

First time in three decades, NAFED steps in to buy apples

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THE NATIONAL Agricultural Cooperative Marketing Federation of India (NAFED) has not bought a single kilogram of apples for the last three decades or more.

"We did not have to, since this trade was always in private hands and the government didn't think it necessary for us to intervene," said an official from the nodal agency that procures oilseeds, pulses, copra, onion and cotton to deliver the minimum support prices (MSP) declared by the Centre to farmers.

But now, for the first time in many years, NAFED has been tasked to purchase all the apples that growers in Kashmir would be bringing to mandis in the Valley. "The J&K Directorate of Horticulture, Planning & Marketing would do the actual procurement and we will take delivery of the apples. The pur-

chases will start from September 12 at four mandis — Shopian, Sopore, Parimpora (Srinagar) and Batango (Anantnag) — and will be extended to more centres as arrivals pick up," the official said.

J&K accounts for about 18 lakh tonnes of India's total annual apple production of 23 lakh tonnes. This year, the state is set to harvest a bumper 20 lakh tonnes crop because of good snowfall. Only last week, apple growers, along with panchayat members from the Valley, met Home Minister Amit Shah, expressing fears of massive losses due to movement restrictions.

"We have been given an indicative target of purchasing 12 lakh tonnes from the Valley. There is no MSP for apple. The state government there is expected to fix the procurement prices for different grades (A, B and C) and variety. We are expected to pay 5 per cent more than the market price that was

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prevailing last year. The tentative total cost of procurement operations is assessed at Rs 5,000 crore," the NAFED official told The Indian Express.

Currently, apple harvesting is taking place mainly in Himachal Pradesh, where 50-60 per cent of the fruits in the main belt of Shimla, Narkanda, Sainj and Rohru are still on trees. Harvesting in Kashmir will start peaking only towards September-end, when the Kinnaur apples from Himachal Pradesh are also ready. "The Valley growers may harvest before that, but they generally do not bring it to the market till it is over in Himachal. Peak harvesting happens in October and the apples keep arriving till early December," said a Delhi-based trader.

For NAFED, the challenge lies in the very short period for preparation. "We opened our office in Srinagar only late last week and the Cabinet order for procuring under the market intervention scheme came to us at 1:30 am on Tuesday. We have hardly any time for registration of growers, collecting their Aadhaar and bank account details to make payment through direct benefit transfer. Ideally, this should have been done at the time of flowering, but that option does not exist now," the official added.

NAFED is supposed to complete the entire procurement operations by mid-December. The Narendra Modi-led government, it is learnt, has targeted making payments to growers accounts within 48 hours of procurement.

EXPLAINED

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