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FSSAI's GMO threshold for imported food crops 'unacceptably high', says letter to health minister

FSSAI issued an order on February 8 setting the permissible limit for GMO in imported food crops at 1%

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The one per cent threshold for genetically modified organisms (GMO) in food crops imported into India, set by Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) in a recent order, is unacceptably high, the Coalition for a GM-Free India wrote in a letter to the government.

It is an advocacy for zero presence of GMO in food and some other consumables.

In August 2020, FSSAI had issued the order that 24 food crops the country imports would need a 'non-GM-origin-cum-GM-free certificate' issued by a competent authority. On February 8, the authority defined the GMO threshold of these crops for certification.

Laboratories in India can detect as little as 0.01 per cent presence of GMO in foods, the letter pointed out. So, the country must aim to accept imported consignments only when there is no trace of GMO in the products, especially processed food, and they come with a GMO-free certificate.

The threshold for adventitious presence of GMO in imported food products should be limited to 0.01 per cent, said the letter addressed to Harsh Vardhan, Union Minister of Health and Family Welfare.

The letter called for extending the GMO restrictions to food products other than food crops. It cited a 2018 analysis by Delhi-based non-profit Centre for Science and Environment (CSE) to highlight the risks of exempting processed food from the FSSAI regulations for GMO in food products.

In 2018, [CSE analysed 65 food products](#) —30 manufactured in India and 35 imported from other countries — that are likely to contain genetically modified (GM) crops. Around 32 per cent of the products were found with GM ingredients.

The illegal sale of imported GM food will continue unabated without such restrictions, the letter said.

It also urged the health ministry to extend said regulations to fish, cotton, seeds and animal feed. The letter said:

“Import of seeds such as soybean, corn or maize, canola, sugar beet seeds from countries, whose cultivation has 90 per cent of these crops, being genetically modified.”

The organisations also asked FSSAI to consider strengthening its testing capabilities at every level to ensure the people of the country consume GM-free food.

The task of regulating GMO levels in imported consumables was initially with [Genetic Engineering Appraisal Committee \(GEAC\) under the Union environment ministry](#). Its role in this was diluted with the enactment of the Food Safety and Standards Act, 2006 and FSSAI was asked to take over approvals of imported goods.

In 2018, after years of confusion and contradictory government orders around which body was capable of taking up the task, the FSSAI rolled out the procedure of framing regulations for imported foods. The recent FSSAI order was an addition to this developing regulatory framework.