

Japan's 'sacred' rice farms rotting from inside

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Rice farmer Shuichi Yokota checks the growth conditions of his rice with a smartphone in Ryugasaki, Ibaraki prefecture, on August 17, 2014

Shuichi Yokota may be the future of Japan's struggling rice industry.

The 38-year-old is about half the age of most growers and he relies on cutting-edge technology to cultivate vast paddy fields that eclipse the bulk of the country's rice plots.

And Yokota doesn't fear opening up to foreign competition—taboo in a place where rice is a sacred cow that is protected by subsidies and massive tariffs.

His farm in Ryugasaki, a community north of Tokyo, has ballooned more than five-fold in 15 years into an operation spanning 112 hectares (275 acres)—almost 30 times bigger than the tiny commercial rice fields commonly found in the area.

"This is simply the consequence of retiring farmers asking me to cultivate their [rice paddies](#) for them," Yokota said.

"I am one of very few full-time farmers in this area, and the people who were retiring didn't have anyone in the family to continue growing rice. But they don't want to sell the land."

While many of Japan's farmers get by with centuries-old farming methods, Yokota and his colleagues share workload information and data such as temperature and water levels—monitored by sensors installed in each paddy—on their smartphones.

Yokota may be an accidental giant among rice growers, but some are betting that people like him are the best hope for fixing an inefficient system, with wider calls for a shake up of Japan's cossetted agricultural sector.

Prices have tumbled as Japan's rice consumption has halved in 50 years, and there are fears the sector is rotting from the inside despite—or some say, because of—decades-old protectionism.

Ageing farmers are also facing fresh competition, with the country's largest supermarket chain Aeon jumping into the rice business.

"The situation is extremely serious—this is the dawn of a very difficult time," said Yoshito Yamada, a 66-year-old farmer in the northeastern city of Kitakata.



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Rice reverence

Whether it is a bed for a piece of raw fish, an essential component of almost every meal, or the key ingredient in making sake, rice is Japan's unparalleled staple food and enjoys a revered status.

Hundreds of years ago it was a currency, a symbol of wealth and power, and a ritual offering that still forms a key part of the native Shinto religion, as well as tradition-bound Sumo wrestling.

"Nothing gets done here without rice," said Sachiko Goto, head of the Tokyo Sushi Academy, a chef-training school.

That reverence has translated into strong protections for tiny plots tended by families who inherited land through generations—resulting in a hefty premium in stores.

Tokyo has for decades stabilised prices by controlling supply and penalising over-production to protect farmers—a key voter base—from volatile world markets,

This policy, known as "gentan" and referring to small-scale cultivation, effectively made rice farming a part-time job left to older relatives while younger family members worked in other sectors.

But, as with much of the greying nation, many farmers are now retiring—the average is about 66 years old—with few interested in replacing them. That has left some 400,000 hectares of farmland unused across the country, an area almost twice the size of Tokyo.

"What needs to be done is encourage older farmers to retire and then gather small pieces of land into one big lot for someone capable like Yokota," said Masayoshi Honma, an economics professor at Tokyo University.

It is estimated that ditching rice tariffs—which can reach 778 percent—would see local prices fall by about 341 yen (\$3.20) per kilogram, according to Japan's agricultural ministry.

An average five-kilogram (11-lb) bag in a Tokyo supermarket costs between 1,500-2,000 yen, up to three times a comparable bag in Sydney, Bangkok and Beijing.



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Overseas markets

Despite resistance to change by the powerful agricultural lobby, some older rice farmers such as Yamada blame the subsidy system for a now stagnant sector.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe last year said he would end production quotas from 2018 and abolish some cash handouts to rice farmers while expanding other payments—leading to claims the policy was toothless.

Despite his plan to shake up the economy, Abe has avoided taking an axe to rice tariffs that have long been seen as untouchable.

The levies have kept imports of foreign [rice](#) to a trickle—77 tons last year against domestic production of eight million—and they remain a key stumbling block in Tokyo's trade talks, including the US-led Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a proposed 12-nation free-trade bloc.

Despite fears the industry would crumble if it has to compete globally, Yokota insists competition might be an opportunity to tap new markets.

"If our supply exceeds domestic consumption, then we will bring it overseas—the TPP wouldn't be a threat in that sense," he said.

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