



Dated 4th May, 2020

Dear colleague,

My congratulations to the State's Food Safety Department for actively contributing to the nation's war against the COVID-19 pandemic. Food safety officials in most States are on front line COVID duty involved in enforcement activities of ensuring lockdown, surveys/ surveillance, inspections of working food businesses/ community kitchens, coordination for food supplies. The outbreak of COVID-19 has not only posed a threat to lives but also affected the economy – supply chains, businesses and jobs.

2. Food Safety & Standards Authority (FSSAI) has taken many steps to facilitate the food businesses to function in these trying times while ensuring enforcement of food safety during the lockdown period. As we move towards easing of restrictions the challenges compound exponentially in difficulty and complexity. I would like to draw your attention towards some priorities in the coming days:-

- a) **Capacity building of food business to operate in COVID-19 era.** A guidance note titled "*Food Hygiene and Safety Guidelines for Food Businesses during Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Pandemic*" has been issued by FSSAI. Based on the same, FSSAI has also initiated through its flagship FOSTAC programme a training module for food handlers on the essentials of food safety and hygiene practices during COVID-19. The same is being organized through video conferencing mode. The resource material of the same is freely available on FSSAI website. State food safety officials need to ensure that all FBOs are apprised of the guidelines and available trainings. They may also conduct outreach/ awareness programmes preferably through video conference mode to enable FBOs to adapt and adjust to the new working environment.
- b) **Testing:** Food safety is anchored on testing. Besides government labs, States need to facilitate the FSSAI accredited private laboratories to function in the lockdown period. This may involve facilitating permissions for functioning and movement of their staff.
- c) **Regulatory Compliance:**
 - 1) Recognizing the need for immediate permissions to operate by food business operators in logistic and supply chains, FSSAI has allowed FBOs, other than manufacturers, to temporarily operate their businesses on the basis of a valid receipt of FSSAI license/ registration application having 17-digit Application Reference Number (ARN) generated on Food Licensing and Registration System (FLRS). The provision is for

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the period of lockdown and one month later. Once the beneficial period expires, State food safety department will need to ensure that the businesses are either granted regular license or their operations ceased.

- 2) It needs to be ensured that the **licensing** work (on FLRS) is continued in the lockdown period. Instructions have been issued for avoiding pre-licensing inspections. In case of high risk cases, e-inspections has been allowed for the lockdown period and a month later, to prevent delay in processing of applications. Special focus on this aspect is required else the pendency is likely to accumulate and disrupt the food industry's functioning. A licensing helpdesk with dedicated number and email id needs to be established immediately in each State.
 - 3) Most States are actively engaged in ensuring supplies to poor/ stranded labour. Civil groups and communities are actively assisting in the endeavor. State food safety department while facilitating such efforts needs to ensure that the food supplied is hygienic and safe. They need to work closely with food businesses to assess vulnerability of supply chains and ensuring controls are implemented. Oversight of ecommerce also needs to be strengthened. Key to the effort would be to have robust **complaint handling mechanism** which ensures quick investigation of reported incidences involving food fraud.
 - 4) Only essential inspections need to be carried out at this time. Following the risk based approach, only high risk inspections must be prioritized during lockdown and restricted times. Others may be deferred until the situation improves.
 - 5) Abattoirs and slaughter houses are always a challenge for food safety. Given the present state of ceased operations, the opportunity may be used to upgrade the facilities from the perspective of both food safety and also precautions for pandemics like COVID-19.
- d) Several instances have been brought to the notice of the Authority where some products such as frozen food, food served cold/ chilled etc were selectively not allowed to be transported, stored or sold, ostensibly on the notion that they could promote spread of COVID-19. FSSAI has always advocated for science based approach. There is no evidence that COVID-19 is spread through food. I would urge you to please review the COVID 19 page on our website as well as myth busters. Those States which have imposed such restrictions at State or local level may kindly review and rescind those not consistent with FSSAI guidance. It may be ensured that a non-discriminatory approach is maintained by the States while dealing with food businesses in the lockdown and even post lockdown period.
- e) While the department is actively engaged in the COVID efforts, it must ensure that its officials including laboratories follow all norms scrupulously including social distancing, hygiene and sanitation and wearing of mask in public space. In post lockdown period when offices open, they must have the infrastructure ready to operate, such as hand washing facility, social distancing etc. We not only have to ensure behavior change in food businesses but also lead by example.

- f) The department must also quickly evolve procedures for working remotely. Robust IT system to facilitate working from home, teleworking, and on-line conferencing is essential.
3. It is requested that suggestions if any to further ease of doing business or improve food safety in COVID period may please be sent to us. We at FSSAI are available 24x7 for any assistance that we can render in these difficult times.

With *best regards*

Yours *sincerely*

GSA
4/5/2020
(Dr. G.S.G. Ayyangar)

Food Safety Commissioner of all States/UTs