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Preventing Japan's Demographic-Driven Agricultural Collapse

While Japan maintains one of the world's largest industrial economies, its agricultural sector is trapped in a cycle of demographic decline and policy stagnation. Japan's agricultural sector is aging, and although food insecurity is not currently a major problem, a continuation of current trends will lead to a sharp decrease in managed agricultural entities and an increased reliance on imports, already the highest in the developed world, straining Japan's rapidly shrinking economy and putting increased pressure on the global food supply. While Japan does not currently face widespread food insecurity, the long-term sustainability of Japanese agriculture is increasingly uncertain. In the year 2000, the average age of a Japanese farmer was approximately 62.2 years; by 2023, the average age has risen to 68.7 years ("Japan's Farming Population Rapidly Aging and Decreasing"), marking over two decades of meteoric rise. If nothing is done, the government predicts that 30% of the country's farmland could be abandoned within the next decade ("Japan's Farmland Shrinks by More than 30% Over Past 60 Years"). To prevent this collapse, I propose a singular integrated solution: a comprehensive National Farmland Succession Transition Framework. This bill would establish a pipeline that matches retiring farmers/landowners with trained young individuals to act as operators. Supported by specialized school based training, offered in a similar manner to Italian specialized secondary schools, the bill would pair this secondary school training with targeted grants to ensure long term farm operational solvency and modernization.

Slightly smaller than the state of California, to the east of the Korean Peninsula lies Japan. Bordered by the Pacific Ocean to the east and the Sea of Japan to the west, the nation comprises four main islands, Kyushu, Shikoku, Hokkaido, and Honshu, along with thousands of smaller surrounding islands. Boasting a population of 125 million people, Japan is one of the most densely populated countries in the world, with about 330 people per square kilometer, spread out over the nation's roughly 377,975 square kilometers of land. Japan's GDP per capita stood at $34,713 in 2025 (Japan: Agricultural Policy Monitoring and Evaluation 2025), placing it at 39th in the world, while its economy stood at number five, totaling $4.28 trillion, a continued fall from its record high of $6.27 trillion in 2012 (Japan: Agricultural Policy Monitoring and Evaluation 2025). Its economic fall mirrors its agricultural troubles; a decreasing and aging population is leaving the country unable to replace its workers, with a birth rate of only 1.2 children per woman (Japan: Agricultural Policy Monitoring and Evaluation 2025). The country is 22% rural to 78% urban (Japan: Agricultural Policy Monitoring and Evaluation 2025), with rural communities often being closer knit and slower paced than urban areas, which offer more social mobility and economic opportunities.

Japanese family structure has shifted to the nuclear family, away from the patriarchal, multigenerational system, which allowed the oldest son to take over the household and care for his parents in their old age. Following World War II, legal reforms dismantled the system and accelerated the transition towards nuclear households, severing the traditional generation transfer of rural farm estates. Even with the declining rate of families that live with their grandparents, the ancient Confucian value of filial piety, the virtue of exhibiting respect for one's elders, remains strong in Japanese society. In 2025, births are expected to fall below 670,000 ("Japan Sees Largest Decline in Farmers in 5 Years"), the lowest

number since record keeping began in 1899. With deaths expected to be over 1.6 million ("Japan Sees Largest Decline in Farmers in 5 Years"), the yearly population decline is expected at over 900,000 ("Japan Sees Largest Decline in Farmers in 5 Years"). The economy continues to suffer the same fate, dropping from $5.04 trillion in 2021 to $4.28 trillion in 2025 (Japan: Agricultural Policy Monitoring and Evaluation 2025).

