

Session: Innovations for sustainable performance

**Seeking Sustainable Performance of GI Beef in Japan:
Innovations Suggested by Alternative Beef Production Systems**

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Beef, geographical indication (GI), Japan, sustainability, innovation

Abstract:

Despite the iconic images of Japanese beef, such as Kobe Beef, associated with the reputation of unique husbandry methods for cattle, drinking beer, listening to classical music, and massage, in the international market, the reality remains unclear. While 11 types of Japanese beef are registered under the sui generis Geographical Indication (GI) system and many more under the Regionally Based Collective Trademark system as of August 2024 in Japan, most of these cattle are fed imported grains and grass, including genetically modified (GM) crops, and are not pastured throughout their lives. Therefore, the sustainability of these Japanese beef, including specialty beef, such as those registered as sui generis GI and Collective Trademark products, is highly questionable.

As criticized by Sekine (2024, 2025), Japanese GI systems recognized by the TRIPS Agreement, sui generis GI and Collective Trademarks, do not guarantee the local sourcing of ingredients in accredited GI products. Consequently, livestock products certified as GI products in Japan can originate from livestock fed with imported feed without being pastured or respecting animal welfare codes. This has emerged from a shortfall in the Japanese sui generis GI system, which lacks the EU’s Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) equivalent category and because of missing specifications of products registered as Collective Trademarks. Furthermore, the recent crises in the livestock industry due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the war between Ukraine and Russia, rising production costs under the depreciation of the Japanese currency, climate change, and the lack of labor have compelled producers to redesign their farming models to be more environmentally, socially, and economically sustainable. Producers of GI beef cattle and their organizations are no exception.

To create more sustainable Japanese GI beef production, is the local sourcing of feeds or pasturing possible? While these conditions are essential in many European GI

beef or dairy cattle productions, their possibility has been denied for a long time by the government and livestock industry stakeholders in Japan because of its limited territory suitable for farmland and meadows and the higher production cost, which necessarily result in higher consumer prices and negative impacts on the industry. Therefore, this study aims to reveal the innovations made by producers who practice organic production, pasturing, local sourcing, and animal welfare-friendly methods in Japan and derive suggestions for revising the current Japanese GI systems. This study is based on a literature review, statistical analyses, and interviews conducted by the author between 2022 and 2024 in Japan. The findings suggest that (1) there is a growing demand both among producers and consumers for sustainable and equitable beef in Japan, even though the market remains shallow; (2) despite the long-lived assumption, cattle production based on local sourcing, pasturing, organic, and compatibility with animal welfare codes is possible in the country; and (3) small-sized alternative livestock farms showed higher economic performance and sustainability than large-sized industrial livestock farms. This demonstrates that the significant transformation of GI systems, the livestock industry, and associated public policies is not only possible but also indispensable.

(496/500 words)

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