

## State food ministers to meet tomorrow

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Fortified rice scheme, pulses and onions supply from Central buffer stocks are some of the issues on the agenda

A newly-planned scheme of fortifying rice distributed through ration shops, the recently passed Consumer Protection Act 2019, and supply of pulses and onion from Centrally-maintained buffer stocks are among the topics to be discussed at a meeting of State ministers of food, civil supplies and consumer protection, which will take place on Tuesday.

According to an official release, the fifth national consultation meeting of the State ministers is being held at a time the new consumer protection Act is notified. A pilot scheme was launched recently in 15 districts in predominantly rice-eating States to improve nutrition security by distributing fortified rice through the public distribution system. Both these issues are expected to figure prominently at the meeting, the release said.

Incidentally, the meeting was initially scheduled for early last month, but had to be cancelled due to the unavailability of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution Minister Ram Vilas Paswan.

The Consumer Protection Act 2019 is a major step forward from the 1986 Act. It proposes to establish a Central Consumer Protection Authority to deal with unfair trade practices besides paving the way for digitalisation of Consumer Commissions, enabling e-filing of complaints, mediation, product liability law and simplified procedures.

For the fortified rice scheme, the government has approved a financial outlay of ₹147.61 crore over the next three years. "The idea of keeping the cost of fortification outside the purview of the price at which the PDS rice is sold at fair price shops is to ensure that poor people would not stay away from buying fortified rice," said an official source.

The cost of rice fortification is estimated to be 60 paise per kg and it will be shared between the Centre and the States at ratio of 90:10 for the North-Eastern, hilly and island States and at the ratio of 75:25 for the rest, the source said.

Among the districts where the pilot project will be launched soon are West Godavari district in Andhra Pradesh, Bongaigaon in Assam, Narmada in Gujarat, Ernakulam in Kerala, Yadgir or Raichur in Karnataka, Gadchiroli in Maharashtra and Trichy in Tamil Nadu. Malkangiri in Odisha and Chandauli district in Uttar Pradesh.

Also on the agenda is the offtake of pulses and onion by the States from buffer stocks maintained by the Centre. As on July 11, the available stocks of pulses in the price stabilisation fund buffer is around 14 lakh tonnes. As discussed in the earlier meetings, the States can purchase pulses from this stock to meet their requirement for various welfare schemes such as mid-day meal, anganwadi scheme, hospitals and hostels for underprivileged students.

The meeting is also expected to discuss the measures taken by States to check unreasonable increase in prices of some food items, particularly pulses, edible oils and sugar and prevent hoarding and black-marketing.

It would also review action taken on the decisions of the last meeting of the State Food Ministers and prepare a fresh action plan to ensure the prices of all essential food items are under control, digitise public distribution and Aadhaar seeding of ration cards.