

Centre boosts Bharat brand output to keep cereal prices in check

Zia Haq

zia.haq@htlive.com

NEW DELHI: The Union government has ramped up the output of basic staples under its subsidised Bharat brand to reach consumers directly in an attempt to control prices, especially of cereals, ahead of the parliamentary elections due in May, officials aware of the matter said.

The Union food ministry has prepared a “heat map” of the country collating inflation data to identify centres where cereal prices are elevated where it will target its products, one of the officials said.

An interministerial panel on inflation management has given its go-ahead to allocate more state-owned cereals into the so-called open market sales scheme (OMSS) that will go into making of cheaper packaged rice and wheat, according to the official cited above.

An additional 2.5 million tonne (mt) would be offloaded in the markets during Jan-Mar 2024, “depending on requirement”, the official added. In all, nearly 10.1 mt of wheat at a subsidised price of ₹2,150 per quintal has been allocated for calibrated release into the domestic open market by the Food Corporation of India through weekly e-auctions. So far, 8 mt of the grain has been sold to food processors.

While these auctions are ongoing, the government has shifted gears to now reach consumers directly with three items, Bharat Atta (packaged wheat), Bharat Dal (packaged chickpea) and Bharat Rice through a vast network of countrywide cooperative stores, the official said.

While the government has achieved its goal of stabilising prices of wheat prices, inflation in rice continues to be an issue. “We have prepared a heat map of places where rice inflation is high and agencies such as Nafed (which will market Bharat rice) will target those places,” food



Bharat Rice is being sold at a ₹29 per kg at all outlets of the Kendriya Bhandar network. AFP

secretary Sanjeev Chopra said.

Union food and consumer affairs minister Piyush Goyal launched Bharat Rice, following Bharat wheat and pulses, on February 6 in New Delhi, flagging off 100 mobile vans where sales would be held. As part of supply-side measures, the government has, in all, channelled over 750,000 tonne of wheat and 500,000 tonne of rice for the Bharat brand, Chopra said.

In an attempt to showcase its fight against inflation by selling affordable food, the government branded its subsidised wheat as Bharat Atta in November with a distinct label and style. It is also selling cheap pulses under a similar brand.

Bharat Rice, being sold at a cheaper-than-market rate of ₹29 per kg, is now available at all stores and mobile outlets of the Kendriya Bhandar network, National Agricultural Cooperative Marketing Federation of India (NAFED) and National Cooperative Consumers' Federation of India (NCCF). Plans are also afoot to make it available on e-commerce platforms. Bharat Atta is being sold at a discounted rate of ₹27.5 per kg.

“The government is wary of high rice prices as it faces Lok Sabha polls in just a few months. It's the only cereal where inflation is entrenched,” said Rahul Chouhan of IGrain.