

Need to monitor rubber nurseries

K. A. Martin

KOCHI: The spiralling price of natural rubber has spawned an industry, rubber nurseries, that is now testing farmers' confidence and is a spot of bother for the plantation watchdog, Rubber Board.

While Indian clones, RRII 105, 414 and 430, have caught the imagination of planters in Ghana, Liberia and Malaysia, the rising number of nurseries back home has created a problem of reliability and quality. Rubber Board estimates that there are between 2,000 and 2,500 nurseries across Kerala that sell rubber planting materials. Many of them are not exclusive rubber nurseries. They function as multi-species outlets.

Rubber Production Commissioner J. Thomas says that there is no control over the nursery business, pointing out that the Board initially insisted on registration of nurseries. The controls were withdrawn in the late 1980s thinking that only quality planting material providers would stay in business.

However, the last five years have witnessed unprecedented rise in natural rubber price. The average price rose from Rs.92.04 in 2006-07 to more than Rs.200 a kg last year. The average price in April 2011 was Rs.258 and it was Rs.211.17 a kg this April.

All Kerala Rubber Nurseries' Association claims it is now a free-for-all and calls for controls. It admits that the Board may not be in a position to control the situation.

Natural rubber is a long-gestation crop. It would be a

great loss for a farmer to discover, after three or four years of waiting, that the wrong planting material had been used.

The association has just 600 members. Josekutty Antony, Secretary of the association, estimates that there are at least 3,000 units that sell rubber planting materials in Kerala. About 75 per cent of them are small-time businesses. Only about a 100 of them sell more than 50,000 units of planting materials a year and those selling a lakh or more units yearly would be less than 20, he said.

Jose Cheerakuzhy from Palakkad, who runs a chain of nurseries, too, feels that the nursery business must be overseen. He suggests that the Rubber Board can start with the root trainer poly bags, a culture that is now catching up in Kerala. It is a new practice over which the Board can exert some control, he adds.

There is no accurate account of the volume of business or of the units of planting materials sold by the nurseries. A rough estimate is that about three crore budded trees and root trainer plants have been sold over the last five years, putting the annual demand around 60 lakh units.

Most of the planting materials go into new plantation areas such as the North East and Konkan, Goa and Mangalore. It is estimated that around 6,000 hectares come under re-plantation annually in Kerala. Each hectare requires between 500 and 600 units of new planting material.