The economic contraction and aging labor force's effect on the economy have largely crippled the agricultural sector. In 2000, the sector comprised over 2.4 million workers; by 2024, the number had fallen to 1.1 million core agricultural workers ("Japan Sees Largest Decline in Farmers in 5 Years"). Of these workers, over 71% are over 65 years old (Japan: Agricultural Policy Monitoring and Evaluation 2025), with an average age of nearly 69 ("Japan's Farming Population Rapidly Aging and Decreasing"). This number represents a jump of 18 years from 1980, when the number was 51 years old ("Japan's Farming Population Rapidly Aging and Decreasing"). In order to fully understand why the number continues to rise, it is important to consider the structural constraints that befall Japan. The island has roughly 4.3 million hectares of farmland (Japan: Agricultural Policy Monitoring and Evaluation 2025), with only 11–12% of the total land area being arable (Asai and Antón). Many Japanese farms are small; the low production yields produce little profit, and a lack of governmental help leaves farming an unattractive career to young people seeking a stable income (Asai and Antón). The average U.S. farm is 466 acres, while the average Japanese farm is 7.66 acres (Japan: Agricultural Policy Monitoring and Evaluation 2023). Mechanization is much more attainable where it can be spread over more acres (Asai and Antón). This has created a cycle where farmers cannot afford to purchase expensive machinery and therefore have to do the labor themselves, raising costs and leaving little room to hire younger employees, who may one day take over the farm operation. The advanced age of the farmers lowers productivity and further contributes to economic degradation of the operation as a whole.

Fragmented farms are a direct result of policies implemented by the Japanese government in the 1970s. Following a rice surplus, the government paid farmers to reduce production (Japan: Agricultural Policy Monitoring and Evaluation 2022) and set production quotas to keep prices high (Japan: Agricultural Policy Monitoring and Evaluation 2022). This encouraged small protected farms, made farmers dependent on subsidies, and reduced innovation (Japan: Agricultural Policy Monitoring and Evaluation 2022). As a result of these production controls, market incentives were destroyed and necessary farm consolidation and modernization were halted (Japan: Agricultural Policy Monitoring and Evaluation 2022). As part of this protectionist policy, high tariffs were placed on imports (Japan: Agricultural Policy Monitoring and Evaluation 2023). While this protected domestic farmers temporarily, it reduced pressure to modernize and kept domestic prices artificially high. Rice farmers were an important voting bloc for the ruling party at the time, and on top of production controls, income subsidies were passed to protect farmers (Japan: Agricultural Policy Monitoring and Evaluation 2022) from price fluctuations. The high level of protectionism made rice farming a safe industry for established farmers; this, in turn, led to a decrease in crop diversification. While Japanese agricultural land could support other important crops like soybeans, wheat, and animal feed, farms continue to produce rice because production controls ensure stability. Japan imports approximately 60% of the food it consumes (Japan: Agricultural Policy Monitoring and Evaluation 2025); this is in sharp contrast to the 15–20% that the U.S. imports. Over time, governmental policy has led Japanese farms to be inefficient, small, outdated, and monocultural.

These protectionist policies protect not only domestic rice but also the politically powerful landowners who have come to dominate the sector. The longstanding policy relationships between rice farmers and ruling parties (Asai and Antón) have shifted policy to favor preservation of existing structures rather than reform that would modernize the sector. The existing market framework protects current farms while limiting opportunities for new entrants to the sector. From a political perspective, this represents regulatory capture. The concentrated interests of the powerful rice farmers exert a disproportionate amount of influence over agricultural policy. Lobbying organizations like the Japanese Agricultural Cooperatives (Asai and Antón) have maintained close ties with the Liberal Democratic Party (Asai and Antón), resulting in policies favorable to current farmers but alienating prospective entrants to the industry.

If current trends continue, a significant portion of current farmland could be abandoned in the next decade ("Japan's Farmland Shrinks by More than 30% Over Past 60 Years"), with the average age of a farmer in the mid-70s, up from around 69 years today. In rural regions already experiencing population losses (Japan: Agricultural Policy Monitoring and Evaluation 2025), farms will die with their farmers, and overall food production will plummet. Imports will continue to increase, and the Japanese economy will become further vulnerable to global market volatility (Japan: Agricultural Policy Monitoring and Evaluation 2025). Monocultural rice production will continue to plague the economy (Japan: Agricultural Policy Monitoring and Evaluation 2022), and farmland will go unused. Rural communities will weaken as young professionals move to urban areas in search of high-paying careers, leading to the degradation of rural economies and family ties. Ultimately, food production is expected to degrade so much that it will fail to meet the needs of the population, and the economic stability and food security of the Japanese people will be at risk.

