

In bid to strengthen global outreach, FSSAI delegation on Europe tour

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With a view to benchmark India's food standards with the global standards and learn the best practices from established food systems in other countries, FSSAI, the country's apex food regulator, has expanded its outreach in recent years. Currently, a high-level delegation led by its chief executive officer, Pawan Kumar Agarwal is visiting several countries in Europe to strengthen its ties with the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA), the Netherlands, Belgium and Italy.

Agarwal was invited to speak at a high-level technical workshop on food safety and healthy diets organised recently by the Pontifical Academy of Sciences at Vatican. This workshop is being held to provide insights and perspectives to contribute to the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO)-World Health Organization (WHO) International Food Safety Conference (IFSC) next year in 2019.

FSSAI already has cooperation agreements with Germany, France, New Zealand, Denmark and Portugal. Similar agreements with the Netherlands, EFSA, Nepal, Afghanistan and Japan are on the anvil. In addition, India's apex food regulator works closely with the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and Singapore.

Key areas of cooperation with the advanced countries are around risk assessment and building capacity of lab personnel. Earlier FSSAI had benefitted immensely under the EU capacity building initiative for trade and development.

Further, FSSAI works very closely with the Codex Alimentarius Commission (CAC), an inter-governmental body of the United Nations, established by FAO and WHO in 1962. It develops harmonised international food standards, guidelines and codes of practice to protect the health of the consumers and ensure fair practices in the food trade.

India is a member of Codex since 1964. FSSAI is the national Codex contact point (NCCP) for India. Currently, India is also the coordinator for FAO/WHO Coordinating Committee for Asia (CCASIA), one of Codex's regional coordinating committees.

Recently, FSSAI, in partnership with the Secretariat of CAC, organised a technical workshop for the Codex Contact Points (CCPs) of Codex member countries from Asia. It was titled Effective

preparation for participation in Codex and witnessed the participation of about 45 participants from 18 Asian countries.

The activities covered under the two-day workshop focused around supporting skills and knowledge development, to increase practical capacity and ability of staff working in national Codex structures and to operate successfully in the Codex international standard setting environment.

The participants from the National Codex structures were trained on the use of electronic systems and tools including the new Codex website, the online commenting system (OCS) and the digital platform for electronic working groups (EWG).

The above activities are envisaged to support the direct contribution of the Codex Alimentarius Commission to some of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations (UN). The participants are expected to further enhance their skill set for working in National Codex structures and transfer the knowledge to peers at the national level in their respective geographies.

While the exposure of Indian participants to the modern information technology (IT) tools used by Codex goes a long way in strengthening India's participation in the Codex standard-setting process, the information and experience gained in this workshop also provides an opportunity to upgrade our systems in line with the Codex best practices, thereby making our regulations' development process more efficient and effective.

Providing leadership for food safety in Asia, FSSAI had also organised an interactive session between delegates from Asian countries and the leadership of the Global Food Safety Partnership (GFSP) at its office recently.

The Asian delegates got an opportunity to interact and discuss the food safety ecosystem in the region. The need for developing countries to embrace a coherent food safety policy framework, to make smarter investments and ensuring more effective regulatory and programme delivery was stressed to avoid rising public health and economic cost from unsafe food.

The works carried out by GFSP in the African region and China was highlighted. In recognition of India's support and keen participation in its activities, Agarwal was invited to the Governing Council of the GFSP.

It may be noted that India has benefited immensely from its partnership with GFSP over the past couple of years in terms of building capacity of India's food lab personnel in using advanced techniques in food analysis through training in Singapore and the United States.

FSSAI, along with Export Inspection Council (EIC), will now set up an International Training Centre on Food Safety and Nutrition in Mumbai with the support of GFSP. This would be inaugurated on the sidelines of the 19th World Congress on Food Science and Technology,

which is slated to take place in Mumbai between October 23 and 27, 2018. This is the first time India is organising the event.

In the Asian region, earlier this year, FSSAI had coordinated efforts for preparing a joint application of Bhutan, India and Nepal for support under the Codex Trust Fund initiative of the FAO-WHO. The joint application envisaged carrying out individual and joint activities of interest to the countries which will help them to develop and operate National Codex structures for effective participation in Codex works.

