

Sparring ministers stall Neera project



Excise minister K. Babu and Agriculture minister K.P. Mohanan

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Thiruvananthapuram: The Neera Project, in which coconut farmers in the state had great hopes, has run into trouble due to squabbles between the Agriculture and Excise ministers. Arguments between the two spilled in a cabinet meeting prompting the CM to suspend licenses for Neera tapping.

In a recent cabinet meeting, the ministers argued with each other to such a level that Chief Minister Oommen Chandy intervened, suspending licenses that had been issued. New licenses will not be issued until the issue is sorted out amicably. With an order to this effect being issued by the Tax Department, many debt-laden farmers have lost hope.

Minister K Babu said that the development would not affect the Neera Project. A government order that would have issued licenses to 157 coconut-producing federations was suspended by the Excise ministry. There are 327 such federations in the state that are coordinated by the Coconut Development Board. About 150 federations have sought new licenses. Licenses have to be provided by the Excise department.

Agriculture Minister K P Mohanan has been seeking a license for the Coconut Development Corporation. He had also demanded that the Rs15 crore that was earmarked for producing Neera in 10 districts on an experimental basis in the 2013-14 budget be provided to the corporation. Both these demands have been rejected. The Excise department is not ready to provide the license because there are no farmer groups under the corporation. Thus, 16 federations were allowed to tap Neera. Later, 157 federations were allowed to tap Neera, but the order implementing that decision has been suspended for now.

A day earlier, the Neera Board met for the first time, but the Excise Commissioner and other officers were not present allegedly because the Excise Minister barred them from taking part in the proceedings. That was when the issue was dragged into the cabinet meeting.

Meanwhile, the Neera Project in Tamil Nadu has expanded and contracts have been signed to export jaggery and sugar developed from Neera to countries such as Germany.