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USED TRACTORS ARE NICE RUT FOR JAPAN

An export boom reflects two shifts—Japanese farmers giving up the land and rising prosperity among Southeast Asian growers.

By **KAZUTO TSUKAMOTO**
Asahi Shimbun

Japan has found a ready overseas market for used tractors.

Last year, about 110,000 tractors were exported, of which 40% were second-hand. About 15,000 were shipped from Yokohama and 7,000 from Kobe.

In rice-growing countries of Asia such as Thailand and Malaysia, second-hand tractors are used mainly as tillers.

Used tractors are popular because they are cheaper than new ones, easy to modify for other purposes and easy to handle, said an official of Suma Sangyo, a used machinery wholesaler in Miki, Hyogo Prefecture.

The surging sales reflect two agricultural shifts—many Japanese farmers giving up the land to larger operations and the increasing prosperity of Southeast Asian farmers, rice grow-

ers in particular. The boom will continue, industry experts say.

The price that a Southeast Asian farmer pays for a used tractor may be triple the export price because of middlemen, said Suma Sangyo Chairman Mamoru Kikutani, "but old Japanese tractors are popular because they are (still) inexpensive, simple and easy to repair."

Although the average life of a tractor is 15 years, new products emerge every seven to eight years, encouraging farmers to trade old models for new ones. That creates a good market for used tractors.

Despite the fact that they are getting second-hand tractors, farmers in countries where rice is grown two or three times a year regard Japanese machines as relatively "new," Kikutani said.

Suma Sangyo began exporting used tractors in 1988. It pur-

chases them from agriculture cooperatives or farming machinery dealers, mainly in western Japan.

Some are old walking tractors—ones that require an operator to walk behind them gripping their handles. Others are four-wheeled ones with 50-horsepower engines.

Suma Sangyo buys the tractors for between ¥10,000 and ¥1 million apiece and exports more than 1,000 a year.

An exporter in Akashi, also Hyogo Prefecture, said there is great demand in Thailand, where farmers are buying tractors as their rice exports grow and bank loans for machinery are getting easier to obtain.

The exporter sells 200 tractors annually to Thailand.

When a Vietnamese cargo ship leaves Kobe, it often is carrying about 200 used tractors—"souvenirs" for crew members, who will sell them for what amounts to a fortune at home.

Most of the tractors the crew members buy at recycling shops in Kobe are very old models nearly ready for the scrap heap. Each costs only ¥10,000 to ¥30,000 each.

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Used tractors await shipment at a second-hand machinery wholesaler-exporter in Miki, Hyogo Prefecture.