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“Guidance documents for seven sectors developed”

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The Union health ministry in recent times has increased its focus on the food safety ecosystem in the country. Through Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI), the health ministry has speeded up the work related to regulations, standards and so on and the work is expected to complete soon. **Anupriya Patel**, minister of state for health and family welfare, in an email interaction with **Shraddha Joshi**, detailed out plans by the FSSAI in particular and the ministry of health in general in strengthening the food safety ecosystem in the country. *Excerpts:*

How is the ministry looking into the issue of food safety and what efforts is it taking to ensure and strengthen food safety ecosystem?

The ministry considers that issue of food safety is of paramount importance for public health. WHO estimates of the global burden of food-borne diseases show that 1 in 10 people fall ill every year from eating contaminated food, and 4,20,000 people die each year as a result. Children under 5 years of age are at particularly high risk, with some 125,000 young children dying from food-borne diseases every year. Even long-term health problems including cancer and neurological disorders can be caused by eating food that has been contaminated with heavy metals or pesticide residues or other toxic substances. In fact, food contamination has far reaching effects beyond direct public health consequences - it undermines food exports, tourism, livelihoods of food handlers as well as economic development.

The food safety ecosystem is being strengthened through several steps being initiated by the ministry and the FSSAI. More than 11,000 internationally benchmarked standards and food additives provisions have been notified. FSSAI is developing guidance documents to assist food industries (especially the small and medium businesses) in implementing food hygiene and safety requirements. These documents provide practical approaches which a business should adopt to ensure food safety throughout the process being handled by them.

Currently guidance documents for seven sectors have been developed namely; bakery, oils & fats, flour milling, food grain warehouses, poultry, food supplements and catering and under process of development for other sectors. Also, with roll-out of the digital licensing and compliance systems and risk-based sampling, consistent

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and transparent enforcement throughout the country through the state food safety machinery could be greatly facilitated.

For training and capacity building of food businesses, FSSAI has launched Food Safety Training and Certification (FoSTaC) programme having several basic, advanced and specialised courses for food handlers and food safety supervisors on matters of food safety and healthy nutrition. Each FBO is expected to have at least one trained & certified food safety supervisor at each premises. During last one year, almost 700 training programmes have been conducted where more than 14,000 people have been trained. It is expected that in next two years, all state and Central licensed FBOs will have at least one food safety supervisor trained and certified under FoSTaC.

To facilitate food testing, FSSAI has expanded its NABL-accredited laboratory network and has taken several steps to build capacity of food testing laboratories and staff through Food Testing Staff's Training (FoTeST). FSSAI has also rolled out a scheme with an outlay of Rs 482 crore to strengthen 45 state food laboratories, 12 referral laboratories and introducing 62 mobile food labs. FSSAI has introduced third-party auditing of food business for checking compliance with FSMS guidelines.

As a part of its obligation to ensure safety of imported food, FSSAI has simplified and streamlined its food import clearance processes and integrated it with ICEGATE of Customs under single-window interface to facilitate trade (SWIFT). As FSSAI is present only at 21 locations in six ports, it has notified 135 Customs officers at 135 locations and one officer at Kandla SEZ as authorised officers to ensure parity of testing at all import points. The Import Manual has also been made available for guidance of all concerned.

To combat micronutrient deficiency, FSSAI has been actively promoting and making available fortified food staples in the country and also coordinating efforts of states to make fortified foods available through various government run schemes as well as in the open market.

Over the past few years, a number of initiatives have been taken up by FSSAI to improve the engagement with its stakeholders be it industry, academia and consumers and bringing about social and behavioral change among all citizens. In this regard, its Safe and Nutritious Food initiatives for citizens wherever they are - in their homes, schools, workplaces and while eating out are notable. With the active cooperation and support of all the states and UTs and other stakeholders, these initiatives would bring the desired results.

FSSAI is also promoting hygienic street food and local food culture under its programme 'Let's bring the goodness back' to ensure safe and wholesome food.

FSSAI has also increased its global outreach by promoting international

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collaborations in various areas to ensure safety and quality of food.

FSSAI's work related to regulations regarding the food safety standards is going on for years now. Elaborate on how soon the regulations work shall finish and tell us about the process that takes to complete the regulations from inception to finality.

After the enactment of the FSS Act, 2006, FSSAI has drafted six principal regulations through extensive consultation and deliberations/ meetings with various stakeholders. These regulations have been notified in the Gazette of India on August 1, 2011, and came into force on August 5, 2011. At that time, 377 standards of various food commodities taken from PFA Rules, 1954, which were very old, were notified. But due to technological advancement, changing dietary pattern etc. there was a need to review and upgrade such regulations in line with the global practices, addressing both the needs of population and promotion of innovation by industry in national interest.

