To the Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries

Please open gates in the Isahaya Land Reclamation Project dike for surveys without further delay!

“Open-gate” surveys will be the first step toward realizing healthy fisheries in the Ariake Sea and Isahaya Bay and healthy farming on the reclaimed land!

Let’s raise our voices together to call on the Agriculture Minister for a historic and wise decision!

“Revive the Ariake Sea” Court Case Association of Plaintiffs, Lawyers and Supporters
Isahaya Bay Emergency Rescue Task Force - Head Office and Tokyo Office
Ariake Sea Network of Fishermen and Citizens

On June 27, the Saga District Court ruled in favor of fishermen who claim the Isahaya Land Reclamation Project has damaged fisheries in Isahaya Bay and vicinity, and ordered the defendant, the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF), to carry out surveys with drainage gates in the Isahaya Bay dike opened.

In relation to its examination of the environmental impacts of this massive public works project, the court pointed out in its ruling that the area should first be restored to a state close to its original environment before the surveys are carried out, and the project should then be reviewed based on these survey results. This is a landmark decision in the history of environmental issues in Japan.

[Excerpts from the Saga District Court ruling]

The defendant, which has been conducting public works projects as massive as this one, in consideration of the possibility that the project could inflict damage upon fisheries at the Ariake Sea, shall be generally deemed to have an obligation to Ariake Sea fishermen and others to take the initiative to investigate the propriety of the project and take appropriate measures based on the investigation's results, which investigation indispensably requires mid- and long-term open-gate surveys.

It is prohibitively difficult for private individuals like the plaintiffs in this case to identify causes of environmental changes in a vast marine area such as the Ariake Sea. Thus, even though the defendant does not generally bear the burden of proof in establishing causality between the project and environmental changes in the Ariake Sea, the defendant cannot be excused for failing to investigate it on such grounds. This court feels compelled to request that this decision will afford the government an opportunity to speedily implement the mid- and long-term surveys, and based on the survey results, to take appropriate measures.

The MAFF, promulgator of the project, is considering appealing this ruling. We are requesting the MAFF to abandon the idea of appealing and start “open-gate” surveys at the earliest possible date, in order to realize healthy farming on the reclaimed land and healthy fisheries in the Ariake Sea. We hope a large number of people will support our request. Please join us to call on the Agriculture Minister to make a historic and wise decision.

[Send your request letter to] Isahaya Bay Emergency Rescue Task Force - Tokyo Office  FAX 03-3986-6490
SY Studio, 3-11-4-205 Zoshigaya Toshima-ku, Tokyo 171-0032
http://www.isahaya-higata.net/ e-mail : info@isahaya-higata.net

==== Fill in the form below and send it by FAX or post. Signatures are also being collected at: http://www.isahaya-higata.net/====

To Masatoshi Wakabayashi, Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries, Japan

I request you to
1. Abandon the idea of appealing the June 27, 2008 ruling by the Saga District Court, which ordered the government to carry out “open-gate” surveys regarding the Isahaya Land Reclamation Project, and
2. Start right away to compile a detailed study on implementing the “open-gate” surveys ordered by the Saga District Court in the above-mentioned ruling.

Name: Occupation, organization, etc.:
Address:
Telephone: e-mail:
Opinions, Comments:

*These request letters will be collected by the Tokyo Office of the Isahaya Bay Emergency Rescue Task Force and presented to the Agriculture Minister. The cutoff date will be posted on our website. Information provided in this form will be handled appropriately as personal information.*
Background information: Issues with the Isahaya Bay Land Reclamation Project

Purpose and history of the Isahaya Reclamation Project

Outline: 3,550 hectares of tidal flats and shallow sea areas in Isahaya Bay were closed off by a dike to develop farmland and related infrastructure and a water level-regulating reservoir.

Purpose: “developing good quality, flat farmland equipped with drainage facilities, etc.,” and “enhancing disaster-prevention functions, so as to withstand simultaneous occurrence of a flood on the scale of the Isahaya Flood of 1957 and a tidal surge on the scale of the Ise-Bay typhoon of 1959.” (There are many doubts about effectiveness of the project for these purposes.)

