

Japan N-crisis: Gov't halts shipment of tea leaves in 4 prefectures over high radiation levels

Monday 6 June 2011, by [Mainichi Shimbun](#) (Date first published: 3 June 2011).

The government on June 2 ordered a halt to shipments of tea leaves produced throughout Ibaraki Prefecture and parts of Kanagawa, Chiba and Tochigi prefectures, after detecting radioactive cesium in leaves exceeding the legal limit.

Tests carried out in the wake of the nuclear crisis at the Fukushima No. 1 Nuclear Power Plant, from which large amounts of radioactive materials have leaked, detected radiation exceeding the legal limit of 500 becquerels per kilogram of tea leaves.

It is the first time for the government to halt shipments of tea under the Special Law on Nuclear Disaster Countermeasures. Since the concentration of cesium changes during each of the steps in which tea is produced — from drying the leaves to create unrefined tea to processing them and making them into a drink — the government had been considering which stages of the production process to halt.

Most of this season's first crop of tea has already been processed into unrefined tea, or "aracha," and on June 2 the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare ordered new inspections of aracha. Up until now, there have been hardly any inspections of tea at this stage of the production process, and it is possible that tea containing radioactive materials exceeding the legal limit has already been shipped out.

"If we find that it has exceeded the limit, we will take measures under the Food Sanitation Law, such as recalling products," a ministry representative said.

According to the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, if 500 becquerels of radiation is detected in one kilogram of fresh tea leaves, then the relative amount in aracha, which is about one-fifth of the weight of fresh tea leaves, rises to 2,500 becquerels. However, after tea is extracted with hot water, the amount in drinks falls to several dozen becquerels.

The Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries and the prefectural government in Shizuoka, a major producer of tea, requested that the testing be done on fresh leaves, on the grounds that aracha itself was not consumed. However some aracha is actually processed for use in green tea (matcha) ice cream and other products, so government officials decided to make both aracha and processed tea subject to restrictions.

Data from the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries and other bodies show that about 86,000 tons of aracha was produced in Japan in 2009, with Shizuoka and Kagoshima prefectures accounting for about 70 percent of shipments. The four prefectures subject to the latest restrictions account for less than 1 percent of the total share.

"I've already scrapped this year's first harvest after the prefectural government ordered us to

refrain from shipment, but I'd thought there would still be hope for next year if I could pick the second harvest. That prospect, however, has now turned bleak," said a 59-year-old tea grower in Odawara, Kanagawa Prefecture.

On June 2, Shizuoka Gov. Heita Kawakatsu indicated he would not comply with government guidelines that included the testing of aracha, saying there were no scientific grounds for doing so.

"There is only one specialist in radiation at the Nuclear Safety Commission of Japan, which advised the government on the testing of aracha. I doubt that person knows much about tea," he said. "I think it's strange for the fate of tea, which is important to 3.8 million prefectural residents, to be swayed by the opinions of specialists whose authority is doubtful."

Meanwhile, the government on June 2 also halted shipments of plums produced in the Fukushima Prefecture cities of Fukushima and Date and the town of Koori, after detecting radioactive cesium above the legally permitted limits. The move marked the first time for shipments of fruit to be halted in the wake of the nuclear disaster.

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* Mainichi Shimbun, June 3, 2011:

<http://mdn.mainichi.jp/mdnnews/national/archive/news/2011/06/03/20110603p2a00m0na004000c.html>