

Work of the Agricultural High School and Collaboration with the Community

Projects and Joint-Regional Activities of Soma Agricultural High School The Agriculture Club of Soma Agricultural High School

Hello everyone. We are the Agriculture Club of Soma Agricultural High School. First, we would like to let the members giving today's presentation introduce themselves.

1. Introduction

Our school is Soma Agricultural High School (or "Sonoh" for short), located in Minamisoma city in the coastal Soso District of Fukushima prefecture in Japan. Since we are approximately 25 km from TEPCO's Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Station, we were forced at one point to evacuate when the area was designated an emergency evacuation preparation zone after the disaster.

Most references to the Soso District where we live mention the famed Soma Nomaioi festival. With over 1,000 years of history, the traditional festival has been designated an important intangible folk-cultural property in Japan. The festival involves processions, horseracing, and simulated battles over ceremonial flags by mounted samurai in full attire. After the earthquake, the continuation of the festival was in doubt, though it has now returned to being a full three-day event on the same scale as before the disaster.

Also after the earthquake, our school set up a satellite branch in neighboring Soma city while we waited for the evacuation order to be lifted. Even after the evacuation order was lifted, myriad problems remained. However, we were able to return to our original building and restart classes. 2013 marked the 110-year anniversary of our historic and tradition-filled agricultural high school.

The curriculum at our school, which focuses on the vocational study of agriculture, has six courses of study—two each in the three departments of Production & Environment, Environment & Green Space, and Food Science.

A characteristic feature of the school is that we carry on a number of traditional performing arts. These arts are seldom part of school activities elsewhere in Japan and include five student clubs for Kagura (ceremonial music and dance), Nagareyama Dancing, Jingai (conch shell music), Taue (rice planting) Dancing, and Hozai Dancing. These clubs perform every year for local audiences. Our school's festival this year was held on October 29 and was a chance for clubs to show their skills.

Students in the Agriculture Club compete with the 80,000 other students across Japan studying at agricultural schools to see whose scholastic efforts have yielded better results, while we also contribute to the local community through volunteer research activities. The Soma Agricultural High School Agriculture Club aims to improve the scientific, social, and leadership skills of its members and follows a motto of "Bringing energy to the local community!" After the Great East Japan Earthquake, we have been motivated to engage in locally focused studying, surveying, and research, and have seen steady results.

Since the disaster, our club has challenged itself to share our energy with the community through activities including the world's largest "seed art" display, the Rapeseed Blossom Project, and the Rosa Rugosa (Japanese rose) Project. It has been five and a half years since the calamity. At the time, we were in grades four to six in elementary school. The region received support from many parts of the world and has been able to recover to the present degree. However, many local residents are still forced to live as evacuees and their traditional farms still face a host of problems.

Under these circumstances, we have taken heart from our many generations of older classmates and considered ways for the club to contribute to the local community. This has included working with local residents and with volunteers visiting the region. This has given us first-hand experience of the need to avoid looking backwards. And it has also shown us that young people like us embody the hopes of the region and we need to steadily move forward one step at a time.

2. Regional problems from our perspective

The following shows how we summarize the regional problems that we have seen through living and being active in this area.

- (1) Depopulation and, in particular, a shrinking younger demographic
- (2) Weaker community ties within the region
- (3) Declines in the agricultural activity that served as the mainstay industry for the region

3. Our efforts toward solving these problems

(1) Attempting to cultivate loyalty and love for the local area while fostering career awareness

Our school offers opportunities for each grade to have direct contact with local businesses.

First year students visit local companies and carry out occupational interviews.

Second year students observe other advanced schools and experience three-day internships in order to develop a perspective on the world of work. They have many opportunities to work alongside alumni, which is significantly helpful in selecting a career path.

Third year students attend group presentations by business representatives visiting campus to explain their industries. Students also make their own visits to companies and think carefully about choosing a career path.

