

How a ‘hog lift’ changed lives for U.S. farmers and ranchers

By Sara Wyant

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Kofu, Japan. April 9 – Fifty years ago, few people could envision that the U.S. and Japan would be major agricultural trading partners. But armed with a humanitarian vision and about three dozen hogs, a group of Iowa farmers established the groundwork that has led to over \$280 billion of food and agricultural product exports to the island nation since that time.

Today, Japan is our largest commercial market for feed grains and pork, for wheat, potatoes and rice, and is expected to eventually be our top market for beef exports. In 2009, Japan was the United States’ third largest export market with sales of more than \$11 billion.

But it might not have happened without a unique collaborative effort between farmers, agribusiness leaders and government officials. In 1959, Yamanashi prefecture in Japan suffered two terrible typhoons in less than a month, devastating much of Yamanashi agriculture. Master Sergeant Richard Thomas, a native Iowan, was working in public relations for the U.S. Air Force in Tokyo. When Thomas heard about the heavy damage to the livestock industry in Yamanashi prefecture, he thought about sending Iowa hogs as an opportunity to help revive the industry. He took his plan to Don Motz, the U.S. agricultural attaché at the Embassy in Tokyo, who was excited about the project and began working on its logistics. The idea of a “hog lift” received enthusiastic support from Walter Goeppinger, President of the National Corn Growers Association (NCGA), who was trying to get the U.S. Grains Council launched.



Roscoe Marsden, president of the Iowa Corn Growers Association, rounded up 36 lean meat breeding hogs donated by Iowa farmers.

He selected seven purebred sows and two boars from each of the four lean-meat breeds. The U.S. Air Force agreed to supply a plane to fly the hogs to Japan and USDA’s Commodity Credit Corporation donated 60,000 bushels of number one grade corn to

The U.S. Grains Council helped bring a load of Iowa hogs to Japan to help rebuild the country’s hog industry which had been hit by two typhoons.

be used for feed. The hogs were sent by truck to the state capital of Des Moines and many people came to see them herded on board a large U.S. Air Force plane.

Getting the hogs to Japan was no easy task, according the U.S. Grains Council:

“The animals were shipped on an Air Force cargo plane fitted with special crates. Because there were no jet cargo planes at the time, the hogs and their escorts were forced to take a time-consuming, treacherous, island-hopping flight across the Pacific. At each stop, Miller and Marsden would bathe the hogs so that the animals wouldn’t overheat. All but one of the hogs arrived safely in Yamanashi, where they lived out their lives in new facilities and populated the prefecture with their descendants. Officials estimated that by the time the last of the original Iowa hogs died nine years later, their progeny totaled some 500,000 feed grain-guzzling animals.”

Following the hog lift, Yamanashi prefecture and the rest of Japan began to develop a modern hog industry. Today, most of the pork that is raised in Japan has a genetic connection to Iowa as a result of the 1959 hog lift, and Japan is also the largest U.S. export market for feed grains.

The relationship goes both ways. In 1960, the first of its kind sister-state relationship was established between Iowa and the Yamanashi prefecture. Over the years, the relationship has involved many exchanges from farmers to Iowa governors. During the Great Flood of 1993, \$300,000 in flood aid relief was given to Iowa from Yamanashi.

"The long term impact of the hog lift has been really quite amazing in the context of international trade," emphasized Tom Dorr, U.S. Grains Council President and an Iowa farmer.

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack, along with his wife, Christie, helped commemorate the 50th anniversary of the 1959 “hog lift” and participated in a number of efforts to build future trade relationships with the Japanese. During the 4-day trip, Vilsack gave a keynote address on April 7 at a Global Food Security Symposium sponsored by the U.S. Grains Council, met with Japanese university students at the American Embassy in Tokyo in a Town Hall meeting and gave a speech at the Foreign Correspondents Club in Tokyo.

“The sister-state friendship that was formed 50 years ago between Iowa and Yamanashi reminds us of the benefits of cooperation and trade,” said Vilsack. “Being here today to celebrate that special relationship inspires us to continue working together for our mutual prosperity and economic health. I have emphasized this important point throughout my visit to Japan—we want our traditionally robust trade relationship to continue to grow and we will continue to work with our Japanese friends to make that happen.”

Vilsack’s participation in the day-long celebration began with a two-hour charter train ride from Shinjuku train station to Kofu with nearly 100 passengers on board, including an Iowa-Yamanashi sister-state delegation, the U.S. Ambassador to Japan John Roos, U.S. trade groups and the media. A “friendship bento” box lunch was served featuring U.S. pork and other food ingredients from both countries to signify the U.S.-Japan agricultural relationship.

Vilsack arrived in Tokyo, Japan, on April 6 to promote stronger ties between the United States and Japan in the area of agriculture, as part of President Obama’s efforts to expand U.S. exports.

While in Japan, Vilsack met with the Japanese Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries Hirotaka Akamatsu, as well as U.S. exporters and Japanese importers.(See related stories in this week's edition of Agri-Pulse and listen to our daily audio updates from Japan at www.Agri-Pulse.com).

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