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From the Editors:

Join Hands for Positive Change

Consumers Union of Japan is engaged in many campaigns that have international implications. We always feel the need for more cooperation between non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and local groups that fight for justice and regulations that support consumers' rights - such as the right to know.

Globalisation can work to our advantage if we join hands for positive change and solidarity.

The purpose of Japan Resources over the years has been to inform others what is going on in Japan. We hope you will stay tuned to our campaigns and join us as we keep up the good work...

- Editors



Kao, P&G and Lion are among the companies that sell problematic products that cause fragrance pollution

Update on the Fragrance Pollution Issue in Japan from the Perspective of Those Who Continue to Suffer

August 2024

By Yuri Kitagawa

Fragrance pollution is about health problems caused by products of everyday life used by others, such as fabric softeners and laundry detergents with sustained release technology for fragrances. After the spread of COVID-19, when people engaged in extensive sterilisation, the use of antimicrobial chemicals in the products, on top of fragrances, has become common. It is said that 70%¹ of the people in Japan use fabric softeners, most of which are scented. Common symptoms are headaches, nausea, coughs, breathing problem, eye ache, dizziness, diarrhea, etc. Some suffer from severe symptoms which prevent them from going to school or workplace. For many, leading ordinary lives become difficult as fragrance- and chemical-filled air comes in the house from neighbours' laundry and everywhere one goes there are people who use the products or/and these users of the

1 Source: Japan Soap and Detergent Association (JSDA) study:
https://jsda.org/w/01_katud/sentaku_chosa2020-2.html

products leave behind the fragrance and the chemicals everywhere as they move about.

Although more people who are affected by the products are raising their voices, most people remain quiet just enduring the nuisance and the suffering as they fear not being understood and/or face alienation and even being bullied. The 70% usage rate of fabric softener is the result of fierce advertisement by manufacturers of these products and the tendency of the Japanese public who think that everything which is sold, advertised and is not banned is safe and that they are good products. The fragrance pollution problem is unique in that while symptoms of, for example, food allergy can be avoided by the sufferer her/himself refraining from eating the food item, fragrance pollution is almost impossible to avoid as the air in most places is contaminated by these fragrances in microcapsules even on mountain paths as hikers and athletes have a high tendency to use the products fearing smell from their sweating.

Since I last wrote about fragrance pollution in Japan² in May 2022, one major development has been the creation in August 2022 of a Network of Local Politicians to Stop Fragrance Pollution. As of 22 July 2024, the Network has 131 members and the local assembly members, as well as the members of the National Assembly, have been actively questioning about fragrance pollution in the assemblies of their cities, towns and villages. The questions have included addressing the issues of students who suffer from Multiple

2 Fragrance pollution is the health hazard caused by scented products (chemicals) such as fabric softeners, air fresheners, deodorants, room fragrances and laundry detergents:
<https://www.nishoren.org/en/?p=2477>

Chemical Sensitivity (MCS), especially from scented fabric softeners used by others, and the problem of scented fabric softeners and other scented products at medical institutions, etc.

One major problem of scented fabric softener has been the use of it to wash *kappōgi* aprons (cooking coat-type apron) which the primary school pupils wear when serving school lunches. Pupils in Japan take turns to serve school lunches and the aprons they wear are normally passed on to the next group of pupils after washing them at home. Since most families use scented laundry products, pupils with MCS end up being forced to wear the aprons drenched with the chemical substances which make the pupils and the families sick. Many local assemblies have decided to instruct school boards and the schools to allow MCS pupils to bring their own aprons or in some cases stop the system of using the same aprons and ask the pupils to bring their own aprons.

While addressing the apron issue is an improvement, the school environment where most pupils and students (and teachers and other employees) continue to use scented laundry products and other scented products, does not solve the fragrance pollution issue in schools. Students who cannot sit in the same classroom with other students because of fragrance pollution, are often dealt with by being made to sit apart alone in a separate room which can be said that the student is being abandoned. Or in some cases, the students have no choice but to give up going to school.

Regulation / restriction concerning this fragrance pollution issue is expected to take time. Meanwhile I am hoping that schools, work places, medical institutions and other public places will introduce scent-free policies like we can see in some places in other countries, such as educational and medical facilities in North America. The reason why there is no talk about introducing scent-free policies in Japan seems to be that there is no

instruction from the national government to do so and the schools think that they cannot impose a ban on articles of daily use as individuals should be free to use the products of their choice. Another reason which I have heard is that some parents of the students might be working for manufacturing or sales companies of these products so that there might be a possibility that the students might be feeling bad if scent-free policies were introduced.

