

Karnataka to promote neera tapping

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Neera, the sweet sap tapped from coconut tree, could be the much-needed elixir for thousands of beleaguered growers who have been battered by pest attacks and droughts in recent years.

After the recent success in Kerala, where the State Government amended the 100-year old excise laws and came out with a policy to promote *neera* production through farmers' associations, the Coconut Development Board wants other major growing States such as Karnataka to emulate it. *Neera* is considered a health drink on account of its high nutritive and medicinal value.

"*Neera* could do to India what crude oil has done to Saudi Arabia," said TK Jose, Chairman, CDB, commenting on the economic potential. Freshly tapped *neera*, if not stored under controlled temperature or consumed within a couple of hours, turns into toddy with about four per cent alcohol on account of fermentation. And the sale of toddy comes within the ambit of the State excise laws.

Early this year Kerala came

out with a policy to encourage production of *neera* through coconut producers' society. Farmers - organised into societies and federations - are being issued licences to tap *neera* from about a tenth of coconut trees in their plantations. Jose said coconut growers the world over, except India, were doing well despite fall in prices of coconut oil or copra as the income earned from *neera* has helped them to bear the impact of lower oil prices. However, in India, *neera* tapping is not allowed, except in Kerala, Maharashtra and Goa.

Hoping that the laws would be amended, CDB has come up with technologies in collaboration with the Central Food Technology Research Institute and Central Plantation Crops Research Institute to extend the shelf-life of freshly tapped *neera* and produce value-added products.

Recent developments in Kerala have caught the fancy of growers in neighbouring States, mainly Karnataka which accounts for 26 per cent of the country's output.

Vishwanath Anakatte, a coconut grower from Tumkur, believes that the Karnataka Government should allow tapping of *neera*.

Farmers in the State have suffered in the recent years on account of mite attack on the trees and successive droughts - that has reduced the yields by about 40 per cent, said Anakatte, who is a member of the coconut growers association. A coconut grower can earn an additional income of up to ₹3,000 per tree, if allowed to tap *neera*.

Draft policy

Though Karnataka came up with a draft *neera* policy way back in 2007, the State has developed cold feet in implementing the same over concerns of misuse. In fact, the State budget last year talked promoting *neera* as an energy drink, but there has been no action from the Government. "We will try to take up the issue with the State Government," said Rajeev Chawla, Principal Secretary, Horticulture.

Addressing the World Coconut Day, Ananth Kumar, Minister of Chemicals and Fertilisers told growers that he would impress upon the Agriculture Minister Radha Mohan Singh to convene a round table of all stakeholders to formulate an action plan on promotion of *neera* and amend the excise rules.