Globally, it was the only joint application submitted by a group of countries and approved by the Codex Trust Fund Steering Committee. Overall, India is not only strengthening its food safety ecosystem and learning from countries that have matured systems for food safety, but also supporting and providing leadership to the developing nations, particularly in Asia, that have begun to set up systems for food safety.

Clean and Safe Meat

FSSAI is launching the Clean and Safe Meat initiative with the objective to develop an ecosystem that will enable the availability of clean and safe meat and meat products to consumers.

The growing population and rising incomes has led to an unprecedented increase in the demand for animal proteins, not only in India, but globally as well. The majority of consumers now in India are eating fish, beef (Buffalo meat), mutton, goat, pig and poultry.

The challenge for this nutritional transition to animal protein-based diets is linked with the use of antimicrobials in the feed and compromised hygiene practices at slaughter houses and retail markets. The result is a lack of trust among consumers on the quality and safety of meat and meat products available to them.

To bring back that trust and surety among consumers, FSSAI organised a meeting of important stakeholders in Delhi, to discuss all aspects that affect the quality and safety of meat and meat products either in direct or indirect way.

Representatives from the ministry of food processing industries (MOFPI), the Department of Animal Husbandry, Dairying and Fisheries (DADF), the Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS), the poultry meat industry (Godrej Tyson Foods Ltd and Venkys Pvt Ltd), the animal meat industry (AOV Agro Foods Pvt Ltd and Allana Sons Ltd), meat retail sectors (Grofers and Licious) and animal feed companies (Godrej Agrovet Ltd and Suguna Poultry Farm Ltd) were present at the meeting.

In this meeting, issues related to good manufacturing practices (GMPs) and good hygiene practices (GHPs) in slaughterhouses and meat processing units, training of meat handlers, eligibility of food business operators handling meat and meat products for obtaining FSSAI

license, the role of animal feed in quality of meat and various existing and upcoming schemes government schemes for the upgrade of the meat industry, especially the unorganised sector, were highlighted.

The numerous action points emerged from the discussion, and Agarwal emphasised on the main action points for key stakeholders, which are as follows:

- Food safety audits of meat units/municipal slaughterhouses will be conducted over the next three months in 40 cities expanded by a third-party auditing agency
- A mandatory food safety audit of the supply chain for e-commerce retail entities involved in retail of meat or meat products will also be conducted
- Training and capacity building of food business operators (FBOs) involved in this sector will be initiated by FSSAI under the Food Safety Training and Certification (FoSTaC) Programme and the training will commence in September 2018, with a target of completing at least 50 training session by the end of December 2018
- FSSAI, in coordination with BIS, will explore the possibility of including the BIS certification of feed, as one of the clauses in Schedule 4 covering GHP and GMP requirements
- FSSAI also proposed that BIS, in collaboration with the feed manufacturing associations and other stakeholders, will review and amend their feed standards for livestock and poultry, if required
- A steering group for Clean and Safe Meat will be formed that will have an overall responsibility for carrying out the activities in this campaign, including the preparation of a guidance note for consumers on fish/meat and feed
- FSSAI will plan a study on the overall ecosystem in sectors of meat, fish, poultry and feed to identify the gaps/food safety concerns and the ways to address them. FSSAI, in coordination with BIS, will be exploring the possibility, including the BIS certification, of feed as a part of Schedule 4 requirements
- Coordinate with the Central and state governments to upgrade their financial schemes in line with GMP and GHP requirements of Schedule 4 given under the Food Safety and Standards Act, 2006, in the meat sector, especially for small businesses for improving their hygiene practices
- This campaign will be a part of Lauh Yatra movement, to clean the slaughterhouses and meat markets. The stakeholders will be participating in Lauh Yatra, covering 2,000 locations in 40 cities across the country

In this way, we can complete the entire loop, covering the quality of feed fed to animals to be slaughtered till the level it is consumed by direct supply or through online retail platforms.

Agarwal also shared the importance of this meeting and highlighted the responsibility shared by each of the stakeholders in achieving the overall objective of ensuring clean and safe meat to consumers across the country.