The first phase of the framework embedded in the bill focuses on crafting a qualified and experienced student talent pool by integrating modern technology and innovation focused agricultural education pathways into secondary schools, and local vocational programs immediately following graduation (OECD, Agricultural Policy Monitoring and Evaluation 2024). Achieved in partnership with local agricultural cooperatives and agribusinesses, these programs would remove stigmas associated with entering the agricultural field rather than urban white collar jobs that currently attract the largest numbers of Japanese students (Asai and Antón). With curriculums focused on teaching sustainable and economically efficient practices, these programs would directly channel trained and well-prepared graduates to a national succession registry. This first of its kind registry would transform Japan's illiquid agriculture job market (MAFF, Annual Report on Food, Agriculture and Rural Areas in Japan). Candidates would digitally log their specific skillsets and certifications. Meanwhile, retiring farmers would submit detailed reports regarding the specific agricultural practices the farm utilizes, allowing the registry to filter candidates and match qualified graduates to agribusiness practices where their skills would be most effective. It is important to note that this is only possible if class selections and specialization tracks are comprehensive, which would require a heavier investment from the government in agricultural education (Japan: Agricultural Policy Monitoring and Evaluation 2025).

The core of the program's framework would expand Japan's existing Farmland Intermediate Management Institutions, also known as farmland banks, into a consolidated national succession system (Japan: Agricultural Policy Monitoring and Evaluation 2023). Through matching qualified candidates to agribusiness entities, as discussed in stage 1, the program is able to assist in long term land transfer

programs. By facilitating land leases and profit sharing models, retiring farmers would receive a steady, long term income guarantee while ensuring the land does not go abandoned (MAFF, Annual Report on Food, Agriculture and Rural Areas in Japan). Japan has a deeply rooted, longstanding culture of prioritizing collective societal benefits over individual gain. Because of this, many retiring farmers and landowners would likely accept discounted land transfer agreements, knowing their operation's legacy is preserved and they're backed by steady retirement income. Equally crucial to its success, the system provides consolidation options to combine fragmented farms into larger contiguous farms capable of achieving higher economic vitality (Asai and Antón). By spreading out costs over more acres, the profitability of these farms would rise drastically. Not only would this protect and increase the retirement incomes for farmers provided by this program, it would also increase the average annual earnings of the new landowners. This would in turn make agricultural careers more enticing to secondary school students and reduce stigmas around them. It is crucial to understand that many Japanese students refuse agricultural careers simply due to familial pressure stemming from the belief that they offer low wages, relative to urban careers (Asai and Antón). In order for this program to be successful, farm consolidation must take place; however, this would increase logistical difficulties because each farm is operated by an individual at different points in their life (Japan: Agricultural Policy Monitoring and Evaluation 2025) . In the short term, this would either cause wage stagnation or require the government to subsidize incomes temporarily. While this increases startup costs, it is entirely feasible for a wealthy nation like Japan. While farmers would receive retirement income from their land, the graduates placed at each operation would still be expected to financially compensate farmers for it, and each transition would be a completely voluntary effort from both parties.

To ensure new operators and owners can manage the newly acquired land, the final phase would provide precise financial tools administered through the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF), a similar entity to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (Japan: Agricultural Policy Monitoring and Evaluation 2025). Transitioning from historical single crop rice price supports, funding would be allocated towards initial land purchase tax credits, low interest equipment loans, and crop innovation and diversification grants (OECD, Agricultural Policy Monitoring and Evaluation 2024). By removing economic burdens in the early years of the operation, young farmers are able to invest in smart technology, efficient irrigation, and a diverse crop array such as soybeans, winter wheat and high value horticulture crops, without carrying long term debt that would prohibit future innovation (Asai and Antón). Improving crop diversity is a key part of the final stage. In doing so, Japan would be able to reduce its import reliance and therefore reduce strain on global food supply networks (Japan: Agricultural Policy Monitoring and Evaluation 2025).

