

QUALITY AND SAFETY ASSURED

As Japanese food becomes more popular around the world, Japanese exports of food and agriculture, forestry, and fishery products are also expanding. The Japan Journal's Osamu Sawaji asked **Yoshikazu Kojima**, director of the Export Promotion Division of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF), about this trend.



Yoshikazu Kojima, director of the Export Promotion Division of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries

What is the current situation regarding exports of Japanese food and agriculture, forestry, and fishery products?

Kojima Yoshikazu: The volume of exports has fallen as a result of the impact of the global financial crisis in 2008 and the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011, but if we look at the broad trend in recent years, we can see that exports have been increasing steadily. The total value of exports in 2011 was 450 billion yen, but the government set a goal of increasing this total to about one trillion yen by 2020.

At present, many of our export destinations except the United States are in nearby Asia, particularly Hong Kong, Taiwan, China and South Korea. This is because these countries are close to Japan geographically and culturally, and because there are good distribution networks connecting these countries to Japan via air and sea. Another factor is that more people in these countries are eating Japanese food as their standard of living improves as a result of the economic growth.

What kind of products are being exported?

About 40% of Japanese exports are made up of aquaculture products, including both processed and unprocessed products. For example, salmon and trout are exported to Vietnam and China, where they become the raw ingredients for processed products. Sea cucumber is exported to Hong Kong as a luxury food.

One product that has seen export growth in recent years is rice. This is probably because Japanese foods are becoming popular around the world, including in Asia. Exports of beef and *sake* are also increasing.

What impression do people overseas have of Japanese food products?

I think an image of Japanese food as healthy and delicious is well-established all around the world. Between March 2 and March 4 2012, MAFF sponsored the Japanese Food Exhibition in Hong Kong at the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Center. About 18,000 people attended the exhibition, including the general public as well as buyers. Forty-one Japanese dealers participated in the exhibition, bringing a diverse range of products including sake, aquaculture products, soft drinks, beef and so

on, and about 360 business discussions were held over the course of the exhibition. I became keenly aware of the extremely high level of interest that the people of Hong Kong have regarding Japanese food. We saw that they enjoyed themselves as they sampled the products such as beef and sake.

Since the Great East Japan Earthquake, what kind of measures has the government taken to secure the safety of Japanese foods?

We are implementing a monitoring program for agriculture, forestry and fishery products produced in Japan that scans for radioactivity. If these scans detect a level of radioactivity that exceeds the regulatory limits, then we prevent that product from being shipped as necessary. With a view to ensuring the highest safety and security of food, new standard limits for radionuclides in foods are being applied from April, 2012. This means that Japan has established a system whereby only safe products circulate within Japan. Moreover, for export products we first negotiate with the receiving countries and regions and then issue documentation certifying the safety of the products, and then inspections are carried out by the importing country or region. Japanese food products are double-checked, first in Japan and then in the receiving country, so people overseas can rest easy when eating Japanese food products.

What are your thoughts on the quality of Japanese agricultural products?

The quality of Japanese agricultural products is extremely high. One of the main reasons for this is that farmers put an enormous amount of effort into growing their products. Take apples, for example. Japanese apples are bigger and sweeter than apples from other countries. One of the important steps required to grow apples like this is to thin out redundant fruit. Multiple apples grow from a single flower bud, but farmers select just one of these apples and thin out the others so that the nutrients concentrate in the selected apple. This kind of work is extremely tedious and time-consuming. However, doing this produces delicious apples.

In the future, what features of Japanese foods would you like people outside of Japan to know about?

One thing I would like them to know is the sense of seasonality associated with Japanese ingredients. Japanese people have always placed a great deal of importance on eating foods that are in season. Bamboo shoots in spring, for example, or peaches in summer, or *katsuo* (bonito) in spring and autumn.

Another thing is the extremely important role played by fermented foods and seasonings in Japanese food. Fermented seasonings such as miso and soy sauce give Japanese cooking *umami*.

Also, MAFF is planning to hold a Festival of Japanese Culinary Culture to promote both Japanese culinary culture and the attractions of Japanese food products and other agricultural and marine products. I hope your readers overseas will be able to take the opportunity to directly experience Japanese food products and agriculture, forestry and fishery products. 