

# Business Standard

August 30, 2018

## Regulator plans crack team for food safety

*On the cards: Field forces comprising hundreds of personnel, 4 national food labs along with regional offices*

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New Delhi, 29 August

Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) is tightening the noose around unhealthy and adulterated food in its drive to gain the trust of consumers. The apex food regulator is coming up with four state-of-the-art national food laboratories, regional offices and is forming dedicated teams to strengthen the food safety ecosystem, chief executive officer Pawan Agarwal said.

The regulator, marred by the Maggi controversy three years ago, is concerned about the lack of trust among consumers, who

believe outside food is mostly unhygienic. Agarwal said while food safety regulations are in place, it is bringing back confidence of consumers with regard to the quality of outside food which is the biggest challenge.

"We are also struggling to cope with the panic spread through the social media," he said. While the FSSAI is finding a solution to curb fake news on the social media, putting a ban on them is not an option, he said.

Over the past three years, since Maggi noodles came out clean after being banned by the regulator, FSSAI has overhauled the regulatory framework by introducing hundreds of stan-

dards for food items and ingredients. It has also moved from the food product-based standard system to a globally tested ingredients-based regulations.

However, implementation remains a challenge. Agarwal said it is time for FSSAI to move to the next level, where building government-owned laboratories and a strong force of officials will ensure food safety.

"The aim is to strengthen the testing infrastructure in the country, which would include setting up FSSAI's own labs. The first state of the art lab — the National Food Laboratory — is coming up in Ghaziabad. Also, the central food laboratory in Kolkata is being upgraded to serve the eastern region and two more labs will come up in Mumbai and Chennai for west and south markets. The plan is to have state-of-the-art govern-



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FSSAI CEO

ment labs and offices in all four regions of the country," he said.

While states like Karnataka and Bengal have better testing records, states like Bihar and Rajasthan failed to even conduct required tests during the Maggi fiasco. "The challenge is how to encourage the states to do better. We have to support them in handling food safety. We have to consolidate the entire food test-

ing infrastructure," he said.

FSSAI is now planning to add hundreds of personnel. Recently, it conducted a study and identified eight widely consumed food items like fish, meat, egg, edible oil and milk. Agarwal said eight dedicated teams are now looking at these items holistically. "This is a proactive approach that we are taking, instead of trying to

address the problems after an outbreak. To improve monitoring and ensure compliance, the regulator is hiring audit officials who will be equipped to file reports from the premises of food business operators (FBO). Also, we are introducing third-party auditors. FBOs will have to get food audits done on a regular basis, in line with the financial auditing system," Agarwal said. While, the unorganised nature of the food processing and retailing business makes it difficult to monitor quality, FSSAI is trying to push food aggregators like Zomato, Swiggy and Food Panda to ensure safe food on their platforms. "We have started working with 200 businesses. We have a dedicated team that specifically looks into these grievances. The target is to address any such issue within 48 hours."