

5月14日付 Wall Street Journal の記事「前途厳しい日本の小規模豆腐製造業者 (Future Sours for Japan's Small Tofu Makers)」の要約

小麦、大豆、コーン等の穀物価格は世界的に高騰しており、大豆を原料として使用する豆腐業界は苦境に立たされている。大豆は95%を輸入に頼っている。2006年には500軒以上の豆腐製造業者が廃業に追い込まれ、全豆連によると現在の豆腐製造業者の数は12,500に減少している。

全国豆腐油揚商工組合連合会の森戸三郎専務理事は、「非常に厳しい年です。」と語る。

日本は米国から大量の大豆を輸入しており、昨年は863百万ドルの大豆を購入した。非遺伝子組換え大豆は一般大豆に比べ、単収が少なく、病害に弱いため、生産者はプレミアムを要求する。最近の大豆価格高騰により、非遺伝子組換え大豆の生産をしたがらない生産者が増えているようだ。USDAによると、2000年は生産大豆の46%が非遺伝子組換え大豆だったが、2007年には約9%に減少した。

日本の輸入業者は非遺伝子組換え大豆を調達するために、より高額を支払わなければならなくなっている。全豆連によると、大豆価格はこの1年で70%以上上昇し、非遺伝子組換のプレミアムも上がっている。

ほとんどの日本の豆腐製造業者は、このような状況でも低価格の遺伝子組換え大豆に切り替えていない。日本の消費者は「GM大豆の豆腐を受け入れないだろうし、だれも切り替える勇気がない」と、森戸専務は語る。2007年に日本豆腐協会が行った調査によると、回答者の45%がGM大豆の豆腐なら、購入しないと答えている。

2004年の調査によると、日本の豆腐製造業者は小規模事業者が60%を占めており、年間売上高は平均で約55,000ドルである。大規模なスーパーマーケットは消費者が買わなくなるのを恐れて、値上げに抵抗している。

日本人の食生活も欧米化し、豆腐の消費量は徐々に下がっているが、豆腐は伝統的な日本食だけでなく、豆腐ステーキやデザートなどいろいろな形で食材として使われている。

東京で川越屋豆腐店を営む根本さんは、毎朝 350 丁の豆腐を作り販売している。10 月に 1 丁 150 グラムの豆腐を 10 円値上げして、170 円で販売している。これは、過去数年で初めての値上げである。

価格の上昇しているアメリカ大豆を使わずに、国産大豆を使おうとする動きもある。しかし国産大豆の価格はアメリカ大豆の 1.5 倍以上し、また供給も不安定ではある。国産大豆を使って普通の豆腐の倍の価格でこだわりの豆腐を 1 パック 300 円で販売している男前豆腐店もある。若い世代にアピールするために、パッケージはアメリカ風で、ジョニーと命名しサーフボードの形になっている。

05/14 06:35p CST WSJ(5/15) Future Sours For Japan's Small Tofu Makers

(From THE WALL STREET JOURNAL)

By Hiroko Tabuchi

TOKYO -- For almost half a century, Ichiro Nemoto has risen before dawn to make tofu in a steamy workshop in central Tokyo -- one of thousands of tiny, family-run businesses across Japan that peddle the soft soybean cakes.

Now, Mr. Nemoto, 65 years old, is facing the toughest challenge of his career. During the past year, he has seen the retail price of U.S. soybeans, his main ingredient, surge more than 60%.

So far, he has survived by cutting costs on packaging and holding back on new equipment. But he isn't sure how much longer he can continue.

As global prices of wheat, soybeans, corn and other commodities continue to soar, Japan's \$6 billion tofu industry is hurting. Tofu is as central to Japanese cuisine as potatoes are to the American diet, yet Japan relies on imports for 95% of its soybeans, tofu's main ingredient. More than 500 tofu makers went out of business in 2006, bringing the total down to 12,500, according to the National Association of Tofu Merchants.

"We're facing an extremely difficult year," said Saburo Morito, senior director of the association.

The tofu industry's woes also reflect a growing concern over food security in Japan. The country provides 39% of the food it consumes, and food-import bills are skyrocketing.

