



# Ceding Control: Politics, the Environment and Japan's Food System

a virtual lecture by **Nicole L. Freiner**

For decades, Japan's Seed Law had been the bulwark of a seed preservation, storage and maintenance system that kept control over staple crops in local hands. The Seed Law and the policies that support it, played a vital role in managing agricultural policy and Japan's food system. The Seed Law was revised in 2018 and the effects of these revisions are already reverberating across the agricultural policy arena, down to local level actors who have responded by creating prefectural level laws to resist the weakening of Japan's decades old agricultural policy framework, the bulwarks of which are a public institution: the Ministry for Agriculture Fisheries and Forestry (MAFF) and a semi-public institution: Japan's National Union of Agricultural Cooperatives also known as JA Zenchu. The two institutions together were responsible for maintaining a small-scale rice growing system in rural areas across the country.

Toyama prefecture is situated in the Toyama plain. Every spring when the snow melt begins to gush downward from the nearby Japanese alps, farmers begin readying their fields for rice planting. The clear, cold mountain water is thought to make rice grown here especially delicious and it is a matter of pride for the farmers in this region of Japan. Since first living here as an exchange student in the 1990s, I have returned here every year. This prefecture provides a window into local public policy efforts in one corner of Japan, that relates to extensive nation-wide changes vis-a vis policymaking within national level ministries such as the MAFF. My research focuses on how the revision of the Seed Law, the declining relevance of JA Zenchu and shifting demographics are remaking Japan's food system.

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Nicole L. Freiner is Associate Professor of Political Science and Director of the Global Studies Program at Bryant University where she teaches courses on Asian and Japanese Politics and Society, Comparative and Environmental Politics and Policy and Global Politics. She is the author of two books on Japanese Politics: *The Social and Gender Politics of Confucian Nationalism: Women and the Japanese State* (2012), and *Rice and Agricultural Policies in Japan: The Loss of a Traditional Lifestyle* (2019), both published by Palgrave MacMillan. Alongside the two books, she is the author of numerous articles including "Mobilizing Mothers: The Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Catastrophe and Environmental Activism in Japan" (AsiaNetworkExchange, Fall 2013) and others published in *The Japanese Studies Association Journal* and *The Diplomat* among others. Most recently, she was the recipient of a research grant from the Northeast Asia Council (NEAC) of the Association for Asian Studies to study Japan's Seed Law and Biotechnology Policy.