

Farmers itching to tap neera, but govt. keeps them waiting

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KOCHI: Farmers' organisations of all political colours have come out against the delay in issuing an order permitting State-wide tapping of neera.

Minister for Excise and Ports K. Babu aired the decision on July 16 in Thiruvananthapuram that the tapping of the unfermented sap from coconut flowers would begin with a unit each of 1,500 trees in 14 districts of the State. However, Thiruvananthapuram, Kollam and Pathanathitta districts, where no toddy tapping takes place, would be allowed to begin with more than one unit each.

These organisations fear a strong lobby is out to torpedo the neera project that can increase farmers' income and create business possibilities.

Even the committee appointed by the government to look into neera's possibil-



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ities was loaded against the farmers, said a farmers' group leader, who did not want to be named. The committee consisted mostly of excise officials and trade union representatives, who would never speak up for the farmer, he said.

Babu Joseph, coconut farmer and a member of the committee, said formal order was expected soon because the government had agreed in principle to permit neera tapping. "What remains are Cabinet approval, notification of the neera rules and selection of units for tapping, packaging and selling neera in each of the

districts. These are formalities, which would take its course and time," he said.

The Excise Minister told *The Hindu* on Friday that the government had not set a time-frame for the order. The Cabinet would soon take up the matter, he said.

Farmers' organisations won't tolerate an about-face. "We will not go back on our demand for permission to tap neera," said Lal Varghese Kalpakavady, State president of Karshaka Congress, the farmer's wing of the Congress (I).

An office-bearer of Karshaka Congress from Palakkad said coconut farmers were in distress; an early order on neera would be of great help to small and marginal farmers.

A farmer's organisation linked to CPI(M) blamed the delay on lack of governance. "There is no government in Kerala. The State is being ruled by bureaucrats," said E. P. Jayarajan, president of

Kerala Karshaka Sangham. He said the project might hit a hurdle because there was not enough people to climb coconut trees.

State president of All India Kisan Sabha Sathyan Mokeri alleged that the influential "abkari lobby" was out to derail the project. He said they were campaigning against the neera project and spreading unsubstantiated claims that toddy tappers would lose their jobs if neera tapping was allowed. "This is unfortunate," he said. Estimates by the Coconut Development Board said even if only one per cent of the 18 crore coconut trees in the State are tapped, the State would generate an extra business worth Rs. 4,300 crore annually.

A scientist at the Kerala Agricultural University said neera tapping could increase the income of a farmer from a coconut tree to Rs. 1,000 a month from the current level of Rs. 50 to Rs. 100.