Area size: 816 hectares of farmland reclamation and 2,600 hectares of water level-regulating reservoir

Project costs: JPY 253.3 billion (USD 2.4 billion) in total (JPY 135.0 billion (USD 1.3 billion) under the initial plan)

Impact of the Isahaya Reclamation Project and the “Ariake Disaster”

Under the Isahaya Reclamation Project, part of Isahaya Bay was closed off, causing decreases in tides and tidal currents in the Ariake Sea, frequent large-scale red tides, depletion of oxygen in the bottom layer of water, etc. It has caused severe damage to fisheries; this phenomenon is popularly called the “Ariake Disaster.”

This situation became the focus of public attention when harvest of Nori (laver seaweed), an indispensable ingredient in Japanese cuisine, dropped to its worst level in this area in December 2000. In recent years, newspapers, TV and other media have often reported that there are now rich harvests of Nori, giving the public a false impression that the “Ariake Disaster” is over. This is far from the truth.

Nori growers have been struggling to maintain minimal production levels by extending harvest periods and other measures. The continuing adverse circumstances are still leading young Nori farmers to go bankrupt and fishermen at their working prime to commit suicide. If Nori harvests are really “rich,” why are such painful incidents still happening?

Fishermen using fishing boats or collecting shellfish have been suffering even more gravely. During the postwar food shortage, the Ariake Sea was nicknamed the “Ariake Bank” because fish and shellfish were always sufficiently available whenever necessary. Now, fishing in the same sea, fishermen can hardly recover fuel costs for their fishing boats because fish resources are so depleted and shellfish no longer reproduce there.

Moreover, ripple effects from these negative impacts on fisheries in the Ariake Sea have spread to related industries such as shipbuilding. It is no exaggeration to say local fishing communities are on the verge of wholesale destruction.

Feasibility of open-gate surveys:
reasons for the national government’s refusal and our counter-arguments and proposals

The idea of carrying out surveys with drainage gates in the Isahaya dike opened was originally brought up by the then Agriculture Minister, Yoshio Yatsu, in January 2001. The third party committee for Nori, set up by the Minister, proposed in December 2001 that short-, medium- and long-term open-gate surveys should be carried out to investigate impacts of the Isahaya Reclamation Project. The Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and fisheries (MAFF) conducted a brief open-gate survey in April 2002. However, it subsequently maintained a position of “no mid- and long-term open-gate surveys.”

In response, not only fishermen and conservation groups but local governments along the coast such as in Saga and Kumamoto prefectures raised their voices to call for mid- and long-term open-gate surveys.

We, together with Diet members, repeatedly conducted hearings with the MAFF in the past few months, and determined that the MAFF has roughly the following four reasons to their argument that the gates cannot be opened: 1) impacts on the environment and fisheries, 2) impacts on drainage of agricultural lands, 3) structural problems of drainage gates, and 4) the long preparation required for something that might be fruitless.

However, all researchers and Diet members attending these hearings share in common recognition that these four points are all technically solvable and thus mid- and long-term open-gate surveys should be conducted.

On the assumption that the open-gate surveys would be conducted, we proposed the following four specific ideas of possible sources of agricultural water alternative to the reservoir: 1) construct a small-sized barrage in the estuary of the Honmyo River, 2) build irrigation ponds on the reclaimed land, 3) re-use post-sewage treated wastewater from Isahaya City (Re-using treated water for agriculture is not unusual in Japan), and 4) use surplus water from the Honmyo River and the Ariake River.

The MAFF, however, refuses to discuss alternative water sources. They have not even argued against or criticized our proposals. Can we be blamed for considering this administrative negligence?

Though construction work on the Land Reclamation Project has been completed, a pending problem of water quality in the reservoir still exists and has not shown any improvement. In addition, toxic aoko algal blooms have lately been present in the reservoir. These are signs of failure of one basic purpose of the Project, which is to use water from the reservoir for agriculture.

It is clear that nobody will benefit if the Isahaya Reclamation Project is moved forward through sheer inertia as problem-ridden as it is. Open-gate surveys should be taken as an opportunity to strive for regaining the original environment and fisheries in the Ariake Sea, while securing alternative sources for agricultural water and enhancing disaster prevention for the local communities. We consider such a course as both feasible, and the best way to benefit as many people as possible.