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NATIC

GUIDELINE CALLED CONFUSING

Organic food label plan panned

By KAORUKO AITA
Staff writer

A planned guideline for labeling organic agricultural products has drawn strong protests from consumer groups and growers.

The guideline, which is expected to take effect Thursday, will classify the increasingly popular organic produce for the first time in an effort to end consumer confusion, according to the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries.

However, "the guideline will confuse and mislead consumers," said Setsuko Yasuda, a member of the Consumer's Union of Japan.

"The guideline is not for promoting proper organic agricultural produce in Japan," she said, claiming it is merely an effort to support nonorganic farmers who grow crops that appear similar.

The guideline includes three major classifications: organic produce, produce cultivated without use of farm chemicals and produce grown with reduced amounts of chemicals.

Ministry officials said the guideline is to clarify which produce is truly organic.

In principle, consumer groups and organic farmers accept the guideline's definition for produce. It says such crops should be cultivated in a field that has been free from chemicals for more than three years. Such a field is usually fertilized with compost.

However, they oppose the two other categories.

The guideline only defines produce of the second category as having been grown without farm chemicals.

Consumer groups and farmers say the guideline fails to take into account the



ORGANIC PRODUCE is labeled at Kinokuniya, a food store, in Tokyo's Minato Ward so consumers can identify which products are free of chemicals.

produce grown with reduced amounts of farm chemicals.

It says if farmers use less than half the normal amounts of chemicals for growing, their yields can be sold as "produce grown with reduced amounts of chemicals" regardless of where they are grown.

Hokkaido, because of its cool climate, needs fewer pesticides and herbicides than Kyushu, Kiuchi said.

"Even if farmers in Kyushu make efforts to reduce the amounts of farm chemicals, they cannot reduce the amounts as much as their counterparts in Hokkaido. The ministry's guideline does not make sense," he said.

"That's more confusing to consumers. They cannot tell which products are safer. There is also no way to confirm that no chemicals, or smaller amounts of them, have been used. In the U.S. and Europe, only genuine organic produce can be so labeled," Kiuchi said.

Yuji Fujisawa, 40, deputy chief of the ministry's Office of Sustainable Agriculture, said that under the guideline, the labels for produce grown with reduced amounts of chemicals will contain the place of production, the name, address and telephone number of the grower and the chemical reduction rate.

"If consumers come across

growing. We should not lower the agricultural self-sufficiency rate, which is already very low by international standards."

Japan imports 88 percent of its wheat, 96 percent of its soy beans, 40 percent of its fruits and 10 percent of its vegetables, according to the latest ministry survey.

Kiuchi and Yasuda said there is another problem with the classifications under the guideline.

According to a consumer survey on the image of farm produce, it was found that more feel produce grown without farm chemicals is safer than true organic crops.