In autumn 2023, the Network to Stop Fragrance Pollution³, together with the Network of Local Politicians to Stop Fragrance Pollution and Canary Network Nationwide (CAN; Network of those who suffer from symptoms caused by chemical products such as fabric softeners) started a signature campaign on the online platform “change.org”⁴ targeting the three major manufacturers of fabric softeners and detergents, namely Procter & Gamble (P&G), Kao and Lion and the Japan Soap and Detergent Association. The campaign calls for stopping the use of slow-release technology (fragrance and antimicrobial chemicals) including microcapsules. Unfortunately the three companies and the Association accepted the signatures with great reluctance when we visited them to hand over, but we believe that the initiative contributed to raising awareness of the issue. As of 15 January, the campaign had gathered 8,889 signatures and the number of signatures continues to grow, reaching 11,026 as of 27 August 2024.

3 The Network to Stop Fragrance Pollution is a Network created in 2017 and currently consists of 5 organisations, namely Consumers Union of Japan, Japan Endocrine-Disruptor Preventive Action (JEPA), Network for Reduction of Toxic Chemicals (T-Watch), Chemical Sensitivity Help Center and Consumers Union of Japan Kansai Group

4 https://www.change.org/Stop_Kougai

This April and May, the Network to Stop Fragrance Pollution held its annual meeting with the ministries concerned with this issue, ie the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Industries, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Environment and the Consumer Affairs Agency. Although some progress has been made over the years, to this day, the reply from the Ministry of Health continues to be that they do not intend to regulate the products since there is no proof that the fragrances (and other chemicals such as antimicrobial chemicals) from the products are causes of the symptoms.

We need louder voices from those who are suffering from fragrance pollution and the public in general to change the air situation and the attitude of the government. Last year, the EU has banned intentionally-added microplastics, which include plastic-derived microcapsules used in fabric softeners. Japan should do the same although the ban will not fully solve the issue of fragrance pollution as it is expected that soon technology will come up with non-plastic / biodegradable microcapsules.

The United Nations is currently at its final stage of negotiating the Plastic Treaty and it is hoped that the treaty will make clear reference to the microplastics including microcapsules used in products such as fabric softeners. Unfortunately the Japanese government remains reluctant to introduce the “precautionary principle” when dealing with products such as chemicals but we hope that this attitude will change.

The fragrance pollution seems to be at its worst here in Japan but we are aware that the problem exists also in other countries. We are eager to engage in exchanges of information and views with those who are working on the issue in other parts of the world. If you are interested, please contact us.

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Japan's Neoliberal Seed Rules: Farmers' Rights Undermined

August 2024

**By Martin J. Frid & Kaori Hirouchi
(Consumers Union of Japan)**

In recent years, Japan's neoliberal government has introduced new legislation for the seed and seedling sector, restricting farmers' activities while giving multinational corporations a free hand. Is Japan trying to turn millions of farmers into passive buyers, consumers without rights, not only of fertilisers and pesticides, but also of seed, the very essence of our common food security? And what about Japan's efforts to get other countries to join UPOV91, which is a system developed by industrialized countries for the so-called “protection” of plant varieties that unilaterally promotes the interests of the seed industry at the expense of farmers' rights?

One of the major changes was in the revision of PVP Act (*Shubyo-ho* in Japanese). In May 2020 Consumers Union of Japan reported: “The ban on unauthorised self-propagation and self-seeding is to be extended to all protected varieties in order to strengthen the intellectual property rights. ...Strengthening Plant Variety Protection has strengthened the control of seeds by corporations, including multinationals, and has deprived farmers of their rights, food sovereignty and food safety. This amendment will further amplify this situation. We protest against the submission of the PVP Act Amendment Bill to the Diet and call for its withdrawal.” (Link: <https://www.nishoren.org/en/?p=3063>)

During the debate about the PVP Act, farmers' groups, people's organizations as well as opposition parties indicated their concerns, saying that the new PVP Act constitutes a deprivation of the freedom to cultivate crops, and save, exchange and sell seeds. A clause on exceptions was requested, and even some within the Liberal

Democratic Party had doubts about the rush to revise such important legislation.

We were very surprised when this new legal framework for PVP was enacted, with provisions that prohibits seed saving and other activities, including seed sharing and sales of home-grown seed between farmers, if seeds are protected. The threat of harsh punishment was unexpected, for example (Article 67, Crime of Infringement): “Any person who has infringed on a breeder's right or an exclusive exploitation license is subject to imprisonment for not more than ten years or to a fine of not more than 10,000,000 yen, or combination thereof.” (Plant Variety Protection and Seed Act. Link: <https://www.japaneselawtranslation.go.jp/en/laws/view/4036>)

Some farmers, including those in the organic sector, as well as independent experts have continued to protest these restrictions. We believe such concerns are justified.

It has also been pointed out (private communication to the authors from Francois Meienberg of APBREBES, an international network of NGOs that specialises on PVP and UPOV) that Japan's new PVP Act is unusual in that there is no exception to allow, even in a limited way, farmers to save protected seeds for their use on their own fields. Although this is only an optional exception under UPOV91, other countries have implemented this exception in one way or another.

