

# AAINews

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## **A case study on effective utilization of abandoned farmlands**

According to recent reports, in Japan abandoned farmland is increasing due to the aging of farmers, a lack of successors and falling prices of agricultural products. In the past, abandoned farmlands tended to be in small plots in mountainous areas or in areas with bad drainage. However, in one prefecture I investigated, I witnessed an increasing area of abandoned farmlands in the flat plain areas too. According to the data from the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, there were 13,500 hectares of abandoned farmlands in 1985. By 2005, the area size grew three fold to 38,500 hectares, or 9.7% of the total farming area in Japan. In particular, in agricultural areas in mountainous regions, abandoned farmlands account for 14.7% of all the farming land. Yamaguchi Prefecture has been attracting much positive attention for promoting raising cattle, effectively utilizing the abandoned farmland. I had a chance to join a survey in Yamaguchi this time, and would like to report on our findings.

To begin with, what was very impressive in this survey was the proactive and swift implementation of the project by the Yamaguchi Prefectural Agricultural and Forestry Center as well as their cooperation with farmers. At one farm, the prefectural staff were engaging with farmers very swiftly, providing advice on the effective use of abandoned mandarin orchards and farms on steep slopes. Prefectural staff would quickly arrange trial cattle and provide necessary information on how to manage cattle and pastures as well as on the use of insecticides. Prefectural staff would also provide routine advice on all aspects of raising cattle. These proactive actions and cooperation have gained the trust of the project implementers, namely the farmers.

Let me now explain how the project is actually run. In the beginning, farmers can “rent” cattle from the prefecture. They fence the livestock farming area with electric fences which can be rented or purchased. Then introduction animals for breeding purposes are “prepared” to suit the ranching environment. This entails making animals touch the electric fence to experience the electric shock so that they learn not to go near the fence and try to go out. The preparation also includes application of medicine to their bodies to treat against skin ailments caused by ticks and other factors. As long as electric fencing is adequately maintained, animal health is regularly checked and drinking water is provided. The animals can be left alone day and night. This makes it possible for farmers to reduce the amount of fodder that has to be purchased and reduce the maintenance work necessary for the upkeep of livestock sheds. In addition, cattle are happier grazing freely in a stress free environment. Moreover, promotion of grazing is considered to improve the scenery of the particular areas.



**Grazing on an inactive farmland**

The increase in abandoned farmlands has become a serious problem in recent years. In the past, most of the abandoned farmlands were in areas with unfavorable conditions. They tended to be in areas with poor soil and other poor farming conditions, such as isolated small farms, and farms in the deep end area of mountain valleys where there is little water. However, in recent years, the number of abandoned farmlands with relatively favorable conditions in flat areas is also on the increase. The aforementioned data on abandoned farmlands are a national average, however, the percentage of abandoned farmlands in rural prefectures and areas is much higher. In short, it is possible that the more dependent a prefecture is on agriculture, the more advanced the desolation of lands is. In Japan, 40% of the commercial farming areas is in mountain areas. If one adds subsistence farms, the percentage is expected to be even higher. These farming areas were considered to be reservoir for water resources thus playing an important environmental role, yet, it seems in reality due to “economic” reasons, they are cut off from production. Use of abandoned farmlands for grazing in Yamaguchi Prefecture is a progressive example. While I share the wisdom of increasing the potential of abandoned farmlands, I feel the need for dividing technical and economic support into two different functions for farmlands, namely food production and environmental protection/conservation. It takes 2-3 years to rehabilitate abandoned farmlands and return them to their original levels of productivity. In Japan, the food self sufficiency rate based on calories was 73% in 1965. This had decreased to 39% by 2006. This survey of abandoned farmland area conversion for grazing land made me think about various issues including agriculture promotion, national environmental protection and conservation, and an increase in the food self sufficiency rate.

(By Zaitzu, July 2007)