

# THE TIMES OF INDIA

## After public flak, govt & FDA say formalin inherent in fish

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PANAJI/ MARGAO: A day after public uproar over the food and drugs administration findings of cancer-causing chemical in fish brought from outside the state, the government and the agency got into a damage-control mode on Friday by claiming that "fish has inherent formalin content" and it was safe for consumption.

The damage-control began on Thursday itself when a few hours after stating that the fish samples had tested positive for formalin, FDA came out with a mysterious "permissible limit" for a carcinogenic substance after conducting lab tests.

Photo: Anant Redkar, design: Rakesh Mundye

Formalin is used for preservation of biological specimens and embalming, which delays decomposition of human remains

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Vishwajit Rane  
HEALTH MINISTER

“ Formalin cannot be added (to the fish). Nobody can add that for sure, but formalin is naturally present in the fish ”  
Jyoti Sardesai  
FDA DIRECTOR

What the state and the FDA have failed to provide are the findings of the spot test results that forced the agency to stop the sale of fish in the state's only wholesale market. While health minister Vishwajit Rane put up a brave front and said it was a panic reaction and "was a mistake on our part which will not be repeated again", he failed to share the findings of the spot test results.

Though the spin doctors of the government—TCP minister Vijai Sardesai on Thursday and Rane on Friday— were hard at work to establish the fact that there was nothing foul in imported fish, chief minister Manohar Parrikar maintained a studied silence.

FDA which had shown alacrity in checking fish samples for formalin on Thursday, did prefer to lie low on Friday. “But random raids will continue all over Goa to allay public apprehensions regarding the quality of fish,” FDA director Jyoti Sardesai told TOI.

“We will continuously check and ensure that fish beyond a certain limit (of formalin) is not sold in Goa,” Rane said. “There is formalin inherent in fish. But in some states, it is banned as it is used beyond permissible limits to preserve fish.”

Rane said that as health minister, it is his responsibility that this issue doesn’t affect people in the state. “There is no reason at the moment to panic,” he said.

Putting the blame entirely on FDA, Rane said the government has not given the agency officials the right to stop the sale of fish. “The FDA official should have gone to the FDA office, done the confirmatory test, and only then intimated them (fish traders to stop the sale),” Rane said.

FDA officials also towed the state government line by maintaining that none of the samples exceeded the “naturally occurring concentration of formalin in fish”, thereby ruling out the possibility of added amount of formalin.

Quoting from reports and scientific papers that marine fish naturally contains certain amount of formalin, FDA said: “As per the report published by Society of Fisheries Technologists (India) the concentration of formaldehyde in marine fish is found to be varying between 2.38 and 2.95 mg/kg; and for fish/shellfish between 0.33 and 16 mg/kg etc. The scientific papers published in the International Journal of Fisheries and aquatic studies show that freshly caught fish contains presence of naturally occurring formaldehyde in the range of 1.45 mg/kg to 2.6 mg/kg. However, the concentration may vary depending upon the commodity, the geographical condition (and) the marine waters.”

FDA also tried to reason it out that there was nothing wrong in the differential observations between the two tests—spot and lab—for formalin content.

“Spot tests carried out on the samples indicated presence of aldehydes, which is a family of organic compounds, which includes formaldehyde. Formaldehyde in its liquid form is known as formalin. Among all the aldehydes, formalin (formaldehyde) is carcinogenic if consumed in excess,” it said.

But it was also quick to add that it was only an “indicative test” and “unless confirmatory tests are carried out in the laboratory to ascertain the presence of formalin quality, fish cannot be declared as positive for formalin content.”

Over 24 hours after collecting the samples from Old Goa, FDA tested silver fish (Verli) and mackerels on Friday. While these samples did show positive for aldehydes by the spot test, upon laboratory analysis, no added formalin was detected, the FDA said.

The two samples were also tested by the “CIFTTest”, a formaldehyde detection kit for fresh fish developed by ICAR–Central Institute of Fisheries Technology, Cochin—the state FDA received the kit on Friday—and these reports too did not show presence of formalin, the FDA said.