May 2012 10:03

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Cc: SHINOMIYA Naoko (EEAS-TOKYO); BERENDS Gijls (EEAS-TOKYO)**Subject:** Japan: news bulletin on food safety**Farm ministry effort to stop 'becquerel war' draws fire (ASAHI)**

On April 23, a few days before the start of Japan's Golden Week holidays, phones at the farm ministry's Food Industry Affairs Bureau were ringing off the hook. Callers were furious at an advisory, issued by the ministry three days before, urging food companies, shops and restaurants to stay in line with new national maximums for radioactive cesium in food and drop their own more stringent standards. Ministry officials said they were concerned about an escalating "becquerel war" in which food industry players were competing with each other on radiation guarantees. "(The advisory) is meant to avoid excessive regulation and confusion among consumers," the ministry said. But the official line cut across the efforts of private sector companies that said they were doing nothing more than trying to respond to the priorities of their consumers. Under the government's new maximums, introduced in April, levels of radioactive cesium are capped at 100 becquerels per kilogram in common foods, 50 becquerels per kg for milk and infant foods and 10 becquerels per kg for drinking water. That is substantially stricter than the provisional rules, which had stipulated as much as 500 becquerels per kg for common foods, 200 becquerels per kg for milk and water.

Hiroshi Tsuchida, who heads the department of quality control at the national confederation of Seikatsu Club cooperatives, said his organization had come up with its own standards because of a widespread distrust of government figures. "We had to draw up our own standards because consumers do not trust the national standards," Tsuchida said.

Tetsuya Ebisudani, who is in charge of radiation issues at the business strategy department at Daichi o Mamoru Kai, an organization that delivers organic foods, questioned whether the ministry had the authority to impose the advisory on the food industry. "I wonder whether it is something that the state can impose," he said. "Some local governments' inspection systems turned out to be inadequate, as was demonstrated by the fact that farm produce with radiation levels higher than the state standards were distributed to the market," he said. "There are many things the ministry needs to tackle before the advisory."

Although the ministry said food producers had been complaining about confusion resulting from the differing safety standards, an official at the Food Retail and Service Division at the ministry's Food Industry Affairs Bureau had no knowledge of such grievances being filed with the ministry. "Although other divisions may have received complaints, we are not aware of those," the official said. "We, in charge of retail foods and service, wanted to have the food industry know that products in the market are much safer now with the introduction of the new standards."

Other critics point out that it is already common for producers to compete on guarantees, for instance, of the use of chemicals in their products. "If (retailers) are not allowed to set their own safety standards concerning radiation contamination, how about Japanese agricultural standards

certifying less use of chemical fertilizers?" a homemaker in Soka, Saitama Prefecture, said. "Even if farm produce grown with the use of fewer chemicals is put on the shelf, it does not seem to increase consumers' anxiety about and distrust of produce harvested with regular chemical use." She said ruling out guarantees from retailers might actually harm farmers in affected areas by removing one of the ways they can reassure consumers who would otherwise restrict their purchases to produce from locations distant from the crippled Fukushima No. 1 nuclear power plant.

Three days after the advisory was issued, agriculture minister Michihiko Kano tried to dampen the controversy by saying the advisory, which had been issued to 270 food industry and retail groups, would not be enforceable. Some producers in the disaster zone are also questioning the government line. J-Rap, a group of agricultural producers in Sukagawa, Fukushima Prefecture, decided last June to enforce the so-called "Ukraine standards" on their products. Those standards, some of the toughest in the world, insist, for example, on a 20 becquerel per kg maximum for bread. After an intensive program of decontaminating rice paddies and working on new methods of preventing cesium from being absorbed into rice, J-Rap succeeded in keeping radiation levels in steamed white rice harvested last year to 1 becquerel per kg on average. Toshihiko Ito, who represents J-Rap, said the organization intends to continue with its own standards, hoping that its efforts to ensure radiation-free food will help restore faith in produce cultivated in Fukushima Prefecture. "I, too, have grandchildren," Ito said. "I want to provide my family with produce whose radiation reading is lower even by 1 becquerel."