At the root of Japan's tofu troubles is a big change among U.S. soybean farmers, who supply the bulk of the beans used in Japan's tofu-making. Japan -- one of U.S.'s biggest soybean customers, importing \$863 million worth last year -- has long paid American farmers a premium to produce beans that aren't genetically modified. Producers of GM-free soybeans demand a premium because the crop has a lower yield and is less resilient to pests.

But as recent high prices for soy boost profit margins for U.S. farmers, fewer farmers are inclined to take on the trouble or risk of keeping their crops GM-free. Non-GM soybeans grown in the U.S. plummeted to about 9% of overall production in 2007 from 46% in 2000, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

That has left Japanese importers paying ever higher prices to procure non-GM soy. Soybean prices have risen more than 70% during the past year on the Chicago Board of Trade, and premiums for keeping soy GM-free, which can add 20% to prices, are also rising, according to the tofu merchants' association.

Few Japanese tofu makers are making the switch to the cheaper genetically modified, or GM, beans. Japanese consumers "will never tolerate GM soybeans in their tofu and nobody's brave enough to try to change that," Mr. Morito says. In a 2007 survey carried out by the Japan Tofu Association, a separate industry body, 45% of respondents said they wouldn't buy tofu that was made with genetically modified soy.

Compounding the plight of the tofu industry is the tiny scale of most businesses, which gives them little clout with big retailers. According to a 2004 survey, 60% of all tofu manufacturers in Japan employed three or fewer people, with average annual sales of about \$55,000. Japan's supermarkets, giants in

comparison, have relentlessly resisted price increases for fear of scaring away consumers.

As it is, tofu consumption is gradually falling in Japan, as the Japanese diet becomes more Westernized. Tofu is everywhere in Japanese cuisine: in miso soup or chilled side dishes with ginger, grilled as a main course, or folded into desserts like tiramisu or cheesecake. In 1996, a household bought an average of 76 packets of tofu a year, at an average of 250 grams, or about nine ounces a packet; in 2005, that fell to 72 packets.

Mr. Nemoto, who runs his shop, Kawagoeya, with his wife, makes about 350 slabs of tofu each morning and sells them at his shop. In October, he raised the price of one 150-gram tofu slab by 10 yen to 170 yen (\$1.62) -- the first increase in years.

"I cannot raise prices further," says Mr. Nemoto, whose father started the shop a century ago. "I will lose my customers."

Larger food makers, who could bring more-efficient production techniques to the industry, are effectively barred from the market because of a law designed to protect small businesses from competition with mass-producers. Food giant Morinaga Milk Industry Co. only sells tofu by mail order or online and doesn't supply supermarkets. The company's tetra-packed tofu blocks -- sold regularly in North America and Europe -- aren't available at most Japanese retailers, where tofu is supplied by small companies in simple water-filled plastic packs that have a shelf life of just several days.

Japan's dependence on American soy dates back to the immediate postwar period, when the U.S. shipped soybeans to impoverished Japan as a source of protein. Still, many tofu makers initially resisted switching from domestic to U.S. soy, claiming the beans were inferior in taste and color.

But in the mid-1950s, the American Soybean Association carried out an aggressive marketing campaign in Japan pushing new varieties of U.S. soybeans that better fit tofu-making. By the late 1960s, 90% of the soybeans

used for tofu were imported, mainly from the U.S., according to the Soyfoods Center, a U.S.-based think tank.

The high prices of American beans are causing some tofu makers to take another look at home-grown soybeans. Japanese soy, which is GM-free, costs at least 1 1/2 times the price of U.S. soybeans, and the supply is often unstable.

Kyoto-based Otokomae Tofuten Corp. charges a premium for tofu made from domestic soy. A high-end tofu made from Japanese soybeans from Otokomae sells for 300 yen a pack -- about twice as much as U.S. soybean tofu.

Though the beans are 100% Japanese, the packaging is all-American "to appeal to a younger crowd," according to the company. The tofu is called Johnny -- and shaped like a surfboard.

(END) Dow Jones Newswires

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