

Neera tappers can expect sweet news in budget

BENGALURU, DHNS: The State government is likely to allow tapping of neera, the sweet sap from coconut trees, and also take steps to promote its byproducts like palm jaggery and palm sugar.

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah, who also holds the Finance portfolio, is expected to make an announcement to allow coconut growers' societies to commercially tap, process and sell the coconut palm drink in the State budget for 2015-16 to be presented on March 13. The government will have to bring an amendment to Karnataka Excise Act, 1965, to remove the 'neera' clause from the legislation. In the existing Act, 'neera' is classified as juice drawn from "excise trees", including gulmohar, coconut, palm, palmyra, date, bagani or doddasal. Freshly tapped neera, if not stored under controlled temperature or consumed within a couple of hours, turns into toddy on account of fermentation. Neera is known for its nutritional value.

The amendment would pave way for sale of neera as an unfermented non-alcoholic drink without a liquor licence, official sources said. Coconut growers and farmer associations have been demanding that the government allow tapping of neera for several years now. A farmers' delegation led by former speaker of the Assembly Krishna recently met Siddaramaiah, urging him to allow sale of neera in the State. "The chief minister had arranged for a meeting wherein officials of the excise, horticulture, finance departments and the coconut development board were present. There was a consensus to allow the sale of neera," Krishna said.

Siddaramaiah had announced that the government was allowing farmers to produce neera in the 2013-14 budget itself. But, the financial department is said to have dragged its feet in clearing the proposal. The sources said that the government was now keen on following the Kerala model of neera production and processing its byproducts like palm syrup, jaggery and sugar. The neighbouring state has allowed neera production since February last year. Permits to tap and process neera will be given only to farmers who become members of coconut growers' societies. Individual permits will not be given, sources said. At present, there are six coconut growers' societies in the State.