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Committed to food safety and good nutrition, Government strengthens FSSAI

On Monday, Ministry of Health and Family issued orders creating 493 additional posts for the Authority



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by **BW Online Bureau**

Demonstrating a clear commitment to ensure food safety and healthy nutrition for all citizens, Government has sanctioned about 500 posts in FSSAI. The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) established under the Food Safety and Standards Act, 2006 has so far been functioning with merely 356 sanctioned posts and most of its staff is on short-term contract or on deputation. Food Safety and Standards Act, 2006 unified nine existing regulations by the umbrella act of 2006.

FSSAI is responsible for domestic regulation of food as well regulation of imported food in the country and has Pan-India presence. With headquarters at New Delhi and five regional offices at Mumbai, Delhi, Chennai, Kolkata and Guwahati, it has offices at 20 ports of entry for checking imported food. Currently, FSSAI has two large food labs at Kolkata, Ghaziabad and two small ones at Sanauli and Raxaul on Indo-Nepal border. Two new large food labs are under development at Chennai and JNPT, Mumbai. In addition, FSSAI provides oversight for over 250 food labs notified by it.

On Monday, Ministry of Health and Family issued orders creating 493 additional posts for the Authority. With this, total staff strength of FSSAI would now be 824 against the current strength of 356. A large majority of the newly created posts are for technical functions, particularly at the cutting edge, that of Technical Officers (255 posts) and Assistant Director Technical (60 posts), where the staff shortage is particularly acute. In addition, 74 new posts of Central Food Safety Officers, have been created. With this, FSSAI would now be able to handle food safety inspections and enforcement for Central licensees directly instead of entirely depending the States.

In order to ensure that the country has a modern and robust food control system, the Government has created posts for new functional areas like social and behavioral change communication, training and capacity building and new technologies. With this, FSSAI would be able to attract a diverse talent pool with special skillsets required for multifarious activities that the Food Authority has taken up in recent years.

Creation of posts in these specialized cadres is a measure of confidence in FSSAI's recent capacity building and awareness building efforts like food safety training and certification (FoSTaC), a large scale training program for food safety supervisors/handlers, where 40000+ persons have been trained so far; the Safe and Nutritious Food (SNF) initiatives @ Home, School, Workplace etc. and the recently launched "Eat Right Movement." Having dedicated staff for such activities will help FSSAI to institutionalize these activities for sustainable change on food safety and healthy nutrition.

By more than doubling the staff strength of FSSAI, the Central government has addressed one of the key concerns raised by the CAG in its performance report of FSSAI that was laid in the Parliament last December and also by the Standing Committee of the Parliament on Health and Family welfare in its report on FSSAI laid in the Parliament last week. Creation of these posts is also in line with the National Health Policy released in March last year that highlights the need for preventive healthcare, and specifically mentions the need to strengthen human resources in FSSAI.

Globally, food control systems in advanced nations have much more staff and resources. For instance, the United States has a staff of 14,200 in its two agencies, the USDA and FDA to look after food safety and Canada has over 4,000 staff in its food safety inspection services. Compared to these numbers and international benchmarks in terms of the number of staff deployed in the food regulatory bodies of other countries, India has fewer staff for food safety. Given the size of the country's population, the geographical spread and diversity of the country and the widespread prevalence of food businesses in the unorganized sector, 824 posts in the country food safety authority is quite low. However, with its unique model of partnership with all stakeholders coupled with innovative use of IT systems and simultaneous empowerment and capacity building of consumers and food businesses alike, FSSAI is evolving a low-cost, light-

touch regulatory system for food safety and nutrition in the country that could be a model for other developing countries to emulate.

CEO, FSSAI, Pawan Agarwal in his remarks thanked the Government for creation of these posts and called this as "big milestone in the evolution of food safety system in the country. He hoped that with increased staff and resources, the Food Authority would be able to discharge its responsibility more effectively so as to inspire trust and assure safe and nutrition food for all citizens."