

'Spices Year' to infuse the sector with a lease of life

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IN an effort to boost the ailing spices sector in the state, the Agriculture Department has decided to observe the Malayalam New Year as 'Spices Year.' The new year starts on Chingam 1, which falls on August 17.

All year long, priority will be given to spices cultivation - chiefly pepper, cardamom and nutmeg - and their marketing in Kerala. The state had similarly observed 'Nellu Varsham' in 2016 and Coconut Year in 2017 to infuse new lease of energy into coconut and paddy sectors in the state.

Agriculture Minister V S Sunil Kumar told *Express* that spices sector, mainly pepper cultivation, has been facing a host of challenges over the past few years and the price crash has further enhanced its difficulties. Price fluctuation in the international market, coupled with smuggling and import of

cheap pepper from countries like Vietnam through Sri Lanka, has resulted in a huge crash in domestic price. The state government's effort to address such issues resulted in the Ministry of Commerce fixing a minimum import price (MIP) of ₹500 a kg in December 2017. But this was later watered down when smuggling and illegal imports continued unabated.

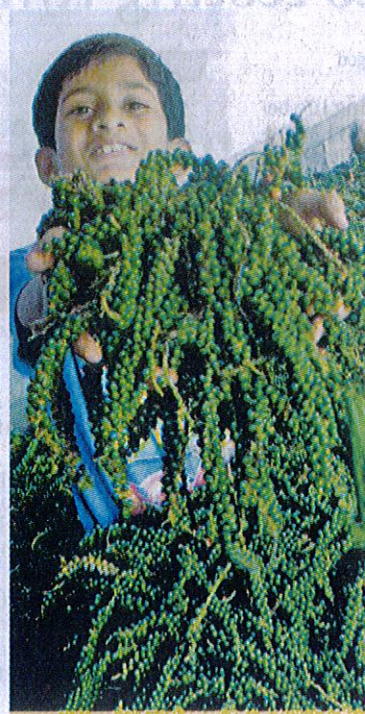
In this backdrop, the 'Spices Year', with its year-long programmes, is expected to help better the prospects of the spice farmers. As part of programme, the department will distribute high-yielding varieties among the farmers with an objective to increase the production.

Further, the year-long attention is expected to provide the sector much-needed support in terms of training and exploring new markets. Funds will also be set aside to help the sector, Sunil Kumar said.

"The state is also planning to

procure pepper from farmers in the state on the lines of paddy and coconut procurement for which the support of the Centre is required. We have already held a couple rounds of discussions with the Central Government including Union Commerce Minister Suresh Prabhu. The state will soon submit a proposal in this regard. If we can start pepper procurement, the issues in the sector can be addressed to some extent," he said.

Minister said the enforcement measures must also be strengthened to curb illegal trade. For instance, Nepal has been importing pepper through Kolkata port. A large part of their import floods the Indian market due to smuggling through porous borders of Bangladesh, Nepal and Myanmar. Such illegal businesses must be curbed to protect the Indian pepper farmers and the local spices market, the minister said.



Import of pepper from Vietnam

Year	Quantity (MT)	Value (Rs Cr)
2014-15	10,845	520.33
2015-16	6,780	404.20
2016-17	9,500	477.85
2017-18	10,825	367.56

(The Indian government does not import black pepper from Vietnam. However, pepper is imported from Vietnam and other countries by Indian processors for value addition and re-exports)



In 2016-17 the average domestic price of pepper went down from ₹694.77 per kg to ₹473.73 per kg. The price went down further to ₹359 per kg in June, 2018

Instruction has also been issued to officers of Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) and field formations of Customs to be vigilant against the entry of inferior quality pepper from other countries

To prevent import of cheap pepper from other countries taking advantage of the provisions of India-Sri Lanka Free Trade Agreement (ISLFTA) and Agreement on South Asian Free Trade Area (SAFTA), Sri Lankan authorities have been requested by the Centre to exercise extreme care and diligence in issuing the Certificates of Origin