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Food regulator wants packaged food labels to display if they contain GM ingredients

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E-Paper

Seeking to introduce GMO labelling for the first time in India, the country's food regulator has proposed all packaged food products containing genetically modified (GM) ingredients must clearly state it on their labels. The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) also suggests mandatory declaration by packaged food manufacturers about nutritional information such as calories, total fat, trans fat, sugar and salt per serve on the front of the pack. Since the country has no provision for GM labelling in its regulatory mechanism presently, consumers are clueless whether packaged food items they buy have genetically engineered (GE) ingredients amid 'unproven' concerns in certain quarters about adverse affects such transgenic food can have on human health.

The FSSAI had last month released a 42-page draft notice - Food Safety and Standards (Labelling and Display) Regulations, 2018 - making it mandatory to label such food stuffs as "Contains GMO/Ingredients derived from GMO" if such items contain 5% or more GE ingredients. The authority will notify the provision for implementation after analysing stakeholders' opinion on the issue.

Pitching for a colour code, the draft proposes that the high fat, sugar and salt will be coloured 'red' in case the value of energy from total sugar is more than 10% of the total energy provided by the 100 grams or 100 ml of the product. It has similar provisions for trans-fat and sodium content.

Draft says that the nutritional information may additionally be provided in the form of bar code. The colour coding will make it easier for consumers to know about the nutritional value of food products and help them make choices as per their requirements. The issue of labelling of food products having GM ingredients has, however, drawn flak from certain quarters. Stakeholders have flagged that the move is inconsistent and ultra vires for FSSAI to issue any regulation on this matter when GM foods itself are not allowed to be sold in India.

Sridhar Radhakrishnan, co-convenor of the Coalition for a GM-Free India, who sent the group's objections on the draft to the FSSAI told TOI that that the labelling move will, in fact, allow the GM foods to enter food supply chain when it is anyway illegal to sell GM foods in India currently. "We need preventive action at this juncture rather than regulatory action", he said.

Other experts, however, differ. Chandra Bhushan, deputy director general of the Centre for Science and Environment (CSE), said, "The GM labelling is an important step but we need a proper system to check it. We need advanced lab facilities to check whether the food stuffs contain GM ingredients or not".

Bhushan is, however, critical about the approach of the FSSAI on finer points of the proposed labelling provisions. He said, "It has adopted a 'reductionist approach' towards nutrition. It allows a product to display nutrition benefits based on one attribute even if the product is bad on other attributes".