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Alberta Farmers offer Support to Japan

Ongoing reports of the devastation in Japan have impacted Alberta barley growers in a personal level.

"Our work on market development in Japan means that we've created strong ties with the Japanese," says Alberta Barley Commission CEO Mike Leslie. He has over five years experience living in Japan and has continued to work closely with the Japanese over the last 20-plus years.

"The Japanese are extremely loyal customers who pay a premium price for premium product," says Leslie. "They appreciate that Canadian farmers are willing to work with them to provide the quality product they desire."

Darcy Kirtzinger, the Commission's Policy and Research Coordinator, has been working closely with the Japanese on a project to develop premium barley for shochu, a distilled liquor popular in the country. He was a natural fit for the project, having lived in Japan for three years.

"The recent disasters in Japan have affected more than just the region nearest the epicentre, they've challenged the country's infrastructure and economy," he says. "The rebuilding process in the affected region will certainly take a long time. Nevertheless, I'm confident that the people of Japan have the resolve and determination to overcome this crisis."

In 2009/20, Japan imported more than 23,5000 tonnes of barley, making it the world's fourth-largest importer of Canadian barley. In 2010/11, the numbers are even more significant. To date, Japan has imported 400,000 tonnes of feed barley with another 75,000 tonnes expected before the year-end. Other barley imports include 23,000 tonnes for barley tea, 17,000 tonnes of malting barley (sent as barley, then malted in Japan), and 100,000 tonnes of barley malt (malted in Canada and shipped as malt).

"Building international trade relationships with countries like Japan has been an important part of the Commission's work," says CEO Mike Leslie.

The Commission's investment in shochu research included a trip to Japan in 2005 and was attended by then-director (and current delegate) Doug Miller of Region 2.

"Everywhere we went, we were treated very, very well," said Miller. "I thought it was a very neat, clean, well-organized country and was very impressed at how respectful the people were. They conduct business in a more formal way than we do here - it was a huge learning curve for me."

Despite Tokyo being 13 times bigger than Calgary, Miller says he never felt as crowded there."It was just a totally different experience.

To make a donation to the relief effort, the Barley Commission recommends The Humanitarian Coalition 1-800-464-9154 (www.together.ca), the Red Cross 1-800-418-1111 (www.redcross.ca), Doctors Without Borders 1-800-982-7903 (www.msf.ca) or checking the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade website at www.international.cgc.ca

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