

THE HINDU

How the FSSAI is taking tech to the ground

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The fssai is putting compliance measures in place to create a system for its officers visiting food outlets for checks

Last week, the food safety and standards authority of india (fssai), the agency entrusted with ensuring safe, healthy, sustainable food in the country, said they're taking tech to the ground force. The aim is to up the transparency in the inspection system at different types of food outlets, and ensure a broader compliance strategy, said vikas talwar, the deputy director of regulatory compliance, at the organisation.

The fssai (you'll see the stamp on every packaged food product) has about 3,500 food safety officers who go from one food business operator (FBO) to the other, checking the premises on a range of criteria. an FBO — and there are approximately 3.2 million of these across the country — is any organisation involved in the manufacture or packaging of food, so anything from a dairy or slaughter house to your local restaurant serving gobhi manchurian or a fancy five-star kitchen. there are both licensed and registered organisations that are audited; the former are those with revenue over ₹12 lakh per annum, while the latter (with less stringent norms) are smaller businesses.



At a recent conference, Pawan Agarwal, the CEO, showed the audience a jacket which had an RFID tag. food safety officers (inspectors) will wear these when they go on their field visits. this means that each business itself will have the RFID scanner too. the real-time tracking will ensure that the officer is indeed visiting the facility. the jacket will also have an embedded QR code, so that the FBO can check if the officer is legit. a photograph and unique id number will be called up, so the manager knows the right person has come to inspect the premises.

Once there, the officer, who will be given a tablet, will record his observations through a checklist as well as photographs which will be geotagged, to ensure that the pictures are of the location specified. all information will be fed back into the food safety compliance risk inspection system, the data-monitoring software.

The jacket, which looks like a regular sleeveless bandgala in dark blue, has pockets for storage and is a unisex product, though FSSAI says they're open for suggestions on the design.

Manufacture will be thrown up via the government's tendering process, but they hope to get the pilot going before year end. vikas, who was instrumental in leading the project under fssai's eat right programme, says he hopes that this technology intervention will boost the morale of the field staff, so they develop "professionalism, a sense of ownership, and the feeling of working with a bigger purpose."

As for the exact nature of transactions between the fbo and the officer? vikas says they won't be recording voices: "we don't want to go back to the system of the inspector raj."

THE WRITER WAS IN GOA AT THE INVITATION OF FSSAI