

FSSAI: Continuing to empower India towards a healthy future

The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India has embarked upon a large scale effort to transform the country's food system in order to provide safe, healthy and sustainable food for the citizens through the "Eat Right India" movement. **Shri Arun Singhal**, IAS, CEO, FSSAI speaks exclusive to HRANI on its new policies and plans for the future.

Q What are the key focus areas for FSSAI in this financial year?

A There is a need to accelerate the progress towards attaining more robust, holistic and healthy food systems in order to enhance the health of our citizens as well as the health of our environment and economy. FSSAI will continue to ensure provision of safe, healthy and sustainable diets to the consumer and empower India towards a healthy future.

With the vision to transform the entire food ecosystem of the country, FSSAI will remain focussed upon expanding the network of licensed/registered food businesses. Special Drives and Camps are being organized by State Authorities on a regular basis to get more businesses under the FSSAI licensing/ registration purview. We are also working towards improving the overall compliance in the food ecosystem and promotion of Self-Compliance by Food Businesses through perpetual licensing and annual returns.

Transparency in the monitoring of compliances has been brought in through Digitization. FSSAI has launched Food Safety Compliance System (FoSCoS) in the year 2020 to provide ease to food businesses and authorities in management of data related to compliance activities.

Strengthening the food testing infrastructure is very vital to ensure maintenance of food quality throughout the food value chain, be it at the food manufacturing facility or distribution or retail facility as defined under the Food Safety and Standards (FSS) Act. In order to ensure better quality control of food manufactured/distributed/supplied in the market, the FSSAI has over 200 notified food testing laboratories across the country. All FSSAI notified labs are NABL accredited and have the capability



to perform a wide array of testing as defined in the regulations. Additionally, Mobile Food Testing Laboratories (Food Safety on Wheels) have been allocated to various States/ UTs so that far flung areas that are beyond the reach of FSSAI notified labs, can utilize these mobile laboratories to perform food testing at the field level. In addition to this, FSSAI has also published a DART Book to help consumers perform simple and basic tests at home to check adulteration in food items.

The various initiatives rolled out under the Eat Right India campaign have seen reasonable success and need to be scaled up to cover every corner of the country. As we move forward, we plan to expand the reach of these initiatives in every corner of the country and nudge people's behaviour towards right eating habits. There is a need to align with all Ministries/Departments associated with food for the purpose of creating convergence and a coherent messaging to consumers and creating safety and hygiene protocols across the food chain.

What is the concept of Food Safety on Wheels (FSWs)? How are FSWs helping FSSAI fulfil the objective of testing various food commodities?

To facilitate on-the-spot testing of

adulteration in common food items, FSSAI has provided over 173 mobile food testing laboratories called Food Safety on Wheels (FSWs) to the States/ UTs to add to the food testing infrastructure in the country. Any consumer can visit these FSWs and test the quality of food products. These units help the functionaries in the States to enhance their outreach and conduct surveillance activities even in far-flung areas. Most of these FSWs are being utilised by States

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effectively and efficiently.

FSWs are fully functional mobile laboratory, equipped with basic infrastructure for quick qualitative testing for detection of adulteration in various food commodities which can ascertain the presence or absence of specific adulterants in food sample like Milk and Milk products, Fats and oils, Spices and condiments etc. The other rapid test kits like pathogen detection kit, pesticides kit, antibiotic kits etc. can also be placed in FSW to do on spot testing.

In addition, FSWs also serve as a platform for training of food businesses largely in the unorganised sector ensuring wider outreach of the training program, especially in villages, towns, remote and far-flung areas. Additionally, FSWs can be used as an awareness tool to spread messaging on safe and healthy food habits.

FSSAI is funding the States/UTs for Hygiene Rating, what are the provisions and how can industry benefit from it?

FSSAI has introduced a voluntary scheme called Hygiene Rating Scheme for food service establishments to make it easy for consumers to make informed choices about the food they eat. The



Hygiene Rating Scheme is a technology driven, user-friendly scheme where food establishments are given a rating on a scale of 1-5, where 5 indicates “excellent” compliance and 1 indicates “poor” compliance of food hygiene and safety standards. The ratings are displayed in the form of symbols i.e. smileys. This scheme encourages food businesses to ensure high standards of hygiene and sanitation and allows consumers to make informed food choices. This scheme is currently applicable to restaurants, cafes, bistros, diners and other eating-places, sweet shops, bakeries and meat shops. It also includes interfacing with e-commerce platforms such as food delivery services and apps to encourage their associated eating places to adopt the scheme.

