

Establishment of a ‘Food Safety’ system in East Asia

By YASUE Noriko

It is possible to enjoy a variety of food products from all over the world in Japan. Especially in recent years, the popularity of Asian food products is increasing. On the other hand, there is the increasing unrest about the safety of those imported food products. In that respect, there is a lot to learn from the food safety system called “From the Farm to the Fork” established by the European Union (EU) which already implemented regional market liberalization, including that of agricultural products.

Although the EU implemented common agricultural policies, and enjoyed the regional market liberalization from the 1960s, it was only in the late 1990s that an awareness regarding the safety of agricultural products started to be highly recognized. In 1996, cases of human infection of BSE were detected in the EU. Moreover in 1999, it was due to an outbreak of dioxin contaminated poultry livestock in Belgium that the safety assurance of livestock and food products became an urgent issue. In 2002, the EU adopted food safety regulations, which indicated duties and obligations of the member nations and companies, and decided to establish the “European Food Safety Authority (EFSA).”

EFSA is an organization whose role is to assess and communicate the risks associated with food safety. More specifically, EFSA provides the highest level of scientific advices to policy makers as well as provides such information to the public. In the case of the EU, where market linearization of farm produce and food products has already been realized, it is still a hard decision to prohibit the distribution of those products even when doubts arise regarding their safety. For that reason, the establishment of a scientific advisory council, independent of national interests, became indispensable. If there are suspicions concerning the safety of a certain produce, it is important that consumers are able to obtain objective information without being dominated by the media and decide whether or not to import this certain product independent from the administration’s decision. Likewise, this broad concept, which takes into account the influence that these food safety regulations by the EFSA have over the next generations, is also new.

In dealing with the BSE problem, Japan itself, learned a great deal from the EU’s food safety regulations, attaching a greater importance to the traceability of food ingredients. EFSA plays a important role by providing analytical results not only in Europe but all over the world. Japan extended its support to East Asian countries during the outbreak of the Avian Influenza; however, taking into account the future promotion of the regional liberalization of farm produce and food products, I would like to see Japan take the initiative towards the establishment of a more integrated, comprehensive food safety system following the EFSA model.

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