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**A social system to ensure food safety:
Campaigning for revision of the Food Sanitation Law
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Introduction

The concept of "food safety" has garnered increased attention in recent years, and has been included in each G8 communiqué of late. For example, lending support to the activities of the OECD and the FAO/WHO, the communiqué of the 2000 Okinawa Summit states that "Maintenance of effective national food safety systems and public confidence in them assumes critical importance in public policy. We are committed to continued efforts to make systems responsive to the growing public awareness of food safety issues..."

At the 2001 Genoa Summit, commitment to the communication process in order to strengthen public confidence in food safety was announced as "Fully aware of the paramount importance of food safety to our peoples, we will continue to support a transparent, scientific and rules-based approach and will intensify our efforts to achieve greater global consensus..."

Now, as issues have become increasingly complex, with globalization of food distribution and progress in science and technology, it may be too late for any one individual region or country to find the causes of food-related incidents, let alone take action. Particularly in Japan, where 60 percent of the entire food supply is dependent on imports, international cooperation is critical in order to maintain continued food safety; consequently, the government's stance in making policy decisions and in administration is an important factor.

Many of the twenty-one million co-op members in Japan joined co-ops out of interest in food safety. Japanese co-ops have placed food safety in an important position in their businesses and activities.

During the period of Japanese high economic growth beginning in 1950s, we experienced many tragic food pollution incidents, such as the Morinaga arsenic milk poisoning, the Kanemi PCB oil poisoning, and the Minamata disease caused by organic mercury, and consumer concerns about food safety are on the rise. The co-ops co-develop products free of food additives with their members, ahead of the curve in the industry. Through communication between producer and consumer, we are reducing the use of pesticides and developing the sanchoku system, a system of direct transactions between producers and consumers ("to produce products showing the producers' faces"), while discussing cultivation methods, including soil creation. Furthermore, we have influenced the industry by creating our own standards that go beyond the country's standards and by conducting food testing and labeling. Recently, in order to protect consumers' right to know, we conducted a social movement and pioneered the labeling of genetically engineered food on our co-op products, leading to the establishment of a labeling system through the Ministry of Health and Welfare and the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries in 1999. These activities have served to increase society's trust in co-ops. Co-ops continue to strive to respond to their members' expectations, but they are limited in their ability to tackle today's food safety issues, and more measures involving society at large have been demanded.

I will now report on the movement seeking a social system for maintenance of food safety that has unfolded over the last three years, since 1999.

Campaigns for Revision of the Food Sanitation Law

A petition of approximately fourteen million signatures collected from across the nation were submitted at the 151st National Diet in 2000, requesting revision of the Food Sanitation Law, the fundamental set of rules governing administration of food safety in Japan. This is a representation of the wishes of consumers, producers, and companies for food safety gathered from across Japan, inspired by the co-ops. This petition, the so-called Consensus on Food Safety, was supported by more than five hundred members of the National Diet, but was not adopted, and was in fact suspended due to deeply rooted opposition from bureaucrats who try to protect their discretionary power, and from the members of the National Diet who comply their wishes.

What are our demands?

The petition consists of the following six items:

Briefly, we want to alter the Japanese social system governing the maintenance of food safety, to be brought in line with today's realities.

The Food Sanitation Law, enacted in 1947, is inadequate for dealing with the issues of today. The problems of the law can be organized as two main points. Firstly, the range of the law is too narrow. Secondly, the definition of "consumers" and the procedures for determination of policies have become old-fashioned.

To discuss the first point, the Food Sanitation Law was enacted around the time of the post-World War II food crisis. A major concern at that time was food poisoning, acute toxicity caused by microorganisms, resulting from eating food prepared in unsanitary conditions. But now, the law must be able to cover chemical issues such as food additives and pesticide residues, along with new issues emerging from changes in food production and developments in science and technology, such as genetically engineered food, endocrine disruptors, dioxin, and mad cow disease, the effects of which on the human body have not yet been fully studied. In Japan, the attitude of "no incidents equals safety" is the basis of administrative policy. If no action for human health is taken unless conclusive evidence is obtained, today's issues such as genetically engineered food and endocrine disruptors will be allowed to run wild. We think that the law should be revised so that administrative actions can be taken from the standpoint of prevention, expanding the scope of the Food Sanitation Law and allowing a proper response to the issues of today.