In recent years, 100% of graduates received job offers and approximately 90% chose to work locally. Our students have been valuable human resources for the local region.

(2) Promoting agriculture and our school's curriculum to elementary and middle school students

We have tried to increase understanding of agriculture and agricultural high schools through various activities including visiting elementary schools and teaching bread baking classes, visiting local elementary and middle schools and teaching lessons, and having students visit our high school in order to experience our curriculum.

On top of this, we promote the merits of our school and the agriculture industry by offering a trial school day in the summer. Middle school students are invited to come to campus and experience stimulating programs planned by each academic department.

(3) Sharing our energy with local residents and reaffirming the merits of agriculture

① Creating the world's largest seed art

On March 23, 2014, we completed the world's largest seed art display thanks to the cooperation and support of many people in the area. The project was aimed at sharing information and helping revitalize the region.

The artwork allowed students to work together with people in the region and to present agriculture and food problems from a young person's perspective.

In September of the same year, proof of certification came from the Guinness headquarters in the United Kingdom. The extensive media coverage of the art allowed us to communicate to a wide audience our feelings for Minamisoma and agriculture. Also, in addition to the great sense of achievement, the project deepened bonds among us.

② Striving to be an agricultural high school open to the community

a) The Sonoh Shop and selling agricultural products

As we celebrate our 113th year, our school has been selling to the community the products we grow and process through our daily scholastic activities. In the spring, we sell products including vegetable seedlings and carnations at an event that is very popular among local residents. Additionally, our Sonoh Shop is open seven times a year and sells bread made by the students in the Food Science Department, plus a variety of processed food and farm products. Quite a few members of the community visit the shop and enjoy the experience.

We also sell products off campus. This includes offering our school's processed and farm products at the Japan Agriculture (JA) Festival, which brings us in closer contact with local farmers.

b) School classes open to Minamisoma city residents

Each academic department offers open community classes that showcase our school's distinctive features. Using our school facilities, students and teachers work together as instructors providing energetic lectures. Our scholastic activities allow us to engage in dialogue with local residents and contribute to revitalizing the region.

c) Community building that strives to restore native hometowns

Here we would like to introduce some of our efforts toward recovery and reconstruction after the earthquake.

We took part in the Hometown Reconstruction Committee, which sought to re-imagine the local area after the earthquake. Our participation allowed us to exchange opinions with many people. We also participated in regional recovery and reconstruction workshops. These reflected on how the region should move forward from this point onward.

This year marks the fourth occasion of the Minamisoma City Requiem and Citizens' Planting Festival held in the area afflicted by the tsunami. Our club's members have led the planting each year, which allows us to support the

many participants involved. Many other students from our school also come to help as volunteers.

In order to assist the recovery of local rice planting, we sowed an original Fukushima variety of rice called Ten-no Tsubu (grains of heaven) while receiving help from pro wrestler Antonio Inoki and others from his Inoki Genome Federation. Rice cultivated in the fertile climate of Minamisoma has been named Genki Mai (healthy rice) and is sold by the local chamber of Japan Agriculture, with whom we cooperated on PR activities. We have been able to see how these activities help bring energy to local agriculture and contribute to restarting our hometown farms.

Now that five years have passed since the disaster, we have restarted planting in our school's own rice paddy. 200 people, including the student cohort majoring in farm products, gathered to celebrate our first harvest this fall. From planting seedlings to harvesting our Ten-no Tsubu original Fukushima variety of rice, participants young and old relished the chance to get muddy and share the joy of starting to farm rice again.

This has been one of the ways that our agricultural high school has tried to be an indispensable presence for the region and steadily work toward recovery and forward progress.

③ Agriculture Club activities developed side by side with the community (joint activities)

a) Rapeseed Blossom Project striving to restore agriculture and farmland

This year was the fifth incarnation of the Rapeseed Blossom Project. This project, which started out because rapeseed is resistant to salt damage and does not absorb radioactive substances, has now grown into a large-scale project that is mobilizing the region and branching out into processing and marketing.

