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TN: Coconut Farmers Demand Increased Support Price for Copra, Direct Procurement

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|  
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The coconut farmers in Kanniyakumari district demand the distribution of coconut oil through ration shops, improvements in the functioning of the value addition centre and compensations for affected trees.

The coconut farmers in Kanniyakumari broke coconuts in protest seeking better prices for milling and ball Copra, procurement of coconut by the state and Union government and compensation of Rs 3,000 per tree affected by diseases.

In a protest held in front of the Agricultural Engineering department office in Melpuram block, the farmers demanded the state government distribute coconut oil through fair-price shops instead of palm oil, restart the functioning of the coconut processing unit in the district to manufacture value-added products and facilitate the process to increase productivity.

The Coconut Farmers' Association affiliated to the All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS) has been demanding to increase the minimum support price (MSP) for milling copra from Rs 106.8/kg and ball copra from Rs 117.50 announced for the 2023 season by the Union government to Rs 150/kg.

The state government has issued a notification to ensure the Price Support Scheme (PSS) at the MSP announced for procurement through the National Agricultural Cooperative Marketing Federation (NAFED) and National Cooperative Consumers Federation (NCCF).

'ENSURE BETTER PRICE FOR COPRA'

Coconut, a crop of the small and marginal farmers, is cultivated in around 4.45

lakh hectares (ha) (during 2020–21) in Tamil Nadu, with a production of 3,751.26 tons in 2022, with a market share of 27.5% in the country. Kanniyakumai accounts for about 24,830 ha of cultivation, with a production of 2,591 lakh nuts during 2021–22 at an average yield of 9,381 nuts/ha. Coconut cultivation accounts for 50% of the land under cultivation of principal crops, which include paddy, pulses including grams, banana, mango, jackfruit, cashew, tapioca, pineapple and pepper. Paddy crops are cultivated in around 11,500 ha.

Recent years have seen a reduction in coconut cultivation for multiple reasons, including the shift to other cash crops, including rubber, uncertainty over prices, diseases and lack of labour force for coconut harvesting. The AIKS has sought remedies to the problems faced by the coconut farmers, including the increase in support prices.

Speaking to NewsClick, D Vincent, Kanniyakumari district secretary of the Tamil Nadu Coconut Farmers Association, said, "The government must ensure the prices of coconut and copra are fixed considering the production cost and increasing labours costs. The government must procure directly from the farmers in each taluk". President of the association N Murugesan demanded the government increase procurement prices.

"The present prices announced by the Union government for milling and ball copra are insufficient. The MSP should be at least Rs 150 for the milling copra." The association cites increasing input costs, including the cost of pesticides, fertilisers and labour costs, for demanding a fair deal from the Union and state governments.

#### ADDRESS LABOUR SHORTAGE AND REMEDY FOR DISEASES

A major problem plaguing the coconut farmers is the shortage of labourers for harvesting at frequent intervals to ensure consistent productivity. The coconuts have to be harvested at least once in three months.

"There is a severe shortage of trained labour for harvest. Through the agriculture department, the government must train people to use mechanical equipment for harvesting," Vincent demanded.

The lack of skilled labour is lacking not only in harvesting but also in plant protection. Diseases like red palm weevil, Ganoderma wilt and coconut root wilt are common diseases affecting the yield, though the productivity is higher in the state than the national average.

"There are several trees which are beyond revival. We demand the government to announce a compensation of Rs 3,000/tree. The respective departments must undertake sufficient research to address these diseases," Vincent added.

AIKS has demanded the state government distribute coconut oil through the ration shops instead of the palm oil being provided now.

"This would create a minimum demand for coconut and ensure the farmers' livelihoods are met," Murugesan said.

The value-added products from coconut, including coconut milk, skimmed milk, dried milk powder, and coconut squash, are in high demand in several countries. The only Coconut Value Addition Centre in the Kanniyakumari district is lying idle, AIKS alleges.

"The machine used to powder the coconut to manufacture the value-added products has not been working for several months. The neglect is unacceptable when the farmers are struggling to get assured prices, though the retail price of coconut has continuously increased in the domestic market," Murugesan said.

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