

Business Standard

Labelling required if GM content over 1%: FSSAI chief

IANS | February 3, 2019

Notwithstanding the lobbying from pro-GM crop groups, the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) has decided to go ahead with labelling packaged food products with over one per cent of Genetically Modified ingredients.

The scientific committee of the food regulator has green-signalled labelling of GM food items for manufacture, sale and distribution in India with a threshold value of one per cent, FSSAI CEO Pawan Kumar Agarwal told IANS in an interview.

"GM food labelling will now be a part of GM food regulation itself. We have taken a view to reduce it to one per cent," he said.

If the maximum residue level (MRL) of GM ingredients reaches one per cent, food products will have to display a message on their packaging that they contain GM food.

A notification in this regard will be issued following approval by the government, Agarwal said.

Earlier, the threshold of five per cent was being considered. However, the scientific committee zeroed in on one per cent following consultations with all the stakeholders.

Labelling of GM food is required in Europe, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, South Korea, Brazil and China.

The FSSAI had come under severe criticism after environmental watchdog Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) reported in July last year that 21 of the randomly picked 65 food products, including that for newborns, from different retail outlets in the country were found GM positive in its lab tests.

Agarwal said the decision on banning or limiting the use of antibiotics in food products would be notified in the next two to three months.

"We were petitioned by the industry that antibiotics in products generally come from primary sources such as through fodder or medical treatment. They also need time to set up lab test facilities," he said.

"We will decide in the next two-three months about how many of the 100-odd antibiotics should be banned immediately and which can be given more time to come to a decision."

He said some antibiotics would be allowed but their presence in food products should be below the prescribed MRL.

Agarwal also said the food regulator had taken a strict view of the food safety norms being flouted by restaurants that have tie-ups with e-commerce food service companies.

"These e-commerce companies have identified 10,400 such restaurants that failed to follow the safety norms. The list has been shared with the state governments. The state governments are in the process of closing them down or persuading them to follow norms to keep their licenses (active)," he said.

A parliamentary panel had last year rapped FSSAI over weak enforcement of food safety laws as many states did not have food safety departments.

Agarwal said there was a shortage of manpower and resources in some states but things were improving.

"New labs are coming up in some states with the support of the central government. The state food labs system is currently weak. Once these labs are operational, testing will be more robust. We are working with states to create posts and fill them up," he said.