

# Food Self-Sufficiency Sags Below 40%

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Photo: Kyodo News

Japan's food self-supply ratio (in terms of calories) declined to 39% in 2006, dipping below the 40% mark for the first time in 13 years. This was attributable to a fall in the domestic production of sugar, fruit and other foods due to unseasonable weather, and a decrease in the consumption of rice, the staple food of Japanese people. The Japanese government has decided a goal of raising the country's food self-sufficiency to 45% by the 2015 fiscal year from a viewpoint of "food security." But Japan still has a long way to go before achieving the goal.

"A mouthful of rice at each meal will lift Japan's food self-sufficiency by 1%," says an annual government report on agriculture for fiscal 2006, exhorting people to reform their basic stance on the daily diet and help to boost self-sufficiency. In 1965, the ratio surpassed 70%, but has since continued to fall in parallel with the Westernization of Japanese eating habits. The Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries apparently deems it necessary to prevent the alienation from rice as a first step to stem the downtrend of self-sufficiency.

An opinion survey by the Cabinet Office shows that more than 70% of respondents regarded the decline in food self-sufficiency as an alarming trend, attesting to the prevalence of a strong sense of crisis among the people. Expectations for domestic foods are rising amid a recent spate of reports on dangerous foods imported from China. The fact is, however, that the "Westernization of eating habits," a structural factor behind the sagging food self-supply ratio, is showing no sign whatsoever of abating. A fundamental problem at the very root of the self-supply downtrend is that Japanese agriculture is not keeping up with the ongoing



Food industry officials and consumer group representatives join government officials and academic experts in a meeting of a council set up to discuss ways of raising Japan's declining food self-sufficiency.

change in eating habits.

The farm ministry is not sitting idly by. It has started to consider changing the basic principle of Japan's farmland system from requiring farmland to be tilled by its owner to separating land ownership from farming. The present system, which has formed the foundation of Japan's postwar agriculture, is thus undergoing a drastic review in line with a new strategy of having corporations and large-scale farmers consolidate small tracts of farmland with a view to reinforcing the structure of Japanese agriculture and thereby raising food self-sufficiency. At the same time, the ministry is pushing ahead with a plan to have surplus rice and food used as livestock feed in order to reduce Japan's heavy reliance on feed imports and promote self-supply in this sector.

The ministry has decided to earmark additional expenditures for measures to enhance food self-sufficiency in its budget for fiscal 2008. These measures include a stepped-up publicity drive to encourage rice consumption and increased assistance to regions intent on cultivating superior farm

products. Moreover, a Food Security Division will be created within the ministry to dedicate itself to enhancing the security of food supply.

The Japanese government, meanwhile, is striving to conclude free-trade agreements (FTAs) with Australia and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), effectively supporting agricultural imports from abroad. This policy aims to avoid relying on particular countries for food supply and ensure the stable supply of food from many more countries from a viewpoint of food security.

Nevertheless, the drastic reduction of tariff rates on farm products in accordance with FTAs will spell a massive inflow of inexpensive farm products from abroad, which in turn could result in lowering Japan's food self-sufficiency.

In order to achieve the two national goals of promoting free trade and raising food self-sufficiency at the same time, it is imperative to expedite the advancement of Japanese agriculture into an internationally competitive structure.