Grain pain

Japan's ageing rice farmers face uncertain future

AFP | Kazo, Japan

important it served as a farming.' ⊾form of currency, Japleftageing farmers struggling for replace the costly equipment.

and as the older generation it but that's difficult when you out, some fear the industry will said. be unable to hold its own in a competitive global market.

him into the family business.

Ogura senior looks on proudplant this year's harvest, splashing through golden paddy fields that stretch as far as the eye can

ronment is all about "produc- than half a century, the crop's come more competitive. ing quality food at a reasonable exalted status in Japanese culprice" and harnessing econo- ture -- where it even serves a turning point", Ken Saito, who mies provided by large-scale religious purpose in Shinto ritproduction, Ogura said.

The future of his establish- until now. ment in Kazo, some 50 kilometres (30 miles) north of Tokyo, looks assured as Yuichi follows in his muddy footsteps but farms all over Japan are dying as farmers age -- the average age of a ricefarmer is now 67.

"I was the only one out of 220 students at my local school who

Fewer Japanese people are eating rice in general, with annual per capita consumption dropping to 54.6 kilograms (120 pounds) in 2015, less than half of its 1963 peak of 118.3 kilogrammes,

went into farming," Yuichi said. There are not many people

crop once deemed so in their twenties who go into

Even existing farms have anese rice has fallen out of fa- been forced to close when their vour with younger, westernised machinery breaks down beconsumers, in a shift that has cause farmers cannot afford to

"Machines get more expen-Rice consumption has nearly sive every year. To replace them halved over the past 50 years, requires a certain level of profof farmers and consumers dies are farming a small plot," Yuichi

The Oguras have managed to stay competitive so far by joining Kazuo Ogura, a 66-year-old forces with two other families farmer, is one of the lucky ones. to farm around 100 hectares His son Yuichi decided to follow of rice fields -- nearly 100 times the size of the average plot.

They sell their rice -- which ly as his 38-year-old son uses a belongs to the leading Koshispecially designed machine to hikari variety -- at 300 yen controlling supplies and prices alysts say he may have to con-(\$2.66) per kilogram.

'At a turning point'

Althoughriceconsumption in Jagovernment scrapped the policy ported rice -- in order to avoid Surviving in this tough envi- pan has been falling for more this year, urging farmers to be- getting whacked with US duties uals -- has ensured its survival fle this month, told reporters.

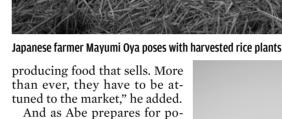
Machines get more expensive every year. To replace them requires a certain level of profit but that's difficult when you are farming a small plot

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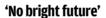
have maderice farming one of Japan's most protected industries, but Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's customary high tariffs on im-

Japanese agriculture is "at a exports. was farm minister until a reshuf-

"Farmers have to think about ported varieties of rice is unlike-



tential trade negotiations with Generous subsidies aimed at US President Donald Trump, ancede some ground on agriculture -- which could include Japan's on automobiles and other key



But even a surge in cheaper im-



Japanese farmer Toshiko Ogura poses next to rice seedling trays on her paddy in Kazo city, Saitama prefecture

ly to shift the palates of Japanese variety to foreign versions.

Fewer Japanese people are But it is difficult to achieve grammes, according to the farm their plots, he added. ministry.

bright future" for the industry. never increase again."

"Ricefarmers need to improve consumers, who generally prefer their competitiveness. Largetheir home-grown, short-grain scale production is also necessary," Ando said.

eating rice in general, with an- economies of scale inmountainnual per capita consumption ous areas -- where 40 percent of dropping to 54.6 kilograms (120 farming takes place -- because pounds) in 2015, less than half of geographical limitations preof its 1963 peak of 118.3 kilo- ventingfarmers from expanding

And with subsidies set to wind Mitsuyoshi Ando, an agricul- down, "the number of farmture expert at the University erswho can survive will be limof Tokyo, said there was "no ited as rice consumption will



A Japanese farmer plants rice seedlings on his paddy in Kazo city



Japanese farmer Toshiko Ogura loads harvested rice by a combine in Kazo city, Saitama prefecture.



Japanese farmer Yuichi Ogura harvests the rice with a combine on his paddy in Kazo city, Saitama prefecture