

From farm to fork, new law to protect you

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LUCKNOW: Eating spicy snacks on city streets might become safer. With the comprehensive new food safety rules finally coming into effect from Friday, "safe food" is something every citizen, both in the country and UP, can demand and expect. To ensure this, the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India, an autonomous body under the union ministry of health, has put in place The Food Safety and Standards Act(FSSA), 2006, a law that will regulate the manufacture, storage, distribution, sale as well as import of food items.

"With FSSA, people can look forward to a strengthened enforcement structure. Under the Prevention of Food Adulteration (PFA) Act, supervision was minimal. Now a senior officer of the state government, designated as state food commissioner, will head a more streamlined system and report to the FSSAI, the dedicated organization set up to monitor all food safety related matters. Accordingly, we believe enforcement will improve," said VN Gaur, chief executive officer, Food Safety and Standards Authority of India.

The new law is expected to incorporate several first-time changes. For instance, it will be mandatory for street food vendors to register with the state health departments, which are charged with policing hygiene. In addition, prosecution of those charged with and found guilty of adulteration, will be done in about 3 months, except if cases are 'exceptionally complicated'. In addition, the state government will for the first time, put in place special or fast-track courts to deal with matters pertaining to food safety. In a significant departure from the existing practice, the law also provides that if food safety officers fail to test samples, individual citizens can test samples of food products themselves (for this they must follow the guidelines laid down under FSSA). State Food Commissioner, Archana Agarwal, said, "The structure of the new legislation is almost fully in place in UP.

The movement of the structure will also begin in a few days. Over time, we hope to see this act translating into safer food for everyone." The FSSA was adopted by the Parliament in 2006, but its implementation was delayed after industry bodies repeatedly raised concerns over inadequate number of testing facilities in the country to implement the legislation. Currently the country has 50 government laboratories where food samples can be tested. Gaur said, "We conducted a gap study in each case and informed the concerned state governments that labs needs to be upgraded. The preparedness of UP was reviewed about 15 days ago and UP was found in an advanced stage of transition.

" The FSSA will also integrate all existing food laws in the country. Under the old legislation, India's food sector was governed by eight separate food laws for meat, milk, edible oil, fruits and vegetables. The new legislation also provides that in addition to state government, FSSAI, under the ministry of health and family welfare, the civic bodies and village councils will also be in charge of implementing the new food law. While acknowledging that the law is 'progressive', industry bodies, however, are not very hopeful of the law.