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# Food Contamination Fears Could Harm Japanese Brands

By MARK McDONALD

TOKYO — Japan's list of casualties, already long, could soon include two of the country's iconic brands: sushi and Kobe beef.

The Japanese Health Ministry said Saturday that it had detected elevated levels of radiation in spinach and milk at farms up to 90 miles from Japan's crippled nuclear reactors. The ministry did not make reference to any contaminated farm animals, seafood or fishing grounds in Japan. And no food exports from Japan have failed quality tests being done by other countries.

But even the perception of contamination, one Japanese agriculture expert said, could cause long-lasting "brand damage," especially if there was evidence of radiation spreading across Japan.

"If the accident becomes bigger, like Chernobyl, it will damage all the brands and people won't buy any of it, even if it's safe," said Hiroshi Uchida, a former professor of agricultural science, speaking of Kobe, Sendai and other brands of high-priced, top-quality Japanese beef. "Even though the government hasn't mentioned the possibility of contamination of beef, we should start testing to convince people the beef is safe."

Trevor Corson, a sushi expert and a former commercial fisherman who used to live in Japan, said seafood caught "in an ocean churning with movement and dispersal might turn out to be less of a concern than agricultural products that are exposed and stationary."

But Mr. Corson also said the Japanese seafood industry could face a long and difficult struggle "to establish faith in the safety of their seafood — not unlike the challenges faced by gulf fishermen in the U.S. after the BP oil spill."

The Tsukiji fish market in central Tokyo, the world's largest clearinghouse for just about anything that fishermen pull from the sea, was not physically damaged by the earthquake. Its cobblestone aisles and alleyways were as loud, profane and hurly-burly as ever on

Saturday. But something in Tsukiji's soul seems to have been lost, or at least badly bruised, in the tsunami.

Before the disaster, the market drew 10 percent of its daily inventory of 2,400 tons of seafood from the waters off Tohoku, the coastal epicenter of the earthquake. The fishery there is renowned for its scallops, seaweed, bonito and shark's fin. Tohoku, as a place and a brand in Japan, was formidable.

"It's not like the brand is just damaged now — it's over," said a glum Tsutomu Kosaka, the general manager at Tsukiji. "At least for now, the brand is finished. Gone. It's hopeless."

Mr. Kosaka said Saturday that neither the Health Ministry nor city inspectors had tested any seafood in the Tsukiji market. The last time there were radiation tests of seafood in Tokyo, he said, was in 1954, after a Japanese tuna boat was contaminated by fallout from an American atomic test on Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands.

Mr. Kosaka's hopelessness, for now, stems more from the outright destruction of fishing facilities in the north than from a possible poisoning of the fishery.

In towns and ports all along the coast, docks and jetties have vanished into splinters. Boats and trawlers are smashed or sunk. Nets and tackle, gone. Offshore fish farms and onshore processing factories, gone. Among the victims was Ojika, a 100-year-old whaling port that had just two boats left from its once mighty fleet.

A sushi chef at a restaurant near the fish market said the tsunami and its plundering of Tohoku had also been disastrous for his business.

"Scallops, sardines and oysters from Tohoku, none of that is available now," said Tomohito Narasaki, 27, a chef at Sushizanmai. He said millions of dollars' worth of bluefin tuna, red snapper and yellowtail farmed off Tohoku was instantly destroyed.

Japanese consumers certainly prize the domestic seafood products that go into their premium sushi dishes, but they also eat plenty of non-Japanese products in their sushi — as do consumers around the globe. Now that sushi is eaten worldwide, it is also sourced worldwide. Wholesalers, distributors, restaurant owners and chefs search everywhere for quality fish.

"I have started to hear people in the West worrying about radioactive sushi and so on, but perception and reality are quite different," said Mr. Corson, the author of "The Story of Sushi." "Much of the seafood typically used in sushi doesn't originate in Japan and never passes through the country."

Producers of Kobe and other top brands of Japanese beef said Saturday that they had not yet tested their prized cattle, which can cost upward of \$50,000 each. Nor had they tested the special feed they use.

Ranchers with operations far from the damaged reactors scoffed at the notion that their cows might be contaminated. Distance is in their favor, they said, pointing out that Kobe is 360 miles southwest of the damaged reactor complex.

“I don’t need any tests,” said Kazunori Ikeda, director of the Wagyu Registry Association, the oversight body for all Wagyu cattle, including Black Wagyu, the strain from which Kobe beef comes. “We’re not afraid of contamination because Kobe is so far from Fukushima. I’m sure all cattlemen in Japan feel the same way. I’m confident.”

Certified Kobe beef produced in Japan is not exported, the certification group said, so foreign consumers will not be affected.

Kobe cattle, like the other leading brands here, have strict requirements for certification. Only 3,000 head per year make the Kobe grade. A five-ounce sirloin at the Ekki Bar and Grill in Tokyo currently goes for 12,000 yen, about \$150.

Japan’s other brands of premium beef include Sendai, Ohmi, Matsuzaka and Yonezawa. “We can’t feed our cows anymore because of the shortages of feed and water,” said Masaru Takahashi, manager of the JA Cooperative in hard-hit Furukawa, which raises Sendai beef. “We have only 20 percent of the feed we need. I can’t imagine what effect this is going to have on our herd.”

Sendai cattlemen had just started to export their beef to Hong Kong and Macao, and had drafted plans to start shipping to the United States. That project is now delayed as the ranchers await word on further radiation tests. The government said Friday that it would test meat for cesium, plutonium and uranium, but gave no timetable.

Mr. Takahashi said he was worried about the public’s perception of beef cattle if tests showed any further spread of radiation. “If the rumors grow,” he said, “I’m not confident that anyone will buy our beef, even if it’s the highest quality and even if it’s safe.”

*David Jolly and Kantaro Suzuki contributed reporting.*

