

# Neera Brings Sweet News

With Neera sanctions, farmers can now earn up to ₹1,500 a month from a palm

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Coconut farmers in Kerala, which is the largest production region of coconuts in the country, have something to cheer as the state government has given sanction for tapping 'neera', a non-alcoholic sweet drink from the palms.

This will bring much-needed relief for them as they can earn up to ₹1,500 from a palm a month with neera. They are now mostly dependent on coconut oil and copra for their earnings. Coconut Development Board has developed technologies with the help of research institutions Central Food Technological Research Institute (CFTRI) for neera extraction.

The government has given sanction for extracting neera to the Coconut Development Board (CDB), Kerala Agriculture University, State Beverages Corporation, coconut producers so-



cieties, coconut producers' federations, jaggery producers and Kerala Agro-Industries Corporation.

CDB chairman TK Jose said the board is waiting for the details following the sanction given by the state Cabinet, particularly amendment to rules in the Abkari Act to treat neera as non-fermented and non-alcoholic drink. "The government sanction is to tap 1,500 trees each in selected districts on a pilot basis. But in a state where there are 18 crore coconut palms, this is negligible number," he said.

Kerala Agriculture University, which has developed a technology named 'Keralamritham', has started pilot projects in Kasargod, Thiruvananthapuram and Thrissur.

"A farmer can tap around 1-1.5 litres from a palm a day.

He can easily earn around ₹1,000-1,500 from a coconut palm a month," said Dr Jayaprakash Naik, associate director of research - Coconut Mission, Kerala Agriculture University.

The tapping is done in such a way that farmers will get a chance to sell their coconuts and tender coconuts too so that their overall income is not affected.

"Only 50% of the total farms of the farmer will be used for neera tapping. Of this, 25% will be tapped in 6 months and the rest in the next six months. This gives time for rejuvenation of the palms," Jayaprakash Naik said. Though coconut producer societies and federations have been given sanction for extracting neera, such organisations will be hard put to find funds for this purpose. The better option is a coconut producer company. About 20 coconut producer societies form a coconut producers federation and ten such federations form a coconut producer company, which may have around 1 million coconut trees under it.

"For setting up a plant for extraction of 4,000 litres of neera a day, you may need an investment of ₹4-5 crore, including the land cost and the facilities for power and water. A company may be able

to do it. But 4,000 litres are hardly enough if we have to go on commercial scale. We need to tap more coconut trees," said Nasar Ponnad, chairman of Malapuram Coconut Producers Company, one of the 14 companies formed under CDB initiative together in Kerala, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh in the country.