



TOHOKU— A VISION OF RESTORATION

INTERVIEW WITH VICE MINISTER OF THE
RECONSTRUCTION AGENCY

MASAKATSU OKAMOTO

TAMI KAWASAKI

FIVE years after the disaster of the Great East Japan Earthquake, how has Tohoku rebuilt itself, and what issues does the region still face? To find out, we spoke with Vice Minister Masakatsu Okamoto of the Reconstruction Agency, a government organ created to administer the reconstruction process following the earthquake.

Please tell us what the stricken areas have gone through, and their status today.

Let me start by expressing our gratitude for the aid we received from a range of countries and regions. Reconstruction has picked up speed over the past five years, and the region's infrastructure is almost entirely restored. Many homes have been restored, both with victims rebuilding their own homes and through public housing. In Iwate and Miyagi prefectures—which were affected by both the earthquake and tsunami—they will finish rebuilding housing within three years. Regional industry has also been reestablished, and sectors like the electronic and automotive components industries are back to the same levels they had reached before the disaster.

How is Fukushima? Many people overseas seem to be under the impression that the effects of the nuclear accident persist.

The effects of the nuclear reactor incident remain within an approximately thousand-square-kilometer radius of the reactor. This is just 7 percent of Fukushima Prefecture's total area, however, and other regions remain safe and sound. The reactor is under cold shutdown and is being safely managed; no radioactive material is being released. We want everyone to be aware of this fact.

It is unfortunate that Fukushima has come to possess a dangerous image as a result of its association with the reactor incident. The area still affected is very small, and contaminants are steadily being removed, with radiation levels dropping. The current airborne radiation level in Fukushima is nearly equivalent to that seen in major cities worldwide. Agricultural products are tested for radiation at the most stringent levels worldwide, based on scientific data. Only those cleared for safety reach the market. In addition, during fiscal 2015, none of the brown rice, vegetables, fruit, livestock and cultivated mushrooms Fukushima Prefecture produced exceeded this level.

Sixteen countries worldwide have repealed their restrictions on the import of Japanese products so far, but sixty-five countries and regions still restrict imports

from Japan. We want people to understand the safety of Japanese food products, including those from Fukushima Prefecture, and rescind these restrictions. The EU recently eased its controls. We will continue releasing accurate data on safety inspections.

What other issues are there in terms of the reconstruction that remains?

The Tohoku region's infrastructure and industry have been restored, but tourism has yet to bounce back. Tohoku has outstanding travel destinations with beautiful natural attractions and delicious food. We strongly urge guests from overseas to see what it has to offer.

HRH Prince William, Duke of Cambridge, stayed at a hot spring inn in Fukushima in February 2015. Along with Prime Minister Abe, His Royal Highness enjoyed food and sake prepared from Fukushima products, and said they were delicious. We were quite happy to hear this. The

Prince also visited a children's exercise facility in Motomiya City, and the site is now popularly referred to as Prince William's Park in commemoration of His Royal Highness' visit.

The Reconstruction Agency has designated 2016 as the year to revitalize Tohoku tourism, and we are devoting our energies to getting visitors to come. Renewed activity in Tohoku is a key step to the reconstruction of its industries and way of life. The G7 Summit is being held this coming May in Japan, and the meeting of G7 finance ministers is slated to take place in Sendai City in Miyagi Prefecture. In 2019, part of the Rugby World Cup will be held in Kamaishi City in Iwate Prefecture. The final qualifying rounds and camps for the 2020 Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games are also expected to take place in Tohoku. We invite guests to avail themselves of this opportunity and see firsthand what the Tohoku region has to offer. 



HRH Prince William, who visited Fukushima to support the reconstruction effort, plays in a big ball pit at Smile Kids Park with Prime Minister Abe and other companions big and small