

# **Local Responses to the Revision of the Seed Law: The Seed Registration System, GMOs and Rice**

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## **Project Statement**

### **Overview**

In summer 2018, while conducting interviews for the final version of the manuscript for a book on Japan's agricultural policy framework that was published this January<sup>i</sup>, I learned of developments in the structure of Japan's seed preservation system. For decades, Japan's Seed Law has been the bulwark of a seed preservation, storage and maintenance system that kept control over staple crops in local hands. In 2018, the Seed Law was revised, and according to people working in the non-governmental arena, these revisions are likely to have effects that reverberate across the agricultural policy arena. Although these impacts are only beginning to be felt, local level cooperatives have already begun to resist the weakening of the law by registering their seeds and creating new strains of rice. This research project focuses these developments in one corner of Japan, Toyama prefecture, where rice growing has a particularly strong heritage.

Toyama prefecture is situated in the Toyama plain. Every spring when the snow melt begins to gush downward from the nearby Japanese alps, farmers begin readying their fields for rice planting. The clear, cold mountain water is thought to make rice grown here especially delicious and it is a matter of pride for the farmers in this region of Japan. Since first living here as an exchange student in the 1990s, I have returned here every year. Now, I would like to turn my attention to the efforts made by local level actors to preserve control over seeds. The project will examine these efforts and examine the relationship between the passage of the Seed Law and the way these local organizations are responding.

### **The Seed Law**

The 1952 Seed Law, affecting mainstay crops mandated the development and production of seeds (rice, wheat, soybeans, barley and oats) by agricultural experiment stations in each prefecture. The Seed Law was implemented by local agricultural cooperatives that are part of a vast network to which virtually all farmers belong along with many non-farmer (associate members). At the national level, JA Zenchu (The Central Union of Agricultural Cooperatives) organizes and guides the activities of all of cooperative related activities as well as providing oversight to its related agencies.

### **Local Level Politics and Policy Actors**

The literature on activity at local levels is shedding new light on policy activities. A recent study by Jentszsch<sup>ii</sup> (2017) researches the impact that national level policy has had on the redistribution of farmland and efforts by local cooperatives to resist such distribution.

Jentzsch uses the term “defensive consolidation” in describing efforts by prefectural and local cooperatives and local farm households which can re-structure themselves as larger collective farms. In his research, Jentzsh notes that these local actors have rendered corporate access from the outside virtually impossible by corporatizing local farms as agricultural production companies. Similar to changes on land distribution policies, the abolishment of the 1952 Seed Law allows the private sector, and large transnational corporations to enter into businesses historically controlled by local actors. Critics argue that this might pave the way for Japan’s seed technologies to become dominated by large multinational corporations if they are able to develop and sell seeds. The sale of seeds would give the corporations inroads into farming in Japan and potentially these seeds may dominate Japanese farming in time.

This research would add to the literature on state and society, as well literature in Japanese politics on regional and local level policy actors that play a role in implementing policy. There is a dearth of information currently on this topic, the article cited earlier by Jentzsch is an important contribution. The bulk of the research in this field are national level studies focusing on central government actors. While this study also proposes to include officials in the Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries, and Forestry, the focus is on local level actors in Toyama prefecture.

### **Research Plan**

In Summer 2018, I completed 10 initial interviews to see whether a future research project was doable. During this trip, I met with local farmers, members and administrators of the local cooperatives and members of the local agricultural committees and found that a project was doable within a short time frame.

In order to conduct this project, I will spend 4 weeks in Toyama prefecture, where I have spent some years cultivating local contacts in agriculture and agricultural policy. While in Toyama, I will visit the local agricultural experiment stations conducting seed development, interview members of local cooperatives and prefectural government administrators who have been part of local initiatives to register and develop new varieties of rice.

I will also spend 2 weeks in Tokyo interviewing the directors of the NO GMO! Campaign, Seikatsu Club Seikyo (Japan’s largest consumer organization) and the Consumer’s Union of Japan. Each of these organizations’ work represent the consumer perspective. I have met with or had contact with leaders at each organization in order to set up potential meetings with them this coming summer. These people will be asked about their perspective of the Seed Law and the Seed Registration system. The central government actor responsible for agricultural policy is the MAFF, I will meet with MAFF administrators to discuss the rationale for the Seed Law’s revision and the policy goals related to this change.

After returning from the field, I plan to write a draft manuscript by early Fall (September 1) for distribution to outside readers before submitting to a top-flight Japanese politics and

policy journal (such as SSRJ) by December/January. Without additional funding it will be impossible to conduct the necessary in-depth, qualitative interviewing to sufficiently address the proposed research question. NEAC funding is vital for this project's success. If I do not receive NEAC support, this project will be abandoned in favor of a more limited research project on a similar, though less impactful topic. This research project needs to be conducted in a timely and in-depth, serious, scholarly manner to document these activities and to ensure that an accurate picture is portrayed. Piecemeal research does not do justice to the topic.

### 3. Budget

Airline ticket to Tokyo, Haneda	1,700 (based on avg. daily fares summer 2018)
Airline ticket Haneda to Toyama	500 (based on avg. daily fares summer 2018)
Lodging, Meals and incidentals	
- 2 weeks in Tokyo	1,834
- 4 weeks in Toyama	3,892
Travel costs in country	
- train travel in Tokyo	20
- 4 week car rental	500
Technology, translation	500
Total trip cost	\$8,946
Summer Stipend Award*	4,500
<b>NEAC Grant Request</b>	<b>\$4,446</b>

#### **NEAC Funds will not be used to cover Technology or Translation costs.**

Note: All numbers for lodging, meals and incidentals are based on DOD per diem rates [https://aoprals.state.gov/web920/per\\_diem\\_action.asp?MenuHide=1&CountryCode=1128](https://aoprals.state.gov/web920/per_diem_action.asp?MenuHide=1&CountryCode=1128). The number for Toyama includes only M&IE as I will be staying with my former host family. The per diem cost for Tokyo city is 278/day. Train travel in Tokyo refers to travel by the Tokyo Metro Subway, this estimate is based on previous research travel. In order to minimize costs, I will land in Tokyo, and start my research travel there spending two weeks and then go on to Toyama (in this way I can purchase a 21 day pass instead of having to purchase an additional 7 day pass). While in Toyama, I will need to rent a car to visit most of sites as they are inaccessible via rail, this number is based on estimates given to me by rental car companies in the area.

#### **Sites in Tokyo**

1. Ministry for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (MAFF)
2. JA-Zenchu
3. Japanese Consumer's Cooperative Union
4. Consumer's Union of Japan
5. Seikatsu Club Seikyo, 6 -24-20 Shinjuku, Shinjuku-ku, Tokyo

#### **Sites in Toyama:**

1. Local Cooperative Offices in: Fukumitsu, Nanto, Inami, and Toyama City
2. JA Norimino Nakano Rice Culture Center
3. Toyama Prefecture Agricultural, Fisheries and Forestry Research Center, Toyama City
4. Nagaoka National Experiment Station, Nigata City
5. National Institute of Advanced Industrial Science and Technology Agriculture Food Industry Research Organization Next Generation Crop Development Center

## **Notes**

i Freiner, Nicole 2019. *Agricultural Policy and Politics in Japan: The Loss of a Traditional Lifestyle* (2018). New York, NY: Springer Books (an imprint of Palgrave MacMillan).

ii Jentzsch, Hanno. 2017. "Abandoned land, corporate farming, and farmland banks: a local perspective on the process of deregulating and redistributing farmland in Japan." *Contemporary Japan*. 29(1): 31-46.