

Industry fears about new labelling regulations unfounded: FSSAI CEO

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NEW DELHI, 24/05/2016: Pawan Agarwal, CEO, Food Safety and Standards Authority of India, in New Delhi on May 24, 2016. Photo: Ramesh Sharma - BUSINESS LINE

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After a hectic year of notifying nearly 28 new regulations, the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) is gearing up for the more challenging task of implementing these laws. FSSAI CEO Pawan Agarwal told *BusinessLine* in an interview that building consumer confidence in the food available in the marketplace is most crucial. Excerpts:

After a year of notifying many new regulations, what will be FSSAI's focus in 2019?

As a regulator, finalising regulations is just the beginning, not the end. Now that the regulations are in place, the bigger challenge is ensuring implementation. We are adopting various strategies to ensure that businesses comply with these regulations. Ultimately, citizens need to have confidence in the food they get in the marketplace — they should not think twice before buying a food product or eating out.

Inspections of food businesses so far have been fairly ad hoc. But now we will focus on a mechanism of risk-based inspections, which means food businesses or products where the risks are higher will get inspected more often. Since there is limited manpower, these inspections will be done in collaboration with third-party audit agencies. The focus will be to ensure compliance of food safety regulations across the entire value chain. This is a paradigm shift from the time when the focus was only on the safety of the final product.

Focus will also be on testing food products through surveillance, sampling and testing. Through strategic surveillance activities such as large-scale food surveys, we can identify hot-spots or areas where there are bigger concerns and understand the nature of these concerns. Training and capacity building within food businesses through the Food Safety Training and Certification (FoSTaC) programme is another focus area.

Have you identified sectors where such strategic surveillance and large-scale surveys are required?

Milk was a big area and we conducted a large-scale survey last year to understand the issues there. Similarly, value-added dairy products, spices, meat and meat products are segments where we plan to take up large-scale surveys. Some work has already begun on testing of honey and edible oil products for a survey.

There has been a lot of debate around the proposed new labelling regulations...

The idea behind the new labelling regulations is to enable citizens to know more about the composition of food products, so that they can make informed choices. Bringing in any labelling regulations without making citizens aware about eating healthier food products — and the consequences of eating food which is high in salt, sugar, saturated fats and trans-fats — will not cut much ice.

Our societal behavioural change initiatives such as the Eat Right Movement are in this direction and we plan to scale them up. Once the foundation for healthy eating habits is laid, the labelling regulations will have a greater impact.

I think there is more interest in the industry than among consumers over the new regulations and this interest is largely driven by a fear that we might be unreasonable. The fact that we have taken a lot of time to discuss and deliberate on these regulations suggests that many of their fears may be unfounded. We are trying to see that while the labelling laws provide useful information to consumers, it does not hit the industry.

Are you working towards setting up a mechanism to handle the issue of fake videos regarding food safety after discussions with the IT Ministry?

They have connected us to various platforms. Players such as Twitter, Facebook and Google have a grievance redress mechanism in India. Once a particular post is identified, we can inform them; they have agreed to co-operate with us. We are also engaging with WhatsApp to find a solution to this issue.

How about plans for a hygiene rating scheme for restaurants ?

We are in discussions with restaurants for the implementation of the Hygiene Rating Scheme. Soon, several thousand restaurants will be rated under this scheme and these ratings will become more and more visible across outlets.

Will the government's nod to FSSAI to create additional posts add a new dimension?

We are currently engaged with external consultants to do two kinds of reviews. One is to focus on benchmarking our practices and processes with global standards. The second review is focussing on the internal working system of FSSAI and involves a review of our HR practices such as performance management. Soon, the hiring of over 800 people will begin in a phased manner. We would like to be seen as a modern organisation with a positive work ethos and culture that values its people .