By incorporating educational pathways, a long term guided land transfer framework, and comprehensive financial support into a single pipeline, Japan can overcome its demographic challenges, increase domestic crop yields and stabilize its long term agricultural job sector (Japan: Agricultural Policy Monitoring and Evaluation 2025).

Implementing the National Farmland Succession Transition framework requires navigation of a complex landscape of political, economic, and cultural stakeholders. Powerful lobbying organizations like the Japan Agricultural Cooperatives, have long protected small scale rice production (Asai and Anton). In order to accommodate the interests and gain the support of established powers, the government administered framework integrates and invites lobbying groups and co-op organizations into advisory and

supervisory roles. These co-ops would leverage their local networks for initial candidate outreach, utilizing their established knowledge of the country's agricultural landscape to assist in modernization while municipal governments would retain administrative responsibility over the digital registry and farmland banks (Japan: Agricultural Policy Monitoring and Evaluation 2023). Historically, Japan Agricultural Cooperatives has maintained close ties with the ruling Liberal Democratic party to maintain high tariffs on rice, and protect small scale farms. These policies have in turn led to market stagnation. As the farming population rapidly shrinks, JA is facing a crisis of its own, reduced transaction volumes and declining membership. To gain the support of JA and similar powerful lobbying groups, the National Farmland Succession Transition Framework treats agricultural modernization as a strategic partnership, rather than an overhaul. By transitioning state policy away from price supporting subsidies into modernization grants, the bill would align lobbying groups' commercial incentives with national farm succession goals. By guaranteeing lobbying groups central roles in supplying and marketing a modernized agricultural sector, the framework would convert a historically protectionist lobbying structure into an active supporter of the demographic and structural reform the bill champions.

Japanese agriculture stands at a critical inflection point. Years of protectionist policies, small inefficient farms, and aging farmers have left the industry increasingly at risk. Without immediate action, domestic food production will decline sharply, import reliance, already at a staggering 60%, will rise (Japan: Agricultural Policy Monitoring and Evaluation 2025), and rural communities will continue to deteriorate. The nation's economy will fragment, and domestic food sufficiency will plummet. This decline is hardly inevitable, and through a unified, multi-stage National Farmland Succession Framework, Japan can modernize its operations, cultivate a new generation of agricultural leaders, and protect its long term food security. These solutions focus on a sustainable, innovation-driven industry capable of meeting the changing needs of the Japanese people while strengthening the economy and preserving the very fabric that has bound rural communities for generations. Japan's demographic challenges present an opportunity to introduce new farmers to the industry who would have never had the opportunity before, turning challenges into opportunities.

Through the solutions outlined above, Japan can ensure its agricultural industry endures, rural villages thrive, and domestic food production remains strong. While these solutions will protect the agricultural industry and ensure farmland does not go dormant, long-term population collapse is still very likely. The population is expected to drop to 63 million by 2100 (Japan: Agricultural Policy Monitoring and Evaluation 2025), down from 123 million today, with 40% of individuals over the age of 65 (Japan: Agricultural Policy Monitoring and Evaluation 2025). By increasing the number of young farmers and making farms larger and more efficient (Japan: Agricultural Policy Monitoring and Evaluation 2025), production levels are likely to increase. These new farms, employing modern agricultural techniques, more crop diversity, and highly productive workers, will produce larger volumes of food, which will be stretched over a smaller population. This will, in turn, reduce the need for imports, reduce strain on the global food supply, and strengthen the Japanese economy. Japan has a unique opportunity to take advantage of its population collapse and, in doing so, will serve as a blueprint for agricultural success to other Western nations also facing population declines.

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