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F&B bodies meet FSSAI chair, demand review of proposed labelling norms

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Ashwani Maindola, New Delhi

In a never-before move, the food and beverage industry bodies and associations, for highlighting their demand for a review of the proposed labelling norms by FSSAI, made a representation to FSSAI chairman Ashish Bahuguna here recently.

Bodies representing the biscuit, bread, halwai (sweetmeat), sugar, liquor and beverage sectors, rice and wheat mills, the Indian Dairy Association and industry bodies such as the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI), the Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry (ASSOCHAM) and the All India Food Processors' Association (AIFPA), were involved in hectic deliberations on the subject of labelling, which the food and beverage industry termed as a move towards putting breaks on its development.

The discussion was led by S Jindal, president, AIFPA, who said, "It is important that regulations are practical and implementable and do not jeopardise productivity. Though it is not the mandate of the food regulator to develop the sector, the regulations should not retard production. If any regulation is retrograde and hurdles ease-of-doing-business and entrepreneurship, it needs to be reviewed." Jindal added that closer interaction with the industry was required.

The outcome of the meeting was not clear. Meanwhile, the representatives of the various industries put forth some observations.

Bringing forth the lack of clarity with regard to logos for veg and non-veg, Indian Cake and Rusk Manufacturers Association's Parveen Khanna said that apart from clarification on the logos, there should be clear direction to the food safety officers (FSOs) who tend to go after manufacturers even in cases where there is slight difference in the colour of logo. National Federation for Cooperative Sugar Factories' representatives sought that no colour coding be imposed on sugar and sugar-containing products.

P N Kaul, former president AIFPA, observed that the labelling should be simple for everybody to understand. Gulshan Kalra, of Hindustan Coca Cola, said that the industry should be given time to exhaust all the pre-labelled packages. R S Khanna,

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from Kwaliti, observed that instead of food standards, FSSAI had started standardising the food, and there was a need to qualify the discussion around the standards for food, and not the threshold limit in food, and each food should be looked upon separately.

Satish Verma from Halwai, Carter and Restaurant Association, observed that if sugar was reduced from their products, it would be an infringement upon their right to formulation as well. “We are manufacturing something with a prescribed recipe, and if one ingredient is reduced, the whole composition will be changed. The consumption of sugar is an individual choice,” he added.

Issues related to allergen and gluten, which was missing from the proposed draft along with the diabetic logo, were also raised during the discussion.

However, FSSAI didn't appear to be moved with the observation. Replying to the queries, Bahuguna stated that the allegation of keeping the industry out of discussions was not true.

He told the industry representatives that FSSAI was of the firm belief that whatever action was taken, be it on formation of standards or enforcement or other issues, they had only one target client in their minds, and that was the consumer.

“Our mandate is to ensure safe and wholesome food to the consumer. The food and beverage business is a very important component of the food safety ecosystem, of course,” Bahuguna said.

He added that the intention behind the labelling regulations was that they should be comprehensible enough to the common citizen.

“The questions are, ‘How do you communicate with the consumer when there is so much information on the label?’ and ‘How do you simplify the label in a manner so that a consumer, literate or not, finds it in accordance to his/her expectation?’,” Bahuguna stated.

He added, “We can't hide behind the excuse that this is our traditional food, this is what we have been eating, and if it is sugary or high in fat, so bet it. Our job is to provide safe and wholesome food. And labelling norms are an effort to nudge the industry towards producing more and more wholesome food.”

Bahuguna said, “FSSAI has not stated that the sugar, salt and fat be reduced from food products. The industry can add any amount of sugar, salt and fat, but it needs to label it. The purpose of the labelling is to educate the consumer to understand what the food product contains.”

He added that the regulator would welcome any suggestion coming from industry, stating that if the industry opined that these standards were not practical, they can

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come up with their own standards and FSSAI will look into it.

In a significant move, the regulator has proposed a draft on labelling norms, in which high fat, sugar and salt (HFSS) foods have been defined. The most significant one is the traffic light declaration. In case the fat or trans-fat or sugar or salt content exceeds the threshold value and the limits are crossed, it has to be labelled in red.

Vaibhav Kulkarni, chairman, technical and regulatory committee and board member, Health and Dietary Supplement Association (HADSA), said that the impact was likely to be significant. The new regulation will require large-scale modification of the label.

“The traffic light declaration is going to seriously impact foods falling under the categories of confectionery, bakery, chocolates, snacks and other such fun foods. The red mark which will warn the consumer regarding the level of salt, sugar and fat,” he added.

“With the heightened consumer awareness, this may impact the sales adversely. It will require reformulation, if it needs to come out of the traffic light declaration,” Kulkarni said.

“There will be pressure on the manufacturers to accommodate all the labelling requirements (which will increase) with the increased height of numerals and alphabets, leading to higher costs. This is more so with medium- and small-scale food business operators (FBOs). Additional parameters in the nutrition fact table will push up the analytical costs,” he added.