

Govt. order promises to juice up neera biz

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KOCHI: The State government took half-a-step on Wednesday to free neera tapping from the Abkari Act by issuing an order, which reiterated the government stand that neera will be plucked out of the excise regime to allow its commercial exploitation.

The September 23 order also made a formal commitment on the formation of a toddy-neera board. The Taxes Secretary has been asked to submit suggestions on forming the board.

The order said the Abkari rules would be amended to allow production and sale of neera as promised earlier by Excise Minister K. Babu.

It reiterated recommendations of a government-appointed committee that pilot units should be launched in all districts, including Pathanamthitta, Kollam and Thiruvananthapuram, where no toddy tapping takes place.

Coconut Producers Societies and their federations, set up under an initiative by Coconut Development Board, will be entrusted with the pilot project. The order said traditional toddy tappers should be given preference in forging a new neera tapping workforce. If they are not available in sufficient numbers, a new group of technicians should be trained and brought under the 'Toddy Workers' Wel-



fare Fund. It is also said that neera cannot be sold through toddy shops.

Coconut farmers have welcomed the order despite the lack of a time frame within which the Abkari Act will be amended to free the farmers to commercially exploit the sweet sap of coconut flowers.

Lal Varghese Kalpakavadi, the president of Karshaka Congress, the farmers' arm of the Congress (I), said it was a historic occasion for coconut farmers.

Babu Joseph, farmer member of the committee set up by the government to study the issues confronting toddy business and the potential for neera business, said the government order was the first step towards realising a long-standing demand by the farmers.

T. N. Rameshan, general secretary of Kerala State Chethu Thozhilali Federation, which represents the interests of traditional toddy tappers, said the lack of clarity in the order could be because the government was not sure whether neera business would succeed.