

NOT SO SWEET

As cane FRP dues pile up, Maha may lodge FIRs against erring millers

As on January 15, around 191 sugar mills in the state have been in operation and FRP dues have mounted up to ₹5,320 crore

NANDA KASABE
Pune, January 29

THE SIT-IN PROTEST by thousands of cane farmers in Pune on Monday over non-payment of Fair and Remunerative Price (FRP) seems to have sent sugar millers in the state scurrying for cover.

For the first time ever, the government may lodge FIRs against chairmen and directors of the mills for non-payment of dues and not fulfilling their commitment to farmers. FRP dues in Maharashtra have piled up to ₹5,320 crore and over 180 mills may face action for non-payment of FRP.

Following the threat of action, on Tuesday, millers from Kolhapur have decided to make payments to farmers' bank accounts at the rate of ₹2,300 per quintal and clear dues until January 15 in a couple of days. The decision was taken at a meeting of the millers in Kolhapur.

The Maharashtra State Cooperative Sugar Factories Federation has, however, decided to hold a meeting on February 4 to decide their future strategy on this issue.



In a late night development on Monday, as farmers expressed their willingness to continue their sit-in protest indefinitely until action was taken, Maharashtra sugar commissioner Shekhar Gaikwad gave a written assurance to the leader of the Swabhimani Shetkari Sanghatana (SSS) Raju Shetti who was leading the morcha of nearly 5,000 farmers that action will be taken against mills that have failed to make payments to farmers.

Now, 39 mills that have failed to make even 25% of the FRP payments will face action under Revenue and Recovery Code (RRC) immediately, Gaikwad told *FE*.

This means once the RRC orders are issued, the district collector will seize the sugar stocks of these mills and hold an

action to recover dues. The rest of the millers will be issued notices and called for hearing within the next week, he said.

Gaikwad also gave an assurance to millers that FIRs will be registered against the chairmen and directors of those mills that have failed to make payments and said this will take time as authentic data will be required to register FIRs against mill authorities.

Shetti had given a stern warning that if the mills try to obtain a stay on the orders issued by the sugar commissioner, his organisation would move the Bombay High Court to stall any such action. He also warned of an indefinite hunger fast if the Sugar Commissionerate does not fulfil its commitment. He said the agitation has

been temporarily called off and if action is not taken against mills, they would come back to protest.

Shetti's organisation got support from farm activist Yogendra Yadav who took part in the protest on Monday in Pune.

Yadav said farmers were only asking for their due. We are already working with Raju Shetti as part of larger All India Kisan Sangharsh Samiti in Delhi to highlight farmer issues and will continue to work for farmer rights, he said, adding that for the first time farmer issues may dominate. As on January 15, around 191 sugar mills in the state have been in operation and FRP dues mounted up to ₹5,320 crore. The total payable FRP as on January 15 was ₹10,487.34 crore. According to officials, around 426.84 lakh tonne of cane was crushed until January 15. Factories have made around 49% of the FRP payment, officials said.

According to the Commissioner, of the 191 mills only 11 mills have made FRP payments and the remaining 174 mills have not paid FRP dues. 47 mills have made 71-99% FRP payments, 21 mills have made 51-70% payment, 55 mills have made 26-50% payment, 26 mills have made less than 25% FRP payments. Around 25 mills have made nil FRP payments. Jayprakash Dandedgaonkar, chairman of the cooperative federation said that the action suggested against factories is totally incorrect and millers are not in a position to make payments unless banks release the funds.

