
Questions and Answers: Safety of food products imported from Japan

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Questions and Answers: Safety of food products imported from Japan

Following a nuclear accident, what does the EU do as regards food safety?

During the years that followed Chernobyl, after scientific advice of the Group of Experts established under the Euratom Treaty (Article 31) the European Community adopted **pre-established maximum levels in feed and food following a nuclear accident or any other case of radiological emergency**. This was done in various Regulations (3954/87 Euratom, 944/89 Euratom and 770/90 Euratom).

The **maximum permitted levels of radioactive contamination** of foodstuffs adopted at the time concern the levels of strontium, iodine, alpha emitting isotopes of plutonium and transplutonium, and other nuclides including caesium 134 and 137. The levels in question were confirmed in 1998 following additional analysis by scientific experts and have thus **not changed since in the past 24 years**.

They detail the maximum levels of contamination for infant food, dairy produce, general foodstuffs, liquid foodstuffs and minor foodstuffs. For example, the maximum level for general foodstuffs in case of contamination of iodine-131 (the main concern of contamination at the moment in Japan) is 2000 Becquerels/Kg.

The **levels in the Regulation** are based on the assumption that, if **10% of the food consumption of a person over a full year** would be contaminated at these levels, its annual exposure to ionising radiation would not exceed the additional **annual dose limit for a human being, which is 1 mSv (milliSievert)**. Moreover, the principles and criteria for setting the maximum levels foreseen in that EU Regulation are **in line with international guidelines** and recommendations on this issue (World Health Organization, FAO, Codex Alimentarius).

What about EU legislation dealing directly with the Chernobyl aftermath setting different levels?

In the years that followed Chernobyl, the EU has adopted a Regulation which sets potential levels of **radioactive contamination of foodstuffs coming from areas** which were concerned by the fallout of the world's largest nuclear accident. A recast version of the Regulation was adopted in 2008 (Council Regulation 733/2008) and its validity was extended until 2020.

It refers to a level of **600 Bq/kg for food products** other than milk and food for infants which is indeed lower than the 1250 level indicated for the same type of contamination in Regulation 3954/87.

The reason is that the EU text in question deals exclusively with potential contamination with Caesium 134 and 137, and only Caesium 137 remains detectable more than 30 years after the contamination. The

maximum level of 1250 Bq/kg in the 1987 Regulation covers besides Caesium also Ruthenium isotopes and Cobalt-60, in case it would occur.

The maximum permitted level of 600 Bq/kg applies to the accumulated activity of Cs-134 and Cs-137. There is currently only a potential for Cs-137 to be present in food from Chernobyl, as Cs-134 has already decayed since then (half-life: 2.1 years); this is not the case in Japan where both isotopes Cs-134 and Cs-137 are present at the same level.

Finally, the maximum permitted levels for imports from Japan should be understood as it is written in Regulation 3954/87 apply to the sum of all radionuclides of half-life greater than 10 days, notably Cs-134 and Cs-137 except strontium and alpha-emitting isotopes of plutonium (for which more restrictive values apply).

Why are some of the levels set now in Japan lower than EU levels?

In the immediate aftermath of the accident, Japan has enforced lower values for their foodstuffs. It has to be considered that in the current situation in Japan, a much higher percentage of their daily diet could be contaminated with significant levels of radionuclides than the 10 % on which the EU levels are based upon.

So these lower levels are probably the result of taking into account the **dietary data applicable to Japan**, but the Commission has not received any official information from the Japanese authorities on the rationale that has been followed.

What has been the EU's reaction to the Fukushima accident as regards safety of food products?

The safety of food products imported into the EU has been a priority of the Commission since Day 1 of the disaster which struck Japan.

Less than 4 days after the accident on the nuclear plant, the Commission launched – on **15th March** - a notification via the RASFF (Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed) recommending to **analyse products from Japan for radioactivity**. This was done **on a precautionary basis** as at time there was not yet any evidence of the contamination of the feed and food chain. Member States were reminded to use the 1987 Regulation and the levels it details (see Q1).

The monitoring and checking of imports are the responsibility of Member States which have to inform other Member States in case a contaminated product is found.

On 25 March, following evidence that feed and food chain was affected, the European Union decided to reinforce controls on imports of food and feed from certain regions of Japan, where production could be affected by the accident at the Fukushima plant.

This was done following an endorsement of these measures by the Member States at a meeting of the Standing Committee on the Food Chain and Animal Health (SCoFAH) the day before on 24 March 2011.

What are the measures endorsed by the Member States to reinforce the controls on imports from Japan?

The measures apply to **all feed and food originating in or consigned from 12 prefectures of Japan**, including the four most affected by the accident. All products from these prefectures have to be tested **before leaving Japan** and will be subject to random testing in the EU.

Feed and food products from the remaining 35 prefectures will have to be accompanied by a declaration stating the prefecture of origin and will be randomly tested upon arrival in the EU.

In particular, the Regulation stipulates that each consignment of food or feed from the 12 prefectures has to be accompanied by a declaration –to be provided by the Japanese authorities– attesting that the **product does not contain levels of radionuclides that exceed the EU's maximum permitted levels**. Radionuclides are radioactive elements and the Commission regulation makes specific reference to iodine-131, caesium-134 and caesium-137.

Upon arrival in the EU, the competent authorities of the Border Inspection Posts (BIP) – for animal products - or of the consignment's Designated Point of Entry (DPE) – for plant products – are to carry out document and identity checks on all food and feed consignments from Japan.

Physical checks, including laboratory analysis, will be carried out on **at least 10% of the consignments of food or feed coming from 12 prefectures mentioned above**. Physical checks will also be carried out on at least 20% of the consignments coming from the remaining 35 prefectures.

Pending the availability of the test results, products shall be kept under official control for a maximum of five working days. The consignments will be released when the importer will present to the custom authorities the favourable results of the official controls mentioned above.

Products that are found to exceed the maximum permitted levels shall not be placed on the market and will either be safely disposed of or returned to Japan.

Will the Commission update the measures on a regular basis?

The Regulation adopted last week stipulates that the measures have to be reviewed every month.

But if the situation was to worsen –for example if contamination with other radionuclides would be found -, the Commission will **strengthen its controls in 48 hours**.

Member States' experts exchange information on the situation on a daily basis and a first state of play will take place at the level of Standing Committee (meeting of experts in Brussels, on Fri. 8th April).

Does the EU import a lot of food products from Japan?

Japan is a minor trading partner of the EU when it comes to food products.

In 2010, imports to the EU of Japanese agricultural products (i.e. products of animal origin, fish and of plant products) stood at **€187 million** for agricultural products and **€29 million** for fishery products.

The main importing EU Member States of agricultural products, in terms of value of imports, are: The Netherlands €38 million; United Kingdom €37 million, France €34 million, Germany €32 million and Italy €13 million. And for fishery products: The Netherlands €13 million; France €7 million, Germany €4 million, United Kingdom €3 million, Italy €1 million.

Japan is authorised to **export to the EU only four products of animal origin**, namely: Fishery products; Bivalve molluscs; Casings; Petfood.

Vegetables/fruits may also be exported to the EU, but such exports from Japan into the EU are small in volume – they stood at about **9,000 tons** from all of Japan's territory in 2010.

Even if the aforementioned elements did not exist, it would be hard for Japan to export anything right now from those regions due to the damages caused by the devastating earthquake and the tsunami that followed. Also, according to the latest information from Japan, food from the affected area is not harvested.

Also see: [IP/11/362](#)