



March 31, 2011

President Barack Obama  
1600 Pennsylvania Ave. NW  
Washington, DC 20500

Dear President Obama,

As reports from Japan bring increasing evidence of continued radioactive releases from that country's nuclear crisis, we write to urge you to take swift action to protect the food and water in this country from radioactive contamination.

The full impact of the Japanese meltdown remains to be seen, but the health risks posed by radioactive contamination are well documented. In 2006, the National Academies of Science issued a definitive report on radiation exposure that concluded that even low levels of radiation can cause human health problems, including cancer, heart disease, or immune disorders.<sup>i</sup> Children are especially susceptible to exposure to radioactive materials, making safeguards of food and water particularly critical.<sup>ii</sup>

Decades after the Chernobyl accident, the United Kingdom still maintains restrictions on large sectors of the country's sheep production because radioactive cesium—dispersed through wind and rain—still contaminates grazing lands.<sup>iii</sup> Additionally, thousands of square miles of land experienced radioactive iodine contamination from Chernobyl, ending up in the grazing paddocks of animal herds,<sup>iv</sup> and then in the milk and animal products that humans consumed. After Chernobyl, there were 6000 cases of thyroid cancer reported from 1991 to 2005 in Belarus, Ukraine, and four affected regions of Russia, many of which were attributed to consumption of radioactive milk after the accident.<sup>v</sup>

Tests in Japan have already found eleven types of vegetables to contain levels of radioactive iodine exceeding national standards by as much as a factor of seven,<sup>vi</sup> as well as milk that contains radiation.<sup>vii</sup>

Radioactive emissions from Japan have been detected throughout the United States at low levels, from California to Colorado and as far east as Massachusetts.<sup>viii</sup> Monitors in the Carolinas have detected the presence of radioactive iodine, the first time this material had been detected there since the Chernobyl accident 35 years ago.<sup>ix</sup>

Currently, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) is charged with the bulk of monitoring radiation levels that may reach the United States from Japan, including taking

samples of air, drinking water, precipitation, and cow's milk, which it does at dozens of locations throughout the country. Disconcertingly, 20 of the EPA's 124 air-monitoring sites were not functioning properly for some period after the accident in Japan, and much of the agency's monitoring depends on volunteers.<sup>x</sup> In California alone, four of the 11 air monitors were out of commission after the accident.<sup>xi</sup> These revelations have prompted the EPA's Inspector General to state that it might be necessary to review the agency's radiation monitoring system.<sup>xii</sup>

The three agencies that monitor almost all of the food Americans eat—the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)—have insisted that the U.S. food supply is safe from radiation and that their agencies have the regulatory capability to keep radiation out of food should it become a problem.<sup>xiii</sup> The agencies, however, have done very little to detail specific ways in which they are responding to the threat of radiation in food. It is also unclear if these agencies, along with the EPA and other divisions of the government, have a cohesive structure for addressing the issue of radioactive materials entering the food supply.

One obvious place to begin would be to increase the locations and amount of monitoring of air and water in agricultural areas of the United States, such as California's Central Valley. This data should be used to determine an appropriate testing program for soil, water used to irrigate or process crops or livestock, and crops, milk, and meat.

American consumers could also be at risk through consumption of food products from other countries that experience radioactive fallout from the nuclear accident in Japan. The United States imports around 80 percent of its seafood as well as an increasing share of its fruits and vegetables. Unfortunately, the FDA inspects less than two percent of these imports, leaving consumers at risk to a host of food-borne issues, which now includes potential radioactivity.

The U.S. imported around 150 million pounds of food from Japan in 2010, a small percentage of what Americans consumed, but not an insignificant amount.<sup>xiv</sup> Imports from Japan included nearly 600,000 pounds of crab and anchovies and nearly 5 million gallons of bottled water, soft drinks and other non-alcoholic beverages containing water,<sup>xv</sup> products that may be potentially higher risk if contamination continues to spread to the ocean and fresh water sources.

The FDA contends that it is taking special precautions with all food imported from Japan.<sup>xvi</sup> But given the FDA's budgetary limitations and notoriously weak capacity to conduct inspections, it seems unrealistic that the agency can ensure it can keep radioactive products out of the United States. A more thorough action would be an outright ban of all food from Japan until the nuclear accident is under control and data shows that food producing regions of the country are no longer contaminated.

No amount of radiation exposure is safe and it is imperative that the federal government conducts comprehensive, transparent monitoring of food and water, especially given the

possibility that radioactive emissions from Japan may continue or worsen in the weeks and months ahead.

We urge the following steps to deal with this emerging threat to our food supply:

- The Food and Drug Administration should immediately ban all food and water imports from Japan, expanding on the FDA's original step of restricting imports of milk and produce from the region near the accident site.
- The Environmental Protection Agency should increase its monitoring in the United States of air, water, precipitation, and milk for radiation. This includes getting any disabled or offline monitoring equipment back into service as soon as possible, as well as expanding the monitoring program into agricultural regions such as California's Central Valley. This data should be made publicly available.
- The data generated by this environmental monitoring should be used by the Food and Drug Administration and the U.S. Department of Agriculture to design sampling programs for soil, water used for irrigation or livestock or crop production, crops including leafy greens, and meat and milk in areas of the United States that are affected by radiation. This data should be made publicly available.
- Adequate resources must be made available for food inspections, both at home and abroad. Current attempts to cut both USDA and FDA's funding would weaken their ability to meet current obligations even without the additional burden posed by this nuclear disaster.

