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EU checks imports amid Japan food safety fears

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The European Union this week put in place strict checks on imports of food and feed from areas of Japan that could be affected by radiation from the damaged nuclear reactors at Fukushima.

Background

Japan is authorised to export to the EU just four foodstuffs of animal origin: fishery products, bivalve mollusks, casings and pet food.

In 2010 the total value of agricultural products imported to the EU from Japan amounted to €187 million, while the figure for fishery products was €18 million.

Japanese fruit and vegetables can also be exported to Europe, but such imports amounted to just 9,000 tons last year.

Over 10,000 people may have been killed in Japan as the tsunami triggered by the 11 March earthquake surged across the coastline, reducing whole towns to rubble. It was the biggest earthquake to have hit the country since records began 140 years ago.

At the tsunami-buffed Japanese nuclear power plant of Fukushima, 240km north of Tokyo, the authorities have spent days desperately trying to cool overheated fuel rods to prevent radiation leaks and, ultimately, the possibility of a catastrophic meltdown.

Helicopters were dispatched to drop tons of water on the reactors and water cannons tried to cool a spent-fuel pool, to lessen the risk of a catastrophic fire should the water hit the target.

Meanwhile, frantic attempts were made to restore the Fukushima plant's backup cooling systems.

Member-state representatives gathered for a meeting of the Standing Committee on the Food Chain and Animal Health (SCoFCAH) on 24 March endorsed proposals from the European Commission to impose special import conditions on Japanese foodstuffs.

From this week, all feed and food products originating from 12 prefectures of Japan, including the four most directly affected by the unfolding nuclear crisis triggered by an 11

March earthquake and tsunami, must be tested before leaving the country and will be subject to random testing upon arrival in the EU.

At least 10% of imports from the 12 prefectures concerned will be subjected to physical checks, including laboratory analysis, while checks will also be carried out on 20% of products from the rest of the country.

Imports of food or feed from the area must be accompanied by a declaration from the Japanese authorities attesting that the product does not contain radioactive elements in excess of the EU's maximum permitted levels.

Importers must also notify the national competent authorities two days before the scheduled arrival on EU soil of food and feed from Japan.

Upon arrival at European ports, Japanese products will be kept under surveillance for a maximum of five working days pending receipt of the test results. Those whose radioactivity is found to be in excess of the legal limit will be destroyed or returned to Japan.

The new rules, which came into force on 27 March, affect radionuclides iodine-131, caesium-134 and caesium-137. As for plutonium, traces of which have been found in the ground around Fukushima, "the EU will address the issue," Commission spokesman Frédéric Vincent said.

Products harvested before 11 March are not affected by the new precautionary measures, but must be accompanied by a declaration stating clearly that they were harvested and processed before the disaster struck.

Sea-water contamination hits record highs

Meanwhile, sea-water contamination in the Fukushima region hit record highs on 29 March, according to data released by Japan's Nuclear and Industrial Safety Agency.

But yesterday the world's biggest oil-tanker firms and container lines were still servicing Japanese ports, judging there to be no threat to vessels or crew from radiation.

Indeed, all 16 of the world's biggest cargo firms have resumed operations in Japan.

Hapag-Lloyd, the world's fourth largest container shipping company, yesterday resumed calling at Yokohama and Tokyo after suspending stops there in the immediate aftermath of the disaster. It is also still operating from Kobe and Nagoya.

Nevertheless, shipping companies continue to observe a 30km exclusion zone imposed around the stricken reactors at Fukushima, and many – including Maersk, the world's biggest container group – are not operating out of Sendai, near the epicentre of the earthquake.

To date few ships or planes appear to have registered abnormal radiation levels or suffered excessive delays as a result of radiation fears.

But confusion reigns as to what measures customs, security, health and port authorities in countries and cities around the world are taking to address the radiation threat, what

levels of radioactivity they consider abnormal and what steps will be taken once such levels have been detected.

"We know some places are screening for radioactivity," Arthur Bowring, managing director of the Hong Kong Shipowners Association, told the International Herald Tribune.

"But often, we don't know what exactly they are screening, and what levels of radioactivity would be considered abnormal by the various officials," Bowring said.

Some EU countries have been taking their own measures to deal with the radioactivity threat since the crisis began to unfold. France, for example, has been testing 100% of imports from Japan since 11 March.

EU consumer groups, meanwhile, are yet to speak out on Japanese food safety fears. One representative told EurActiv that they expected the scare to be "very high profile but fairly fleeting".

The EU import checks will be reviewed on a monthly basis.

Positions

"We understand that specific radiation limits have been set for foodstuffs imported from Japan. BEUC calls on the Commission to ensure that these limits are strict so as to ensure that there are no risks for consumers, and that rigorous and systematic controls are put in place to make sure that they are respected," **Ursula Pachi**, deputy director-general of European consumer organisation **BEUC**, told EurActiv.

Links

European Union

- European Commission: [Food safety: the EU reinforces controls on imports from Japan \(24 March 2011\) \[FR\] \[DE\]](#)

Press articles

- EurActiv France: [Renforcement des contrôles des aliments en provenance du Japon](#)

European Union

- European Commission: [Questions and Answers: Safety of food products imported from Japan \(MEMO; 1 April 2011\)](#)