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Row over export of fresh vegetables to Saudi Arabia

Dilip Kumar Jha, Business Standard

Mumbai, 9 November 2013: Saudi Arabia, the fifth-largest importer of fresh vegetables from India, has said pesticide residues in the commodity are higher than permissible levels. It has threatened to take strong action in the near future.

In an advisory to the Agricultural and Processed Food Products Export Development Authority (Apeda), the government of Saudi Arabia said high levels of pesticide residues were detected in two consignments of green chilli. "It has been brought to the notice of authorities of KSA (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia) that in some recent consignments of vegetables from India, there have been interceptions of higher than permissible levels of residues of pesticides. If the situation persists, the government of KSA will take strong action in the near future," the advisory said.

Saudi Arabia accounts for Rs 92 crore of annual imports of fresh vegetables from India. With Rs 284 crore of imports, Pakistan was the largest importer in 2012-13, followed by the UAE (Rs 255 crore) and the UK (Rs 151 crore). With Rs 143 crore of fresh vegetable imports, Nepal was fourth on the list.

"Volume is not a worry. The only worry is the action, as prescribed by the Saudi Arabian authorities. If they ban vegetable imports from India, other countries in West Asia may follow, impacting India's overall vegetables exports severely," said Vinod Kaul, deputy general manager and head (horticulture), Apeda.

Though Saudi Arabian authorities haven't specified the permissible limit of pesticide residue, it is usually understood the specifications by the European Union are applicable. Specifications by Codex, as well as other global norms, are also understood to be applicable on fresh vegetable exports to Saudi Arabia.

In an advisory to exporters, Apeda has advised adherence to the import requirements of Saudi Arabia, adding products should be tested before exports. "As a region, West Asia is very important to us. We, therefore, do not want any strong action by Saudi Arabia, and its repercussion on other countries in the region. Hence, we have advised our members to test export oriented goods carefully before shipping," said Kaul.

West Asia accounts for about a third of India's overall fresh vegetable exports. In 2012-13, total exports of fresh vegetables stood at Rs 1,334 crore, a rise of 2.7 per cent compared with Rs 1,299 crore in 2011-12.

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