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FSSAI to review food import clearance system to halve clearance duration

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E-Paper

FSSAI has decided to conduct a comprehensive review of the food import clearance system (FICS) with an aim to halve the timeline for clearance in next the three months, from the current 190 hours to 90 hours average. The country's apex food regulator has decided to reduce the paper burden on food importers by reducing the number of documents needed for clearance from 12 to five, while the importers are now required to upload all the relevant documents on the Ice gate portal of the Central Board of Excise and Customs instead of FSSAI's portal. From June 1, custom house agents or importers can do that and need not come to the FICS to upload the additional information. All the information uploaded to Icegate would be available to FSSAI as well and save 4-5 days' delay in clearance.

It has also been decided that a uniform basic food import clearance fee of Rs 2,000 will be charged for bill of entry, and no further testing fee would be charged from the importer. Currently, the testing fee is Rs 12,000, besides other bills that can range up to Rs 5,000.



The decision is likely to benefit the food importers who have a lot at stake, as speedy clearance would ensure minimising the chances of losses due to delays. "However, this doesn't mean that the regulator will give a bypass to the importers to bring in the food without any compliance. But the checks and balances have been made or streamlined in such a manner that would help in both ways, in speedy clearance and ensuring food safety," said Pawan Kumar Agarwal, chief executive officer, FSSAI. He added that the regulator would focus on a better surveillance of the imported food products that are sold in the market. Agarwal said, "If it is checked well, the compliance at the entry point would be better." He added that the risk-based sampling was now completely in place and there was complete alignment with the HFSS Code, dual use and risk profile of food items. "There is no need for referring to the drug controller if the end-use declaration of the product is food," Agarwal said.

Further, the pre-arrival document scrutiny (PADS) to enable the importers to obtain FSSAI approval before the shipping of the consignment will be put in place by June 2018 completely.

Moreover, the regulator has decided to expand the list under the provisional no-objection certificate (NOC), which now includes fresh food having a shelf life of less than seven days and packaged food. It has also been decided to reduce the number of samples for testing for the same consignment/batch of the same manufacturer. "We have also decided to incentivise the importer whose compliance record is good. We will provide the importer a green channel,

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by means of which he would be able to import the food with minimum documentation,” said Agarwal. “The scheme is in the line of the Customs Authorised Economic Operator Scheme,” he added. FSSAI has also reviewed the turnaround time for food testing, and for that, only labs in the vicinity of the importing port shall be assigned the test. The regulator has approved a microbiological test having turnaround time of around three days.

FSSAI will closely monitor the time taken in testing of imported food samples. Besides, labs in countries, including Bhutan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, has been recognised for the purpose of testing. Food is imported through 20 ports in India, wherein Mumbai, Delhi, Chennai, Kolkata and Tutincorin, remain the major ones, as FSSAI’s import offices are located there.