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FOOD & DRINK | FOOD SUSTAINABILITY IN JAPAN

# Is farming in Japan on its last legs?

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Shigenobu Fukumoto was born into a farming family close to Lake Biwa in Shiga Prefecture. Growing up in the early 1970s surrounded by fields of rice, carrots, cabbage and green onions, Fukumoto and his family were representative of Japan's 5.5 million farming households.

As Fukumoto, 49, recounts while walking through a field of *naganegi* — a type of green onion — his parents were "small quantity, large variety" farmers, and in every sense typical. Fast forward nearly 50 years and the picture is radically different.

According to the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF), in 2015 there were about 1.33 million households engaged in commercial farming, with the total number of farmers down from more than 11 million in 1965 to fewer than 2 million presently. Moreover, farming is increasingly an occupation dominated by the elderly: 6 in 10 farmers in Japan are over the age of 65, and farming as a full-time profession is increasingly becoming a thing of the past.

However, while farming as a profession has lost out to other jobs, and as elderly farmers die and aren't replaced, the number of farmers may not be the key issue.

How Japan tackles food self-sufficiency and maintains its landscapes, cultural heritage and vitality of its countryside villages through agriculture is of particular concern, says Jos Verstegen, a researcher at Wageningen Economic Research in the Netherlands and a visiting professor at Miyazaki Sangyo-keiei University.

"Japan has issues with all of these topics already, and with the aging of farmers it will become more serious within a decade," Verstegen says.

Fukumoto knows that only too well. In 2005 he took over the 5-hectare family farm on a full-time basis and immediately set about scaling back on the variety of crops grown. Now, he concentrates on growing rice and a type of long onion he breeds — the Nobunaga *negi*, which takes its name from venerated samurai leader Oda Nobunaga (1534-1582) who built Azuchi Castle beside Lake Biwa more than 400 years ago.

The Nobunaga negi, which is grown using organic fertilizers, has found local success; currently 25 farmers in Shiga Prefecture's Dainaka region grow the onion. A handful of these neophytes are young full-time farmers, encouraged to take up farming with the aid of special grants from the MAFF.

But Fukumoto — who works alone save for harvest, when he relies on family and friends — says the profit margins are so tight in farming that he's not surprised young people don't consider it as a career.

He also worries about the future of his farm. Ideally he'd like one of his sons to step up and take over running the land. However, he acknowledges he can't force either of them into the profession against their will. "I just can't do that," he says.

Fukumoto, who worked for Japan Agricultural (JA), a farming co-op and powerful lobby, prior to taking over the family farm, thinks the government needs to do more to help small farmers like him.

Ironically, subsidies and other protectionist policy measures decided at the national level have unintentionally slowed down farm development, Verstegen says, to the point that "very few farmers are ready to compete in a global trade setting."

While Fukumoto is resigned to the decline of farming as a way of life, he's not without hope. The Nobunaga negi has proved to be a success with consumers and farmers in Dainaka hope to start selling it in shops across the Kansai region.

"This would stabilize our business and protect the small farms," says Fukumoto. "Nobunaga negi is our hope."

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*This is the second part of a monthly series exploring issues relating to food sustainability in Japan.*

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