We urge you to work with the federal agencies responsible for protecting America's environment and food and water supply to make sure that Japan's nuclear crisis does not unnecessarily endanger the United States.

Sincerely,



Wenonah Hauter  
Executive Director

CC:

Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack

Dr. Margaret Hamburg, Commissioner of Food and Drugs

**Dr. Elisabeth A. Hagen, Under Secretary for Food Safety**

Dr. Jane Lubchenco, Administrator of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

Senator Stabenow, Chair, Agriculture Committee

Senator Roberts, Ranking Member, Agriculture Committee

Senator Boxer, Chair, Environment and Public Works Committee

Senator Inhofe, Ranking Member, Environment and Public Works Committee

Senator Harkin, Chair, Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee

Senator Enzi, Ranking Member, Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee

Senator Rockefeller, Chair, Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee

Senator Hutchison, Ranking Member, Commerce Science, and Transportation Committee and Ranking Member, Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies Appropriations Subcommittee

Senator Kohl, Chair, Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies Appropriations Subcommittee

Senator Blunt, Ranking Member, Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies Appropriations Subcommittee

Senator Mikulski, Chair, Commerce, Justice, Science, and Related Agencies Appropriations Subcommittee

Senator Reed, Chair, Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies Appropriations Subcommittee

Senator Murkowski, Ranking Member, Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies Appropriations Subcommittee

Representative Lucas, Chair, Agriculture Committee

Representative Peterson, Ranking Member, Agriculture Committee

Representative Upton, Chair, Energy and Commerce Committee

Representative Waxman, Ranking Member, Energy and Commerce Committee

Representative Kingston, Chair, Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies Appropriations Subcommittee

Representative Farr, Ranking Member, Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies Appropriations Subcommittee

Representative Wolf, Chair, Commerce, Justice, Science and Related Agencies Appropriations Subcommittee

Representative Fattah, Ranking Member, Commerce, Justice, Science and Related Agencies Appropriations Subcommittee

Representative Simpson, Chair, Interior, Environment and Related Agencies Appropriations Subcommittee

Representative Moran, Ranking Member, Interior, Environment and Related Agencies Appropriations Subcommittee

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- <sup>i</sup> National Academies of Science. Board on Radiation Effects Research. "[Health Risks from Exposure to Low Levels of Ionizing Radiation: BEIR VII Phase 2.](#)" 2006 at 6, 8, 10 and 151.
- <sup>ii</sup> United Nations Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation. "The Chernobyl accident, UNSCEAR's assessment of the radiation effects." Available at <http://www.unscear.org/unscear/en/chernobyl.html> and on file. Accessed March 31, 2011.
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- <sup>vi</sup> World Health Organization. "FAQs: Japan nuclear concerns." March 29, 2011. Available at <http://www.who.int/hac/crises/jpn/faqs/en/index7.html> and on file. Accessed March 29, 2011; Food and Drug Administration. Import Alert 99-33. Available at [http://www.accessdata.fda.gov/cms\\_ia/importalert\\_621.html](http://www.accessdata.fda.gov/cms_ia/importalert_621.html) and on file. Accessed March 29, 2011; "Leaked radiation enters Japan's food chain." *New Zealand Herald*. March 30, 2011.
- <sup>vii</sup> Soble, Jonathan and Robin Harding. "Japan finds higher food radiation levels." *Financial Times*. March 18, 2011.
- <sup>viii</sup> Hotz, Robert Lee and Jennifer Levitz. "Radiation Detected in U.S." *Wall St. Journal*. March 29, 2011; "Traces of radiation from Japan reach Colorado." *KWGN*. March 23, 2011; Environmental Protection Agency. Japanese Nuclear Emergency: Radiation Monitoring: Daily Data Summary. Available at <http://www.epa.gov/radiation/data-updates.html> and on file. Accessed March 29, 2011.
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- <sup>10</sup> Burke, Garance and Noaki Schwartz. "Gaps in US radiation monitoring system revealed." *Associated Press*. March 26, 2011.
- <sup>xi</sup> Burke, Garance and Noaki Schwartz. "Gaps in US radiation monitoring system revealed." *Associated Press*. March 26, 2011.
- <sup>xii</sup> Burke, Garance and Noaki Schwartz. "Gaps in US radiation monitoring system revealed." *Associated Press*. March 26, 2011.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Food and Drug Administration. Public Health Focus Factsheet on Japan. Available at <http://www.fda.gov/NewsEvents/PublicHealthFocus/ucm248257.htm> and on file. Accessed March 30, 2011.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Global Agricultural Trade System. Imports, Consumption, Japan. (Food is defined by the following two-digit harmonized codes: HS-2: 02, 03, 04, 07, 08, 09, 10, 11, 12, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22).
- <sup>xv</sup> Global Agricultural Trade System. Imports, Consumption, Japan. (CRAB: HS-10, 0306242000, 1605104002, 1605106090, 1605104040, 0306142000, 1605102010, 1605104035, 0306244000, 1605102059, 1605102025, 1605104010, 0306144010, 0306144020, 0306144090); (ANCHOVY: HS-10, 0305632000, 0305634000, 0305636000, 1604164000, 1604166000); (BEVERAGES: HS-10, 2202909090, 2202100020, 2202100040, 2202100060).
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