

## Food safety dept to crack whip on unlicensed food biz operators

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Madurai: It seems that the year-long awareness programmes conducted by the food safety department on the importance of getting a licence have not brought about the desired effect among the food business operators (FBOs). Irked over the denying attitude of a section of FBOs, the officials have started cracking the whip against the offenders. FBOs are those involved in manufacturing, processing, packing, storing, transporting and distributing food materials. The licence from the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) is mandatory for the FBOs whose sales are Rs 3,000 or more a day. While it has been estimated that there are around 75,000 FBOs across Madurai district, only 4,156 of them, which is less than 6%, have taken the license so far.

Instead of getting licence, FBOs have obtained registration certificates from the food safety department by paying Rs100, which is meant for hawkers and roadside vendors only.

The licence is important in ensuring the quality of products that reach customers. In the absence of such a licence, it is difficult for the department to close in on the erring FBOs when a complaint is raised, food safety officials said.

Designated officer for food safety, Madurai district, Dr M Somasundaram said, "We have started action. No one can claim that they are unaware of the rule, since we have extensively conducted awareness camps," he said. It has started issuing notice under Section 63 of the Food Safety and Standards Act. FBOs served with the notice would have 15 days to get the licence, failing which they will face jail term up to six months and a fine amount up to Rs 5 lakh, he said. Officials said that there are three kinds of licences available at the fee slabs of Rs2,000, Rs3,000 and Rs5,000 per year. One can also opt for a five-year licence by paying the required amount.

Traders from the city said that the food safety officers assigned for each area have earned bad reputation in the past for bribery. Owing to this, the traders are skeptical of approaching the FSOs. Although the scenario has changed in the last one year, the information is yet to reach the traders and stakeholders.

President of Tamil Nadu Food Grains Merchants's Association S P Jeyaprakasam said that many do not come forward due to the tedious process involved in getting the licence. There is no one-time licence and the traders have to renew it every year. A trader or manufacturer

who has multiple outlets in the state or the country has to take multiple licenses. “We have taken the grievances to the ministry concerned. They have acknowledged the issues, but they have not made any changes so far,” he said.

Dr Somasundaram said that people can finish the work and payment online. There are several designated centres in and around the city to get the work done.

President of Tamil Nadu Chamber of Commerce and Industries N Jagadeesan said, “We too have conducted five rounds of sensitization meetings and have sent circulars to our members asking them to take the licences, but for some reasons they are not forthcoming,” he said.