

Iwaki's Revitalisation 5 Years After the Disaster: Onahama Port

Iwaki Vision visited Onahama Port, one of the areas that was affected by the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake and tsunami. There we met with staff from Iwaki La La Mew to learn more about the damage the facility received and how the surrounding area has been undergoing steps in reconstruction and revitalisation 5 years after the disaster.

Before and during the disaster

Iwaki La La Mew is a popular fish market facility on the shore of Onahama. Before the earthquake, it brought in over 2 million customers and over 10000 tour buses every year.

The people who work at the facility had experienced some small tsunamis in the past, such as only 10cm or so in height. That is why they initially didn't believe in the warnings that a 3m tsunami would hit Onahama back in 2011.



The next day, the workers went downstairs to find that the tsunami had completely flooded the entire first floor and left glass, dead fish and debris scattered everywhere. The facility was forced to close its doors and took nine months to clear debris and clean up the facility. But thanks to the efforts of volunteers, they reopened on November that same year. However the biggest concern at that time was if customers would return as a result of reports after the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Disaster.



The earthquake struck on a Friday afternoon when the facility was packed full of customers. As soon as the tsunami warning came, staff used loudspeakers to quickly evacuate customers from the facility. Thanks to their efforts, no lives were lost at the facility; however, 16 staff who couldn't evacuate in time had to wait out the night in the second floor of the building as multiple tsunamis up to 4m high and 2m above sea level inundated the port area.



La La Mew and Onahama Port 5 years later

Customer numbers had significantly dropped after the disaster and nuclear accident. However, La La Mew has made efforts to not only bring back local customers, but also attract tourists from outside the city. Some of these efforts include setting up a play area for children on the first floor as well as including a 3.11 disaster exhibition (see bottom two photos on previous page) to help people better understand Iwaki's reconstruction and dispel some of the misinformation that arose due to the nuclear accident.

These efforts have helped return some customers, but nonetheless the current amount of visitors to La La Mew stands at around 80% of pre-disaster levels, and sales are roughly 60% of pre-disaster levels. One of the reasons why sales have taken so long to recover is that most local fish cannot be sold due to the risks of radiation. This is despite radiation monitoring showing that no local fish samples have exceeded 50bq/kg (half of the 100bq/kg limit) over the last six months.

Meanwhile, it is expected that some of the other reconstruction projects taking place around the port will further boost tourist numbers. These include the completion of a 927m long bridge extending from the shore so that bulk carriers containing coal can enter the harbour and provide more quantities of more efficient coal for the nearby Hirono and Nakoso power stations.

One of the other major development projects taking place near the port is the construction of a large shopping mall. The shopping mall is planned to be five storeys tall and also designed to not only withstand tsunamis, but also serve as an evacuation site in the event of future tsunamis. The entire first floor will comprise of only car parking with shops starting from the second floor above. A pedestrian deck will connect the second floor of the shopping centre with the nearby Bishoku Hotel.

Finally one other main project underway includes adding an extra traffic lane each way for the main road all the way to Aquamarine Fukushima as well as working on a bypass that will connect Onahama directly to the Joban Expressway.



Iwaki Vision has learnt more about the efforts taking place to revitalise the Onahama Port area. We hope to find out more about the progress of reconstruction in other areas of Iwaki in the future.