A comprehensive checklist has been created based on the criteria a food business needs to meet hygiene and sanitation standards laid in FSS Act. The food business is then audited basis this checklist and awarded a rating by a third-party audit agency empanelled by FSSAI. A certificate is generated based on this rating and displayed for consumers at the premises. This helps consumers identify if the place is hygienic or not. A rating of 3 stars and above is considered as a ‘Good Rating’.

This Hygiene Rating is helpful for both food businesses and consumers. Through this rating process, food businesses have the opportunity to understand the basic criteria of safe food handling practices and implement these practices through training and capacity building of their food handlers. Moreover, food businesses that are compliant can showcase their efforts to consumers by displaying this certificate prominently at the premises. This gives them a competitive edge over other businesses and wins the trust and loyalty of their consumers. The businesses that are hygiene rated are compliant with the FSS Act and are not required to be mandatorily inspected by the State Food Authorities for a period of two years.

For consumers, this rating is a helpful tool to easily identify if the food being served is safe or not. This empowers consumers to make informed choices and exercise their right to choose a place to eat not only on the basis of taste and service but also health. It also plants the idea of food safety and hygiene in the minds of consumers, making those who are unaware also cognizant of the importance of food safety when

they eat out. Overall, such a scheme benefits everyone as a whole because improved hygiene standards means fewer instances of food-borne illnesses among citizens overall, better health and productivity of people, reduced burden on the healthcare system and ultimately growth and development of the economy and the country as a whole.

There was an announcement of perpetual license by FSSAI, when is it going to be implemented?

The provision of perpetual licenses subject to the condition of filing online annual returns is proposed under the Draft Food Safety and Standards (Licensing and Registration of Food Business) Amendment Regulations, 2020 which was draft notified for public comments on 17th November 2020. The draft regulations after compilation of public comments are under the process of consideration and approval in due course.

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Eat Right India has been quite successful in its efforts to bring back the wisdom of traditional foods with focus on local and seasonal produce, how is FSSAI sensitising the young population towards healthy eating?

The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India has embarked upon a large scale effort to transform the country's food system in order to provide safe, healthy and sustainable food for the citizens through the “Eat Right India” movement.

Eat Right India is based on three pillars – Eat Safe, Eat Healthy and Eat Sustainable. It is an action oriented program, driven by the judicious mix of regulatory, capacity building, collaborative and empowerment approaches to ensure that our food is good both for the people and the planet. Through this, FSSAI targets both demand as well as the supply side of food. While the supply side interventions are aimed at building capacities of food businesses to promote self-compliance in food safety, the demand side initiatives work towards motivating consumers by engaging and educating them on eating right as well as demanding safe and healthy food.

FSSAI uses various tools and mediums to create awareness about eating right and promoting traditional foods with a focus on local and seasonal produce. To commemorate 75 years of India's independence, Walkathons and Eat Right Melas are being organised in 75 cities across the country. These events aim for massive outreach to educate people and spread the message of safe, healthy and sustainable diets through fun-filled activities like quiz competitions, zumba, yoga and live cooking demonstrations etc., especially targeting our youth to create a culture of safe, healthy and sustainable eating. In addition to this, FSSAI has been undertaking various efforts to promote Millets as a nutri-cereal and sensitize citizens about the benefits of local and seasonal produce through new age channels like digital media platforms. Nutritive value and options for various vegetarian and non-vegetarian food items are disseminated to the public so that they can make informed food choices.

Through Challenges like Eat Right Challenge for Cities & Districts and Eat-Smart Cities Challenge, awareness about healthy eating habits is created to consume a variety of whole grains including millets; local and seasonal produce; fortified food items for better health outcomes. To spread awareness to a wider audience especially in the rural areas, scroll messages related to millets and their health benefits have been released on Doordarshan (DD News, DD Kisan and DD Regional Kendra's). Youth is targeted through new age channels like Radio Mirchi, IRCTC App; SMS service for creating mass awareness about safe, healthy and sustainable eating practices.