

Use private labs to test food faster, food safety chief tells officials

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MADURAI: Responding to grievances of traders that food samples collected were not being tested on time, chief executive officer of the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI), Pawan Kumar Agarwal, urged officials to make use of recognised private labs to test products if government facilities cannot handle the demand.

Agarwal said this during a discussion on the Food Safety and Standards Act, 2006, jointly organized by Tamil Nadu Food Grains Merchants Association and Tamil Nadu Hotel Owners Association, on Monday.

Earlier, traders from Madurai city had reported that samples taken from manufacturing units and shops are at times tested after their expiry date, though rules stipulate that products must be tested within 14 days of sampling.

Addressing stakeholders present at the meeting, Agarwal said it was a grave offence to test samples after expiry and initiate action against food business operators (FBO) based on it.

He said Tamil Nadu was fortunate to have six food testing labs, when seven other states don't have a single such facility. "The facilities in (government) labs may not be adequate. But while the labs are being upgraded, officials have been given permission to get the samples tested in private labs. I am not sure why this is not being done," Agarwal said.

Saying the process has to be dealt with in a pragmatic manner, the CEO said results produced in private labs were equally valid as that from government labs. "The only thing the labs must have is a qualified food analyst."

Speaking about future plans in the field, Agarwal explained that the whole philosophy of the new Food Safety and Standards Act, 2006, is different from the earlier Act that focussed on preventing adulteration. "The focus now is to ensure safe food standards and supply chain. But that spirit is yet to percolate to the field level. Much of the discussion continues to be about penalties and punishment."

Agarwal added that a five-year plan created by the FSSAI will address this issue and bring to fore the food processing standards that are to be adhered to by FBOs. “The ecosystem for food safety that we are creating comes at very little cost and from meagre resources compared to most developed nations. We will become the food safety model for the rest of the world, particularly for other developing nations,” he said.

Dr K Vanaja, director and additional commissioner of department of food safety and drugs administration, and food scientist V Pasupathy were also present at the meet.