

FSSAI contemplating review of regulations prescribed for organic food

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E-Paper

FSSAI is actively considering reviewing the regulations it has prescribed for the organic food which came into force on July 1, 2018. The reason was said to be farmers' protests at several places, who are finding it difficult to adhere to the norms. "However, the country's apex food regulator opined that the farmers are waking up late. It has become the tendency of the people to wake up at the last moment. The regulations are there for some time, and the stakeholders have been informed that from July 1, the implementation shall begin. But until the last moment, nothing happened," said a senior official with FSSAI. Meanwhile, several organic farmer groups protested against the new regulations asking for organic certification and met with Pawan Kumar Agarwal, chief executive officer, FSSAI. The farmers raised issue related to the shortage of certification agencies and technical glitches, amongst others. There are challenges for the small farmers under the National Programme for Organic Production (NPOP) and the Participatory Guarantee System for India (PGS-India), as both are long-drawn-out processes and need farmers' involvement, which is not possible in case of small farmers.

Currently, India has a mere 24 accredited agencies for the inspection and certification of 0.5 million hectare organic farms. NPOP came in being to provide the equivalence with foreign standards, and start a regime of organic certified farming so that organic products are acceptable to foreign buyers, the only available market that time. The mandate till date was always the exports market, and hence, the Agricultural and Processed Foods Export Development Authority (APEDA) was the agency to handle this.

However, the domestic market is regulated by FSSAI. So unless there is a very good synchronisation between APEDA and FSSAI, things will go haywire, which is already happening. To add to the confusion, PGS is not recognised by APEDA, while it is promoted by Ministry of Agriculture, Government of India. "So this amalgamation has thrown the process off-track, and now there is APEDA's organic and FSSAI's organic, and even the brands don't know what to do, said Pankaj Agarwal, co-founder and managing director, Just Organik, which sells organic food products. He added that any farmer who wants to grow organic foods has to do so under a process, and NPOP is the process that gives the farmer to also sell his produce overseas as organic.

If the farmer only wants to do domestic market, the PGS-India system has been recognised to do the same. This is also a fact that farmers rarely pay for the certification cost by themselves. In most of the cases, it is the brands/companies that further process/market the produce, pay for the certification costs, like in case of our brand, Just Organik. Farmers shall not be exempted to follow the process, as ultimately, this is about the safety of the food and directly affects the health of the consumer," Pankaj Agarwal said.

"India, as a market, has taken a big beating, and we cannot convince our own domestic consumers, as well as foreign buyers, of the authenticity to that extent. The result is in front of us - the Indian organic market has not progressed at all. These regulations have, for the first time, put the consumer in front of the farmers," he added.

Pankaj Agarwal said, "The biggest challenge is the implementation. Currently it is being pushed in a very haphazard way with no communication to the brands/companies." "The industry representation is also half-hearted and the criteria for deciding the expert panel is questionable. However, a very good communication channel is available in form of the certification bodies, to which every company is attached. Even after implementation, the biggest worry is that it should not initiate another inspector raj," he added.

Meanwhile, FSSAI has decided to conduct another round of consultations with the stakeholders, particularly the small farmers, in the coming weeks. “We’re trying to figure it out that if there can be made a special arrangement for the small farmers in the regulations. So we would be doing a review into the regulations,” said Pawan Kumar Agarwal. “But the traceability issue with the organic farming is a major concern, and there shall not any leniency on the subject, so that consumers are not cheated and genuine farmers also do not face any difficulty,” he added.

“We’re also calling the small traders and farmers for a meeting on the subjects as well, and we would try to find a way to safeguard their interests,” the FSSAI CEO said. FSSAI has also deferred implementation of the organic foods regulations till September 30, 2018, until which the traders has been asked to get a license or endorsed their existing licenses.

Giving relief to the small organic producers/traders, the apex regulator has also clarified that such traders/producers will be treated as petty food manufacturers defined under the Food Safety and Standards Act, 2006, and don’t require licenses to operate.

The organic farming is a hectic process to follow. There is a three-year process to make sure that farmland becomes organic and the residue from the land is reduced to below detectable limits. The challenge for the farmers during this period is the decrease in production, and that is generally compensated by the companies aggregating such farmers.