

Neera makes sweet entry

Chief Minister launches product; boost to coconut sector in State

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KOTTAYAM: Breaking a 102-year-old jinx on diversification of coconut products on account of legal tangles and heralding a turnaround in the coconut sector, Kerala on Sunday formally launched the sale of commercially produced neera (sweet toddy) and value-added food products that use the produce as raw material.

Chief Minister Oommen Chandy launched the sale of neera here. He said the coconut sector had been constrained by the provisions of the Abkari rules during the colonial period and the industrial base of the sector was limited to production of raw coconut, copra, oil, and toddy. Though there were calls to expand the base, right from 1902, serious effort in this regard was taken during the past one decade, he said.

Mr. Chandy said the government was committed to ensuring the strengthening of the toddy sector. Production of neera would in no way af-

- **State committed to strengthening toddy sector**
- **Potential for exports to be explored**

fect the prospects of toddy production. It would create job opportunities and scope for further strengthening of the coconut sector, he said. Mr. Chandy said while production-related facilities for neera were being readied, several linkages remained to be established. Rules have to be amended to ensure that minimum commercially viable number of coconut trees were provided under each of the companies formed by the coconut producers' organisations. The State would have to focus on marketing networks and scope for export markets, he said.

Mr. Chandy said controversies had restrained the State from using its natural wealth. Though we have a long coastline, we have not been able to use the sand from the ocean for construction work. "The Gulf coun-

tries were using processed sea sand for decades," he said. The mineral-rich sand from beaches could bring the State not only money but create thousands of jobs for youngsters, he said.

"Seaplanes are a normal sight in most countries, but I was put to shame after I launched it in Kerala," Mr. Chandy said, referring to the agitation by inland fishermen against introduction of seaplanes in the backwaters of Kerala.

In his address, K Babu, Minister for Excise, Fisheries, and Ports, said beside the legal issues involved, apprehension among toddy workers and lack of appropriate technology to increase the shelf-life of neera were issues that had delayed the launch of the product..

Since neera would be governed by the provisions of the

Abkari act, any attempt to dilute the quality assurance or unauthorised production would be punishable. Stakeholders should take care not to move away from the legal and technical limits accorded to them, he said.

T K Jose, chairman, Coconut Development Board, in his introductory remarks said if properly implemented, the project could revive the ailing coconut sector and bring revenue to the State.

Minister for Forests, Environment, and Transport Thiruvanchoor Radhakrishnan, launched various value-added food products from neera. Anil Xavier, Excise Commissioner, G.P.C. Nair, K Suresh Kurup, MLA, P.H. Kurian, Principal Secretary, Industries, and others spoke.

Licences distributed

Licences for the trained neera technicians were distributed on the occasion. The new initiative is being launched by Coconut Development Board and the State Excise Department.