As for the second point, the Food Sanitation Law provides no definition of "consumer". The Minister's authority to regulate those involved in business and industry is spelled out, but neither the people's rights nor the country's responsibilities are clearly specified. In other words, the current Food Sanitation Law is structured so that consumers' health is protected as a consequence of governmental regulation of those involved in business and industry. This has two outcomes. One is that since consumers are not defined by law as an "interested party", a lawsuit brought by consumers expressing dissatisfaction with an administrative decision will be summarily rejected. As a practical matter, consumers cannot bring these concerns to court. This is a critical issue. The other is that only specialists and administrative personnel are directly involved in implementing policy based on the Food Sanitation Law, in other words creating rules and regulations, setting standards, and so on; we, the consumers, have no say.

This is a quite old-fashioned way of thinking. In fact, it is written as official policy that the Codex Committees that set up international specifications, when creating food specifications, will perform "risk analysis". Clearly, this is the standard way of thinking in Europe and America when it comes to food safety administration.

Risk analysis means to select methods of regulation after "risk assessment" has been performed, based on the latest scientific knowledge. "Risk management" is the means to make decisions through discussion by the interested parties, including consumers. And, risk management is a way of thinking about policy decision making and administration; that is, establishing a structure of "risk

communication” that allows for the exchange of opinions through participation of each layer of society, including consumers and producers, in the entire process from risk assessment through risk management and maintaining transparency and trust. A major issue in Japan is the fact that there is no provision for risk analysis, particularly risk communication, in the laws and systems responsible for ensuring food safety. Consequently, we are requesting that radical revisions be made to the Food Sanitation Law.

The nationwide spread of the food safety movement and looking to the future

Our campaign has spread across the nation, and the validity of our request has been proven.

A total 13.73 million signatures have been collected in the forty-seven prefectures. We received support from approximately eight hundred groups, including local consumer groups, as well as producer’s organizations such as the Japan Agricultural Cooperatives. In addition, 162 local assemblies submitted written opinions to the government requesting adoption of the petition, and 541 members of the National Diet regardless of party affiliation supported and agreed to become sponsors of the petition. This is equivalent to 74 percent of the members of both houses of the Diet.

This widespread movement was supported by the efforts of the individual consumer in every region.

*Allow me to present in detail the case of Co-op Kobe.

In Co-op Kobe, with its 1.4 million members, 130 food safety information advisors who were trained for six months held an uncounted number of mini-study meetings. Co-op Kobe spent a half-year on this study. Following the study, staff members and co-op members asked for signatures at shops and on the street, explaining food safety and the Food Sanitation Law. In only two weeks, 1 million signatures were collected, and 2.1 million signatures were collected overall. We were surprised ourselves at the speed and the numbers, and became confident of the people’s wishes with regard to food safety.

As a result of lobbying locally selected members of the National Diet and lobbying local assemblies, the written opinion of revisions to the Food Sanitation Law was adopted by the Hyogo Prefectural Assembly and Kobe City Assembly. The population of Hyogo Prefecture is over 5.5 million. The petition was suspended in the National Diet, but we gained much through this movement.

Firstly, the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare announced its “Food Safety Promotion Action Plan” in December 2000. When confronted with the petition, they had no choice but to announce some form of administrative enforcement policy. In addition, through lobbying activities conducted in each region, we increased the awareness of Diet members regarding food safety, which had hardly been a major political issue up to that time.

Secondly, as mass communication broadcasting capabilities and interest in food safety are increasing, our activities have begun influencing companies’ business strategies. Supermarkets, convenience stores, fast food establishments, family restaurants, and others beside the co-ops have been developing products promoting “organic”, “pesticide-free”, “additive-free”, and so on.

Thirdly, within the co-ops, the study of food safety spread, and members gained abundant knowledge. Staff members also experienced being a part of the co-op movement, felt pride in the co-op principle, and gained the trust of members. The benefits of co-ops were once again discussed among members, and co-ops gained greater recognition within the community.

The co-ops will continue onward, in order to realize our wishes in the future.

To obtain a clear answer from the National Diet regarding its intentions to respond 1.4 million people’s wishes concerning food safety, all over Japan preparations are under way for resubmission of the petition to the 153rd National Diet, currently in session.

In addition, while obtaining the cooperation of specialists such as scholars, lawyers, and so on, a revision of the law has been under discussion, and in the future, we would like to create a revision process, with consumer and concerned citizen participation, while consulting nonpartisan members of the Diet.

Japanese co-ops hope to continue putting effort toward allowing consumers and concerned citizens to be the protagonists of the twenty-first century by leading the movement to create a social system that ensures food safety for the new era.