The development of standards is a dynamic and ongoing process based on the latest developments in food science, food consumption pattern, new food products and additives, changes in the processing technology leading to changed specifications, advancements in food analytical methods, innovation by the industry and identification of new risks or other regulatory options. Accordingly, the article/areas of food for setting standards are selected based on the requirement of stakeholders and also with a view to bridge the gap between national and other international standards.

In food authority, the work of standard development is undertaken by 17 scientific panels and a scientific committee comprising more than 220 independent subject experts/scientists. For this internationally available standards including Codex and nationally available standards like BIS and Agmark are studied and reviewed and on the basis of their study, harmonisation of standards is carried out.

In recent past, the authority has put in concerted efforts for establishing globally benchmarked science-based standards for food products. During the last two years, the authority has framed standards for more than 130 food products specifying more than 150 quality parameters and reviewed major regulations.

The authority has also formulated new regulations on nutraceuticals and health supplements which are unique in the world; regulations for organic foods, regulations for food fortification, including a new regulation on 'alcoholic beverages,' which would be notified soon.

The authority has also taken up the revision of packaging and labelling regulations. Once revised, these regulations would provide consumers informed choice to select the right food. Front of pack label of food products would require display of fat, trans-fat, sugar and salt content along with their per serve and per cent contribution of the Recommended Daily Allowance (RDA). The authority is also strategising on

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the major subjects - Salt Reduction; Trans-fat Reduction; and Sugar Reduction to raise the bar for food safety and healthy nutrition.

Although a number of new standards and regulations aimed at providing safe and wholesome food products to citizens of the country while giving impetus for food industry have been developed, but still a lot of standards are still to come. Everyday a new food product is coming in the market nationally or internationally and standards for these need to be in place.

The formulation and revision of regulations/ standards involves several stages. After recommendation by the scientific panel, following the due process laid down including validation by the scientific committee, regulations/ standards are considered by the food authority. After these are approved by the food authority, and thereafter by the ministry, the draft notifications are issued for inviting comments from all stakeholders including WTO. After considering the suggestions so received, these are finalised and notified in the Gazette of India.

Food in school is a major challenge. FSSAI is in forefront of fortification plans of food products including packaged food. How is the programme going on and is there any plan to include the mid-day meal under the programme of fortification?

FSSAI has initiated the project 'Safe & Nutritious Food at School' to raise awareness amongst children on importance of food safety. As a part of the initiative, draft regulations on Food Safety and Standards (Safe and Wholesome Food for School Children) have been notified for public comments. FSSAI has also created age-appropriate activity-based Yellow Book on Food Safety, Hygiene and Nutrition Practices across Schools. Also, a pool of 521 health & wellness coordinators & master trainers have been created for information dissemination. All resources created are available on website snportal.in. A letter has also been addressed to ministry of HRD and states to include and adopt curricular activities on food safety & nutrition in schools.

As regards fortification of food, food fortification is globally accepted as a proven, cost-effective strategy for prevention and control of micronutrient deficiencies. With an aim to address the problems of micronutrient deficiencies, the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India has released in October 2016, standards on fortification of five staples namely edible oil, milk, salt, wheat flour and rice and also launched the +F logo to be put on all fortified packaged food to help identify foods that are being fortified as per FSSAI standards.

As part of the fortification strategy, all the Government Safety Net programmes namely Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS), Mid-Day Meal (MDM) and Public Distribution System (PDS) are covered to include the fortified staples in services that are provided to the beneficiaries under each scheme. A lot of states have now started implementing fortification across their safety net programmes. The latest progress is available at <http://ffrc.fssai.gov.in> /ffrc/food_

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product_availability.

Besides the issue of severe malnutrition and hunger in the country is a major challenge as reported by the WHO in a recently held meeting at FSSAI chaired by Union health minister J P Nadda. How is your ministry planning to eradicate and what role you think FSSAI can play?

It is a fact that though we are in a position to reach every needy household in whatever geographical location and terrain it is located and provide food grains at highly subsidised rates, malnutrition is still prevalent in the country. This is mainly because quite a large segment of society cannot afford to get access to adequate /sufficient amount of proteins, vitamins, minerals and other micronutrients as they can hardly afford to purchase nutrient-rich food such as milk, eggs, meat and fish. Therefore, we need to adopt multipronged strategy for the purpose.

On the one hand, we need to ensure a reasonable source of income to all so that they can afford to purchase nutrient-rich food. This is likely to take time. Secondly, making available fortified food can also meet some of their micronutrient requirements. FSSAI has taken the initiative by laying down standards for fortification of staple food items namely edible oil, milk, double fortified salt, wheat flour and rice with vitamins and minerals and nudging the industry to adopt fortification as a norm.

