

Neera, the health drink of God's own country to hit the market soon

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On 2nd March, 2014, Kottayam, the land of letters, Kerala witnessed a historical moment when Shri. Oommen Chandy, Chief Minister, Kerala officially launched Neera and its value added products at a function presided over by Shri K Babu, Minister for Excise, Government of Kerala. The coconut farmers were denied of the right to tap and produce neera due to the provisions of the first Excise Act enacted in 1902. The Act was further modified in 1967 wherein the zero alcohol neera was wrongly categorized as Toddy, an alcoholic liquor.

Now the farmers are relieved since the Government of Kerala has issued orders permitting the production of neera by coconut Farmer Producer Organizations on 3rd February 2014. Necessary amendments in the Excise rules is effected and notified as the new Kerala Sweet Toddy (Neera) Rules, 2014. The draft of the rules issued through a notification through gazette of 14th February 2014. Government of Kerala has entrusted seven agencies/ organisations for the production of neera in the state which includes the Coconut Producers Federations (CPF) registered under Coconut Development Board. Besides, the Chief Minister has also promised to see that the budget provision made in the 2013-14 state budget for setting up neera units shall not be lapsed.

The state of Kerala has around 18 crores palms of which 5,04,141

palms are utilized for toddy tapping. Presently the state is having 29,465 registered toddy tappers and most of them are jobless today on account of the crisis in toddy sector. It is estimated that one lakh green collar job opportunities can be created if atleast one percent of the palms of Kerala are used for neera tapping. As per the amended rules, it is stipulated that toddy tappers will be given preference in neera tapping too. In case of shortage of traditional tappers, Friends of Coconut Tree (FoCT) will also be considered for neera tapping. Thus it is expected that neera production would pave the way for the better livelihood of toddy tappers and trained FoCTs.

Coconut Development Board is in the process of imparting training to Neera technicians at its Institute of Technology (CIT) in Vazhakulam, Alwaye and also at SCMS, Kalamassery, Kochi in collecting good quality neera through best

hygienic methods.

With utmost happiness and great expectations, the Coconut Producer Companies formed in Kerala under the aegis of Coconut Development Board have already initiated the preliminary steps in establishing neera processing plants. Setting up an integrated unit for coconut neera and its value added products needs huge financial investment. The technology can be availed from, CDB, Kerala Agriculture University, CFTRI, CPCRI or DFRL. Farmer Producer Organisations can avail the

financial assistance offered by the central as well as state governments for setting up neera units.

Tejaswini Coconut Producer Company, Kannur the first Coconut Producer Company formed in Kerala comprising of 16 Coconut Producers Federations has recently announced that they are in the process of establishing a neera unit at Cherupuzha in Kannur with the capacity to process 1000 liter neera per day. Shri. Sunny George, Chairman of the Company informed that Tejaswini's branded neera products will be launched by May end. Initially, Tejaswini will be producing jaggery from neera. The company is also planning to start another manufacturing unit consisting of copra drier, coir fibre, pith, organic manure and hair oil. In the second phase the company is planning to produce virgin coconut oil, desiccated coconut powder,



coconut chips, coconut milk, coconut soda etc. Financial assistance will be availed from NABARD for establishing this unit and from Coir Development Corporation will be availed for establishing coir units. As a first stage, the company will tap Neera from the 1500 palms identified from various federations. The price for Neera is fixed at Rs.100/- per litre and Rs.500/- per kg for palm jaggery. Thejaswini has already received enquiry from two Kochi based exporters.

In Kollam district, Kaipuzha Coconut Producer Company with its strength of 11 member Coconut Producers Federation will step into Neera production by the middle of April 2014. Shri.Shajahan Kanjiravilayil, Chairman of the company is very optimistic in their preparedness about setting up the neera unit. A project worth Rs. 10 crores is already submitted at Coconut Development Board. The construction of the plant with the capacity to process 10,000 liter neera per day in 1.5 acres at Kadapa will start shortly. Manufacturing of organic coconut oil, hair oil, coconut chocolate and biscuits will also be done in the same plant. During the first phase, Neera health

drink, Jaggery and Jam would be produced.

Palakkad Coconut Producer Company Limited (PCPCL) is the first company to submit the project proposal to Coconut Development Board with an estimate of Rs. seven crores for setting up a Neera plant at Muthalamada in Palakkad district. The attempt is to produce packed neera in bottle, palm sugar and palm jaggery. Palakkad being the highest toddy producing district in Kerala, the company anticipates good response for neera from the local

public, said Shri. Vinodkumar, Chairman of the company. Initially the company is planning to sell and supply Neera through juice vending kiosks at main centers. The Muthalamada Coconut Producers Federation under the ambit of Palakkad Coconut Producer Company has also installed a modern copra drier unit with the capacity to process 40,000 nuts per day. The company has already signed an agreement with Department of Horticulture, Karnataka to take over the neera plant in Dakshina Kannada district on lease and it will be run on trial basis. This would provide a first hand experience in neera processing and equip them to establish and run the plant at Muthalamada in a well-organized manner.

It is a welcome and encouraging step that 11 companies out of the 12 companies formed in Kerala have submitted project proposal to Government of Kerala and to CDB for enabling early commencement of the project. The Board is extending 25% of the total project cost as grant in aid to such units under Technology Mission on Coconut (TMOC), in addition to its efforts for equipping sufficient neera technicians in the country.

Coconut Producer Companies are already getting export enquiries for Neera and its value added products like palm jaggery, syrup and wine from multi national and international companies for long term contract before even initiating the production. Most of the coconut producing countries are earning high foreign exchange revenue through the production, marketing and export of neera products. The success stories from these countries enthuse our FPOs to go ahead with this venture. Let us hope that the best quality Neera, the health drink of God's own country in attractive packaging will reach out to the entire globe soon.