To make matters worse, we have seen how Japan has changed from a passive player, to putting forward a strong, aggressive, even confrontational agenda abroad, both at UPOV meetings in Geneva, Switzerland and through the little known East Asia Plant Variety Protection Forum (EAPVP Forum). Absent from the EAPVP Forum are the local actors who are most likely to be affected by the decisions of the PVP offices, particularly smallholder farmers, indigenous peoples, local communities, as well as civil society

organizations. One example of Japan's proposals is to develop and test a model of an online PVP registration application platform known as e-PVP. Development of e-PVP Asia is extremely worrying. It risks not only entrenching an unsuitable PVP system in the East Asian region, but also the loss of national sovereignty over seed.

One-size-fits-all approach like UPOV91 does not work, because diversity matters in the face of climate crisis and building resilient community. Also, such approach deprives farmers and consumers alike of self-determination to food, thus the right to food. Consumers Union of Japan is concerned about the domination of seeds by companies and the way in which farmers' rights are being stripped away. UPOV91 is not a suitable solution for Japan or other countries in Asia and the world. Access to food is a human right. We hope the current debate will continue to inspire more people to get educated, get involved, grow their own food, and as much as possible, to save seed for future generations.

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Let's Label! Local Initiatives for Mandatory Labels of Genome-Edited Foods

Consumers Union of Japan and the No! GMO Campaign are calling on everyone across the country to work for the adoption by prefectural and municipal assemblies, of a letter of opinion calling on the Government to mandate the labelling of genome-edited foods.

Currently, genome-edited foods do not need to have any environmental impact assessment, no food safety assessment and no notification acceptance. This sorry state of affairs began in 2020. As of April 2024, six crops and fish have been notified (Tomatoes, maize, horse mackerel, puffer fish and flatfish). The Consumer Affairs Agency does

not require genome-edited labelling, citing, among other reasons, that it is “not possible” to check whether the genome has been edited in the final product.

However, food labelling is an important means of guaranteeing consumers’ right to choose. As long as there are consumers who have concerns about genome-edited foods, labelling is necessary. Food businesses can also produce food products that avoid genome editing. They should be able to indicate whether such novel technologies are used or not, if labelling is available from fresh raw materials to the final food product.

Starting in 1996, some genetically modified foods were imported from the US without a labelling system. Consumer concerns and calls for labelling spread across Japan. Environmental impact assessments, food safety assessments and labelling systems were established. The power to move and change the opinion of the national government in Tokyo, and globally, at that time came from the large amount of opinion letters submitted by local councils across Japan.

Similar opinion letters calling for the labelling of genome-edited foods have already been adopted by several prefectural and city councils in the past few months. Let’s expand this growing movement and our efforts from the local level and realise mandatory genome-edited food labelling.

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Responses to Our Questions to Supermarkets Regarding the Sale of Genome-edited Tomatoes

Consumers Union of Japan and the No! GMO Campaign sent a letter of request and questions to six supermarkets in the Tokyo metropolitan area that we found were selling genome-edited tomatoes and processed tomato juice in 2024. We received proper

responses from two of them. Two companies refused to respond and two companies did not reply.

Naritaya and Meidi-ya properly responded to our consumer concerns about genome-edited food products and, moreover, both companies had stopped selling genome-edited tomatoes. Both companies responded that they were aware of general information about genome-editing technology, but were unaware of our concerns, which reaffirmed the importance of properly communicating consumers’ voices.

Miuraya and Seijo Ishii, on the other hand, replied that they would not answer our questions. Even though this is a voluntary request, we think the attitude of refusing to respond to consumers’ concerns about safety and other issues is problematic. We asked Y’s Mart and Advance Kuriyama (Shimizuya) to respond several times, but as of 24 July 2024, we have not received any replies from these supermarket companies.

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Japan’s Consumer Affairs Agency “Will Not Regulate Genome Editing”

On 31 July 2024, the Consumer Affairs Agency’s Food Sanitation Standards Auditing Department responded to an open letter jointly submitted by Consumers Union of Japan and the No! GMO Campaign calling for regulations on genetically modified foods.

The agency responded stating that it would not regulate genetically modified food. The reasons given were that there are no foreign genes or parts of such genes remaining in the foods, and that there are no safety concerns about the associated genetic changes, which can also occur in nature.

(Source: Bio Journal
<https://www5d.biglobe.ne.jp/~cbic/english/2024/journal2409.html>)

Consumers Union of Japan

CUJ is a politically and financially independent non-governmental organization (NGO). We are funded by membership fees, sales of publications and donations.

CUJ was founded in April 1969 as Japan's first nationwide grassroots consumer organization.

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