

Why the price of rice is so high in Japan

Warm-up question: Have you ever experienced a shortage of a food or product that's normally easy to find? How did it affect your daily life?

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ARI SHAPIRO, HOST:

Remember when the price of eggs became a major issue in American politics? Well, in Japan, something similar is happening with rice. The price of this **staple** doubled in the last year, and that's one reason the **party** that's dominated Japanese politics for more than half a century lost the majority in both houses of parliament after elections last weekend. To explain the shortage of rice in the homeland of sushi, Kay Shimizu of the University of Pittsburgh joins us from Nagano, Japan. Welcome.

KAY SHIMIZU: Thank you so much for having me.

SHAPIRO: What caused this huge price increase in recent years?

SHIMIZU: Well, a number of factors, including a major heat wave in 2023, roughly two seasons ago, as well as increase in inflation in Japan. But the **root cause** of the shortage of rice, as well as the increase in prices, is really the government's long-term efforts to restrict the production of rice.

SHAPIRO: I want to talk more about those government efforts in a moment. But just to give us a sense of what it feels like there in Japan, where you are right now, is it something that you see when you go into restaurants and grocery stores? Is it something that people talk about over dinners that include rice?

SHIMIZU: Oh, oh, of course. It's a major topic, and it was a major issue during this current round of elections. We see it in the grocery stores. You go in, and there's a sign that says each customer is restricted to buying only one bag of rice, which has - never in my lifetime - it's never happened.

SHAPIRO: Wow.

SHIMIZU: And prices are just really expensive. My son just went on a camping trip with his classmates, and they were asked to each bring their own bag - a little bag of uncooked rice.

SHAPIRO: Wow.

SHIMIZU: And some families are having a hard time providing that.

SHAPIRO: So we're looking at a **convergence** of factors, from weather to inflation to **hoarding**, and then there's the government mismanagement. What has the government done wrong?

SHIMIZU: The key issue is the government's effort to protect rice farmers - the many rice farmers who are **essentially** elderly, part-time farmers, who are the main voting base for the leading political party in Japan, the Liberal Democratic Party, which has been in - basically in power in Japan for almost the entirety of the post-1945 years.

SHAPIRO: And that's the party that just lost this past weekend.

SHIMIZU: Exactly. They **artificially restrict** rice production so that, of course, there is a limited supply of Japanese-produced rice, and thus the rice prices remain high and support the livelihoods of these part-time farmers.

SHAPIRO: This problem has been going on for years, so why can't Japan just import rice to get out of the problem?

SHIMIZU: Well, of course, importing rice would put a lot of these rice farmers out of work. This is not their main source of income for the most part, but many of them rely on it for at least part of their income and also think of it as their sort of **cultural duty** that they've done over generations.

SHAPIRO: The price of rice is still very high in Japan, but it looks like it has come down a little bit from its peak. So is this problem on its way to a solution?

SHIMIZU: I don't think there's going to be any short-term solution. But the price of rice is coming down, in part because the weather - the climate that was so unfavorable towards rice production in 2023 was much better in 2024, and so the current supply is not nearly as **dire**. But I think in the long run, or at least even in the medium run, Japan has to reconsider its production restrictions, especially also because the average age of a rice farmer in Japan is now nearly 70 years old. There are not that many of these part-time rice farmers that are supporting the LDP. So what is the political decision to make here?

SHAPIRO: That's Kay Shimizu of the University of Pittsburgh, speaking with us from Nagano, Japan. She is coauthor of the book "Betting On The Farm: Institutional Change In Japanese Agriculture," with Patricia MacLachlan. Thank you so much.

Vocabulary and Phrases:

1. **Staple:** A basic or important food or product that people use regularly and depend on (e.g., rice, bread).
2. **Party:** A political organization that competes in elections and tries to influence or control government.
3. **Root cause:** The most basic reason something happens; the original source of a problem.
4. **Convergence:** A situation where multiple factors or events come together at the same time.
5. **Hoarding:** Collecting and storing large amounts of something, often out of fear of future shortages.
6. **Essentially:** Used to say something is mostly true or represents the basic idea, even if not completely exact.
7. **Artificially restricted:** Limited or controlled by human actions rather than natural causes.
8. **Cultural duty:** A responsibility or obligation people feel because of their traditions, values, or shared identity.
9. **Dire:** Very serious, dangerous, or urgent (often describing a bad situation).

Comprehension Questions:

1. Why has the price of rice doubled in Japan over the past year?
2. How have government policies contributed to the rice shortage?
3. What signs of the shortage can be seen in everyday life, according to Kay Shimizu?
4. Why is importing rice not a simple solution for Japan?
5. What does the future look like for Japan's rice production?

Discussion Questions:

1. Do you think it's more important to protect farmers or to keep food prices low for consumers? Why?
2. How might climate change affect food supplies in your country?
3. What traditions or cultural values influence farming or food in your community?
4. What are some ways governments can balance tradition with the need for economic change?