As cultivated acreage and the number of farmers have increased, the project launched a product called Yuna (Canola) Mayonnaise. Efforts are currently underway to produce a dressing. Also, global cosmetic manufacturer LUSH garnered enthusiastic attention by launching a soap product called Tsunagaru Omoi (connecting hearts) using our rapeseed oil.

b) Japanese rose conservation and the Minamisoma Happy Planting/Happy Recovery Organization

Since the earthquake, we have been active in Japanese rose research, conservation, and education activities, which led to receiving the Noguchi Hideyo Award for scientific research writing by Fukushima prefecture middle and high school students.

These activities gave us the chance to combine our efforts with a variety of like-minded groups, with whom we established the Minamisoma Happy Planting/Happy Recovery Organization for holding planting events.

The project allowed the Agriculture Club students to work together and use to the maximum effect the specialized knowledge we learn in each of our school's academic departments. The project also grew to involve industry-academia-government collaboration within the region and become a large-scale revitalization effort.

The planting events were held in May of last year and March of this year. They were organized under the phrase: "Towns where hope blooms and dreams mature! Minamisoma regrown." A total of 400 people gathered to attend and 1,000 saplings of 18 varieties, mostly Japanese rose, were planted to make a small park.

At present, all Fukushima prefecture farm products must undergo radiation testing before distribution and sale. We appealed to the prefecture to have Japanese rose products recognized and recently received radiation testing. The results were negative and the "other fruit" designation that was given moves us one step closer to having Japanese rose be an official farm product. We are also working on a campaign for product development and packaging design so that this Japanese rose can become established as a regional brand.

c) Extending our efforts from regional collaboration to extra-regional communication

Last year, we went together with local groups to visit cities that have cooperation agreements on disaster management with Minamisoma. These cities included Suginami ward in Tokyo, Toride city in Ibaraki prefecture, and Nayoro city in Hokkaido. The visits allowed us to publicize Minamisoma and interact with the partner cities. Additionally, our activities to date have been widely covered on TV and in newspapers. This has helped spread information on our efforts and generate a great deal of recognition inside and outside our local area.

This year is the third year of a project that sends flowers from Fukushima to the Shibuya district in Tokyo. As part of the Shibuya Koen-Dori Flower Festival 2016, 1,000 young begonias grown at our school were placed in planters throughout Shibuya, which sees approximately 1.5 million visitors a day. In addition to the begonia planters at the event, young flowers raised in Minamisoma were handed out and donations were collected to support earthquake victims in Kumamoto. All of this helped convey the energy of Fukushima to those outside the prefecture. Just the other day, our school sent out a shipment of violas and cyclamens headed for Shibuya.

We also continually take part in a variety of other activities meant to share our energy throughout Japan. Our previous activities led to an invitation to participate in the Japan Society of Environmental Education's 27th Symposium held in August of this year at Gakushin University. At the symposium, we made a poster presentation,

sold products at the environmental education fair, and presented a report on our research projects. This was a significant opportunity for us to receive a wide variety input on our activities, which received praise from those in attendance.

4. Conclusion

As a 113-year old agricultural high school with a proud history and tradition, we have grown side by side with our local area. All of our club members work together not to strive for what an agricultural high school can do, but for what we can do precisely because we are an agricultural high school.

We will continue our activities with the resilience that helped us overcome the earthquake, with the gratitude that fills us for the immense support we received, and with the sense of mission and purpose we have to provide for this region.

In order to restore the agricultural activity that is the backbone of our area, we would like to reimagine our native farms and retrieve the amazing agriculture and hometowns we once had.

We will continue to follow our motto of "Bringing energy to the local community!" and will convey the Sonoh Spirit in our activities for preserving our home region.

We would like to thank you for coming to Japan and Fukushima and appreciate your interest in our projects. We also hope that this workshop will be an unqualified success. This is the end of our presentation. Thank you for your time today.