

“Global Food Regulators Summit 2023 pledges to strengthen global food safety systems”

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For the first time in India, the Food Safety & Standards Authority of India (FSSAI), and the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW) organised the two-day G20 Global Food Regulators Summit (GFRS) on July 20 2023 in New Delhi. The two-day Summit aimed to create a global platform for regulators on enhancing food safety systems and regulatory frameworks across the food value chain through collaboration. The Summit witnessed the presence of leading experts, regulators, and industry professionals from around the world. Considering the evolving landscape of emerging food hazards, new technologies, and changing consumer needs, the Summit envisaged developing a cohesive approach to the food safety policy framework. Moreover, the exhibition demonstrated cutting-edge solutions, technologies, and products that contribute to advancements in food safety and regulation.

The summit was inaugurated by Dr Mansukh Mandaviya, Union Minister of MoHFW in the presence of Narendra Tomar, Union Minister of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare, Dr Bedu Ram Bhusal,

Minister of Agriculture and Livestock Development, Government of Nepal, Prof S P Singh Baghel and Dr Bharati Pravin Pawar, Union Ministers of State for Health and Family Welfare.

Underlining the importance of food safety during the summit, Dr Mandaviya said, “Safe food and good health are complementary to each other. Balanced, safe, and nutritious food acts as preventive care and ensures our health and wellness. It is critically important to deep dive into issues of food grains, food safety, and food security for global sustainable development. Food regulators have a highly responsible job to create an ecosystem under the One Health approach which provides an integrated platform to collectively look at the health of climate, human, animal, and plant.”

“This conference perfectly aligns with and complements the theme of this year’s India’s G20 Presidency: “Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam: One Earth, One Nation”. We need to explore how regional diversities can be factored into global best practices,” Dr Mandaviya added further while emphasising on the fact that different geographical regions are characterised by agro-climatic diversities, no one standard could be applicable to food safety protocols.

Unveiling new digital platforms

The Summit witnessed the launch of several groundbreaking initiatives that will revolutionise the accessibility and sharing of food safety information. Among these initiatives is the release of Food-o-Copoeia, a comprehensive collection of food category-wise monographs, serving as a single-point reference for all applicable standards for specific product categories. Another remarkable initiative launched was the common regulator’s platform ‘SaNGRAH’ (Safe Food for Nations: Global Food Regulatory Authorities Handbook). It is a comprehensive database of Food Regulatory Authorities from 76 countries worldwide, presenting their mandates, food safety ecosystems, food testing facilities, contact details for food authorities, and information related to SPS/TBT/Codex/ WAHO. SaNGRAH is available in English, Hindi, Gujarati, Marathi, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, and Malayalam languages.

A Common Digital Dashboard- a unified IT portal providing comprehensive information on standards, regulations, notifications, advisories, guidelines, contamination limits, and the latest developments by Food Regulators in India, was also launched during the Summit.

A two-day exhibition was also held at the GFRS 2023 summit. This exhibition provided an avenue for the exchange of ideas and information on food safety, food standards, food testing capabilities, product reformulation, and advancement in food technologies. A total of 35 exhibitors including Food Business Operators (FBOs), Rapid Analytical Food Testing (RAFT) manufacturers and esteemed organisations like the Agricultural & Processed Food Products Export Development Authority (APEDA), Marine Products Export Development Authority (MPEDA), Export Inspection Council (EIC), Spice Board, Tea Board and Coffee Board showcased their expertise and contributions to the field during the two days.

During the summit, G Kamala Vardhana Rao, CEO, FSSAI said, “Safe and nutritious food is key to good health, while unsafe food causes 600 million infections and 4.2 lakh deaths every year. I hope that this gathering will brainstorm on the critical aspects of food safety and bring out innovative solutions to ensure a safe food supply.”

Insightful technical sessions on food safety

The conclave had a number of technical sessions led by prestigious dignitaries from government bodies, industry, and academia. The opening session was followed by the first technical session on 'Global Regulatory Framework', with Panelists from eight different countries including Brazil, Bhutan, Chile, Ethiopia, Mauritius, Mozambique, the US, and New Zealand. The discussions revolved around the importance of collaboration and cooperation among global food regulators to maximise regulatory effectiveness and efficiency. Notably, the emphasis on harmonising regulatory standards was highlighted as a key measure to ensure consumer safety and facilitate international trade. The best practices and success stories were shared by different countries which have the potential to be adopted by other countries in strengthening their food regulatory system. The Panel also suggested strategies for collaboration among multiple agencies/ stakeholders to develop a robust national food control system with a strong emphasis on safety parameters. The deliberations also focused on the involvement of all the stakeholders while developing any new or amending any existing food regulations.