At present, it is voluntary on the part of FBOs but the same can be made mandatory in future. Government under its Mid-Day Meal and Integrated Child Development Schemes is making available fortified food. Some states have also taken initiatives to distribute fortified food. There is need to popularise the fortified food by adequately incentivising FBOs to adopt the same and making such food available in the market.

FSSAI has convened a summit at national level; and organised several zonal consultations for states/UTs, jointly with ministry of women and child development, other line ministries/departments and development partners during 2017 for generating awareness. Further, FSSAI is also in process of continued engagement with staple food manufacturers to enable them to undertake fortification and advocacy towards creating mass awareness on the importance of fortified food through several outreach programmes; and use of electronic and print media.

Recently, FSSAI has also organised a two-day 'National Conclave on Food Safety and Nutrition' with state health ministers and state health secretaries with a view to drive the work on food safety and healthy nutrition in proper direction across the country.

Also, Indian Food Sharing Alliance (IFSA) is a platform formed by FSSAI to help solve India's food waste and hunger crisis. Through IFSA, FSSAI aims to provide strategic policy, regulatory and programme support to food loss and food waste reduction initiatives. Various food recovery agencies, NGOs and partner

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organisations are a part of IFSA and whose primary aim is to help recover or prevent food from waste, loss and surplus in the country while also educating the population on the same.

State food safety agencies are facing severe manpower crunch. How is your ministry planning to augment that?

Enforcement of the FSS Act and Rules and Regulations made thereunder primarily rests with the state/UT governments. Enforcement, which includes licensing, surveillance, monitoring, inspection and random sampling is done through the institution of commissioner of food safety, designated officers and food safety officers (FSOs). Overall, the number of food safety officers have seen a significant rise of above 35% over past few years with nearly 3,000 FSOs in various states and UTs. However, the number is not adequate for effective implementation of the Act. FSSAI regularly takes up the issue of staffing, institutional arrangements, manpower crunch etc. with the state/UT governments. Gaps in institutional arrangements and manpower was also highlighted in the first National Conference of States/UTs Health Secretaries/Food Safety Commissioners held on January 8, 2018, on the subject of on “Promoting Preventive Health through Convergence and Concrete Action.”

Also the state food safety agencies are facing crunch in terms of infrastructure, like labs both moveable and mobile. There is also report about lacking in terms of capacity of doing tests on major subjects of microbiology, chemical analysis etc. How is your ministry planning to enhance that?

To strengthen the lab infrastructure, FSSAI is implementing a Central Sector Scheme titled “Strengthening of Food Testing System in the Country Including Provision of Mobile Food Testing Labs” (SOFTeL) with a total outlay of Rs 481.95 crore. The time-frame for implementation of the scheme is 2016-17 to 2018-19.

The scheme inter alia envisages strengthening of 45 state food testing labs, strengthening of 12 referral laboratories and creation of 62 mobile food labs. Capacity building of food testing personnel is another major component under this scheme. Till date, a grant of Rs 70.50 crore has been released for strengthening of 23 food laboratories of 22 states/UTs for procurement of high-end equipment (along with manpower) and setting up of microbiological laboratory which would enable the state food testing laboratories to analyse the safety parameters in food samples such as heavy metals, pesticide residues, antibiotic and drug residues and naturally occurring toxic substances along with microbiological tests. A grant of Rs 10 crore has been released for strengthening of five referral laboratories for procurement of high-end equipment.

Further, 22 Food Safety on Wheels (the mobile food testing laboratory) have been provided to 20 states/UTs. This is a multipurpose vehicle which would help States/UTs in food testing, dissemination of information and act as a platform for getting food safety training. Each such vehicle costs Rs 38.50 lakh approximately. A grant of Rs 5 lakh/mobile lab/year is also being provided to states/UTs along with

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the mobile lab.

27 programmes have been organised in association with government institutions, international bodies and private laboratories on NABL (National Accreditation Board for Testing and Calibration Laboratories) awareness, GFLP (Good Food Laboratory Practices), specialised programme on mycotoxin, pesticides, veterinary drug residue & antibiotics and dope substances in food supplement. A total of 623 participated in these programmes.

There is a large number of street vendors and a large part of the population feeds on them. How is your ministry ensuring the safety of the food that is sold through these vendors?

FSSAI is taking comprehensive steps to bring all the street food vendors under the ambit of FSSAI Act, 2006, Rules & Regulations by ensuring ease of doing business through simple registration process with the aid of CSCs (Common Service Centres) in the country. Regular surveillance, monitoring, inspection and sampling of food is being carried out by the officials of food safety departments of the respective states/ UTs to ensure the safety of the food that is sold through these street vendors.

In addition, FSSAI's initiative of "Clean Street Food" focusses on training of street food vendors on basic hygiene requirements to ensure health, hygiene and safety standards of street food for all consumers. Few states/UTs have successfully adopted and implemented this initiative.

