

Legislators and academics yesterday warned that signing an economic cooperation framework agreement (ECFA) with China could potentially undermine Taiwan's food security because the nation's food self-sufficiency rate is alarmingly low, about 30 percent, and Chinese suppliers of agricultural products would be able to influence Taiwan's food markets.

They said unless efforts are made to improve the nation's food self-sufficiency, the trade pact the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) government is seeking to sign with Beijing next month would mean China would gain significant control over wheat and corn imports and prices of wheat-derived foodstuffs, animal feed and meat products, putting Taiwan's food security at risk.

According to Council of Agriculture (COA) statistics, the nation's food self-sufficiency rate for 2007, in terms of calorie intake, was only 30.6 percent. This increased to 32.7 percent in 2008, but, despite representing a five-year high, that was still 4 percent lower than the 36.8 percent figure of 10 years ago. Of this, rice self-sufficiency was 95.9 percent, but Taiwan produced no wheat and only 24.4 percent of the cereals consumed.

Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) Legislator Wong Chin-chu (王健雄) said yesterday that wheat-derived foods were becoming more popular in Taiwan "and the COA statistics show we are now importing more than 1.13 million metric tonnes of wheat annually."

Because of fluctuations in global wheat prices in 2008, prices for imported wheat went up from NT\$7 to NT\$16.2 per kilogram.

Wong said that if Taiwan were to sign an ECFA, China would control wheat and corn foodstuffs, despite the fact that Chinese agricultural products would not be imported immediately.

"In particular, Chinese state-run agricultural product manufacturers are already able to affect the prices of wheat and corn, and when these products start to be imported into Taiwan, they would have a virtual monopoly," she said.

Tsai Pei-hui (蔡培慧), an assistant professor at the Shih Hsin University Graduate School for Social Transformation Studies, said Chinese food manufacturers have significant influence on the market and can control wheat and corn prices. This also has implications for Taiwan's meat industry, as corn is a major source of animal feed, she said, adding that any fluctuations in corn prices would have a serious impact, especially as Taiwan only produces 10 percent of the corn it uses.

Tsai said Taiwan should establish a food security policy, make the public aware of the possible food crisis and encourage them to use Taiwanese food products.

ECFA a threat to food security: experts

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In a recent article in a COA publication, Chen Yi-wen (陳宜文), an associate professor at Ling Tung University's Graduate Institution of Financial and Economic Law, said Japan has set a goal of 50 percent food self-sufficiency by 2020.

Chen said Japan has banned the non-agricultural use of quality agricultural land, has increased subsidies for growing wheat and soybeans, while requesting that local governments guarantee areas for farming.

Chen said Taiwan should set a food security policy to counter the increasing risk of international food price fluctuations and avert a food crisis to deal with the fact that the nation's food self-sufficiency is even lower than that of Japan.

Chen said not only should local governments ensure the integrity of agricultural land, they should also create laws for managing agricultural land use in accordance with the regulations in the draft national land plan act. Chen said he also believes that they should offer subsidies to promote agricultural production, gradually remove subsidies for fallow land and that Taiwan could learn from Japan in this respect.

Wong said in 1955, Taiwan grew wheat on 20,000 hectares in Taipei, Tainan and Taitung, but because of increased imports of US wheat, it is now only grown locally on 6 hectares in Daya Township, Taitung County.

Wong said growing wheat in the autumn and winter could help solve the problem of low vegetable prices because of oversupply during the winter, increase farmers' incomes and help solve the unemployment problem.

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