Day two of the conclave witnessed a technical session emphasising best practices on the robust standards-setting framework. Important aspects for robust standards setting including an articulated operational regulation management, well-documented food safety management, and effective quality control were discussed during this session. Continuing the deliberation on the importance of establishing robust regulatory standards, a session on 'Health Supplements and Nutraceuticals' delved into the escalating global demand for these products. During the session, experts highlighted the necessity of strong regulatory frameworks, scientific research, and product quality assurance to ensure the responsible and safe use of health supplements and nutraceuticals.

The discussions also focussed on the guidelines being prepared by Codex on Nutrient Reference Values (NRVs) and their applicability to health supplements. The Panel also deliberated on the adverse effect of non-sugar sweeteners (NSS), risk assessment of emerging new strains of probiotics, and rediscovering and repurposing the rich traditional heritage of Ayurveda for developing new food products.

Another session titled 'Contaminants and Residues – Risk Mitigation – Regulatory Intervention' highlighted the importance of harmonising food safety standards with international agencies to effectively address chemical contaminants and pesticide residues in food. The focus was on establishing safety limits for contaminants and residues, ensuring compliance, and employing mitigation strategies to prevent biological hazards. The panel suggested the best possible use of the National Reference Laboratories for data collection to plan the strategies for emerging contaminants and residues.

The panel discussion on 'Organic Foods' focused on strengthening the organic food sector and adopting sustainable farming systems based on organic principles. The importance of integrity and authenticity in organic food and the development of analytical parameters for rapid authenticity testing were the key points of discussion.

The session on 'Impact of Animal Feed on Food Safety and Human Health', emphasised the need to ensure the availability of good quality feed and robust regulation for animal feed. Experts discussed the need for mandatory regulations and national policy on effective traceability mechanisms for

animal feed. The panellists focused on the need for exploring innovative approaches to monitor feed safety. The session aimed to develop insights into risk assessment strategies and formulate policies to enhance food safety through animal feed and its raw ingredients.

Further, the summit progressed with a session on 'Innovation in Food Emergency Response, Recall, and Analysis'. This session underscored the revolutionary impact of innovation in food analysis and techniques in response to growing consumer concerns about food safety. One of the key highlights was the adoption of cutting-edge technologies like the Internet of Things (IoT) and Blockchain to establish robust traceability systems. The panellists discussed the integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) with instrumental analysis in enhancing the efficiency and accuracy of food safety assessments. The deliberations also emphasised the use of rapid analytical kits and the use of Big data analytics to identify patterns and detect potential risks for establishing a robust decision-making platform for food emergency response.

The discussion and outcomes of the sessions have laid a strong foundation for collective action in tackling regulatory challenges and ensuring the well-being of consumers worldwide.

Toward a safer and more sustainable global food system

By bringing together regulators and experts from various countries, the GFRS 2023 has laid a solid foundation for coordinated efforts in enhancing food safety and tackling challenges like AMR, antibiotic residues, regulating animal feed, analysis of food products, etc. GFRS 2023 reaffirmed its commitment to fostering international cooperation, knowledge sharing, and cross-learning, as well as promoting a safer and more sustainable global food system.

Addressing the Valedictory Session of the GFRS 2023, Suman Berry, Vice-Chairman, NITI Aayog said "This summit has been a pivotal platform for international cooperation in addressing food safety challenges. Strengthening food safety scientific standards and enforcing regulations to prevent adulteration and counterfeiting of food is important. The complexity of India's food landscape poses significant challenges which need to be addressed. Collaborative work between the government, industries, and other stakeholders is crucial to realise this endeavour."

The Summit marked a significant step forward in promoting international cooperation, knowledge sharing and cross-learning to create a safer and more sustainable global food system. The shared commitment and expertise exhibited during the summit will undoubtedly drive positive change and safeguard the well-being of consumers worldwide.

The Global Food Regulators Summit 2023 concluded with a pledge to strengthen food safety systems across the globe.

Mansi Jamsudkar