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Neera to sweeten session on Monday



Coconut Development Board to serve the health drink to push for amendment to Karnataka Excise Act

Karnataka legislators will be served with *neera*, the sweet sap tapped from the inflorescence of the coconut palm, and its value-added products like sugar and jaggery when the second phase of the ongoing legislature session begins in Bengaluru from Monday.

This is being done to by the Coconut Development Board with a two-fold objective. One, to draw attention to the economic importance of this 'health' drink, and second, to persuade them to amend the Karnataka Excise Act to permit all coconut farmers in the State to tap *neera*.

Disclosing this at a meeting of coconut farmers and entrepreneurs here, Chairman of Kochi-based Coconut Development Board T.K. Jose pointed out on Saturday that the State government permits *neera*-tapping only in Dakshina Kannada and Udupi districts. But, if *neera* is to be tapped in all districts, the Excise Act would have to be amended. In his 2015-16 budget speech, Chief Minister Siddaramaiah announced that the Act would be amended to permit members of the coconut growers' federations to harvest *neera* in limited quantities from coconut trees. Though it would help in increasing the income of coconut growers, the amendment is yet to come through.

The board, the Horticulture Department and farm producers' organisations have been requesting for the amendment of the Act. A team of representatives of the Coconut Producers' Companies registered in the State met Mr. Siddaramaiah and Speaker of the Legislative assembly Kagodu Thimmappa at the Suvarna Soudha in Belagavi on July 6 to request them to facilitate the amendment. The Chief Minister then asked the team to distribute *neera* and its value-added products to all MLAs and MLCs at the session in Bengaluru after July 15.

The board thought it was a great idea. *Neera*, packaged in small bottles, will be offered at the session to push the idea through.

Mr. Jose said: "Neera is a non-alcoholic, nutritious and natural health drink. Its shelf life under refrigerated condition is six months."

In fact, a team of senior officials of the State horticulture and excise departments visited Tamil Nadu and Kerala on June 19 and 20 to study issues relating to production, processing and marketing of *neera*.