

Food Bill stares at delays as states express doubts

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New Delhi, Feb 13: The government's aim to introduce the National Food Security Bill in the Budget session of Parliament may not be a smooth affair with some states on Friday opposing provisions concerning the identification of beneficiaries and the financial impact of the proposed legislation. Food ministers of Bihar, TN, Kerala, Punjab and other states, in a conference with the food ministry on Wednesday, expressed the fear that the Food Security Bill would deprive states of their current foodgrain allotment and put fiscal pressure on them.

Tamil Nadu food minister RKamaraj sought exemption from implementation of food Bill as the southern state has a universal public distribution system which Kamaraj said was 'more effective, robust and time-tested.'

According to Kamaraj, after the implementation of the food security law, monthly allotment of foodgrains to the state would decline to 2.24 lakh tonne from the current 2.96 lakh tonne. Kerala food minister Anup Jacob was of the view that the state's monthly entitlement would decline to around 1 lakh tonne from the current level of 2 lakh tonne.

Demanding setting up of an independent BPL commission for identification of beneficiaries under the proposed legislation, Bihar food minis-

CONSENSUS NOT IN SIGHT

■ Food ministers of Bihar, TN, Kerala, Punjab and other states expressed fears that the Bill would deprive states of their current foodgrain allotment and put fiscal pressure on them

■ Food minister KV Thomas admitted that the identification of beneficiaries, their entitlement and prices are issues that require careful consideration

ter Shyam Rajak said: "Rather than imposition of criteria, identification of families should be carried out in consultation with states."

"At present, under the Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS), the Centre gives us food grains for only 65 lakh families while we have been distributing subsidised foodgrains to 1.3 crore families. The identification process should be transparent and acceptable to states," Rajak told *FE*.

During the consultation, Orissa food minister Pratap Kishori Deb demanded inclu-

sion of all the tribals under the ambit of food Bill. "The Centre is not clear about the criteria of inclusion and exclusion of families under the proposed legislation. There has to be clearly defined criteria for avoiding confusion on beneficiaries," Deb said. Even Chhattisgarh, which has enacted its own food security Bill, called for universal coverage of subsidised foodgrains to all poor families

The food Bill, which was introduced in the Lok Sabha in December 2011, envisages giving legal right over subsidised foodgrains to two-third of the country's population. The annual food subsidy bill, after implementation of the food security law, is expected to cross ₹1.2 lakh crore from the current level of ₹80,000 crore.

Recently, a parliamentary standing committee suggested significant alternations in the Bill, saying all the beneficiaries be provided 5 kg of wheat and rice per month at a uniform rate of ₹2 and ₹3 per kg, respectively. The panel had also recommended coverage of 75% of rural and 50% in urban population with uniform entitlement.

Admitting the 'challenges' in arriving at a consensus, food minister KV Thomas said, "We need to finalise our views on these recommendations early, give a final shape to the Bill and present it back to Parliament for consideration and passage in the ensuing Budget session."