

Hope, hard reality mix in Japanese town wrecked by disaster

By Mari Yamaguchi
The Associated Press

FUTABA, Japan — Yasushi Hosozawa returned on the first day possible after a small section of his hometown, Futaba, reopened in January — 11 years after the nuclear meltdown at the nearby Fukushima Daiichi plant.

It has not been easy.

Futaba, which hosts part of the plant, saw the evacuation of all 7,000 residents because of radiation after the March 11, 2011, quake and subsequent tsunami that left more than 18,000 people dead or missing along Japan's northeastern coast.

Only seven have permanently returned to live in the town.

"Futaba is my home. I've wanted to come back since the disaster happened. It was always in my mind," Hosozawa, 77, said during an interview with The Associated Press at his house, which is built above a shed filled with handcrafted fishing equipment.

An abandoned ramen shop sits next door, and so many houses and buildings around him have been demolished, the neighborhood looks barren.

A retired plumber, Hosozawa had to relocate three times over the past decade. Returning to Futaba was his dream, and he patiently waited while other towns reopened earlier.

To his disappointment, the water supply was not reconnected the day he returned. He had to fill plastic containers with water from a friend's house in a nearby town.

The town has no clinics, convenience stores, or other commercial services for daily necessities. He has to leave Futaba to get groceries or to see his doctor for his diabetes medicine.

On a typical day, he makes a breakfast of



rice, miso soup, and natto. In the late morning, he drives about 10 minutes to Namie, a town just north of Futaba, to buy a packed lunch and to shop.

He takes a walk in the afternoon, but "I don't see a soul except for patrolling police." He drops by the train station once in a while to chat with town officials. After some evening saké at home, he goes to bed early while listening to old-fashioned Japanese "enka" songs.

He looks forward to the spring fishing season and likes to grow vegetables in his garden. But Hosozawa wonders if this is the best way to spend his final years. "I won't live much longer, and if I have three to four more years, I'd rather not be in a Futaba like this," he says. "Coming back might have been a mistake."

"Who would want to return to a town without a school or a doctor? I don't think young people with children will want to come," he said.

No-go zones

When massive amounts of radiation

spewed from the plant, more than 160,000 residents evacuated from across Fukushima, including 33,000 who are still unable to return home.

Of the 12 nearby towns that are fully or partially designated as no-go zones, Futaba is the last one to allow some people to return to live. There are still no-go zones in seven towns where intensive decontamination is conducted only in areas set to reopen by 2023.

Many Futaba residents were forced to give up their land for the building of a storage area for radioactive waste, and Fukushima Daiichi's uncertain outlook during its decades-long cleanup makes town planning difficult.

Futaba Project, which helps revitalize the town through tourism, new businesses, and migration from outside Fukushima, sees potential for educational tourism.

"Places with scars of the disaster remain in Futaba. And visitors can see its reality and think about the future," said Hidehiko Yamasaki, a staffer at the nonprofit

TSUNAMI LEGACY. Yasushi Hosozawa drives past damaged buildings in Futaba town, northeastern Japan, on March 2, 2022, on his way back from buying his lunch in Namie town. He often drives to Namie, a neighboring town, for his favorite meals. Hosozawa returned to his home in Futaba 11 years after he evacuated following the 2011 earthquake, which caused a nuclear crisis in the area. (AP Photo/Hiro Komae)

Futaba Project.

Hideyuki Ban, co-director of the Citizens' Nuclear Information Center, says that those returning to the area should have health checks. He says the inhabitable radiation level is the same as for nuclear workers, and could cause increased cancer risks within five years.

In June, Futaba is set to officially reopen the 1,400-acre area near the train station — about 10% of the town — and an area that was once a commercial district where more than half the town's residents once lived. Daytime visits have been allowed since 2020 ahead of the Tokyo Olympics, when train and bus services resumed and a prefecture-run disaster museum opened.

Futaba has invited 24 companies, many of which are involved in town and plant cleanup work, to start new businesses as part of an effort to revitalize local industry. A temporary town hall is set to open in August, and an 86-unit public housing complex is also being built. The town's goal is to have 2,000 residents within five years.

The latest surveys show that only 11.3% of the 5,625 people still registered as Futaba residents want to return home to live there, with more than 60% saying they will not. But 66% say they want to stay connected with the town.

Town officials set to return and live in Futaba ahead of the August town hall reopening will have to figure out how to

Continued on page 7

Helping Overcome Problem Gambling

Spring is Here

This time of year, Oregon is dressed up in her finest. Tree buds burst into flower and mountains come out from hiding behind cloudy skies. It becomes just a little easier to set aside the things that worry us, to perhaps try to ignore habits that we developed during darker days. If gambling is one of those habits, it's a great time for a new start. Spring is a perfect time for renewal, for change.

Help is Available

If you have a gambling habit that has grown beyond your control, help is available. Through the Oregon Problem Gambling Resource (OPGR), gamblers and those who love them can get support from trained addiction counselors, often right from home. Treatment is effective. People are ready and waiting to provide better mechanisms to cope and to heal. And, best of all, it's free.

All it takes is a phone call, a text, or an online chat to get started. Reach out. Let this season be your season for change.

For more information, visit

OPGR.ORG
OREGON PROBLEM GAMBLING RESOURCE

