

Food sector positive about proposed licensing, registration amendments

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The food industry has reacted positively to the proposed amendments in the licensing and registration regulations under the Food Safety and Standards Act, 2006. Terming them an effort to reduce the barriers, it opined that this would bring down the paperwork it entails, as well as ensure self-compliance.

"To facilitate food businesses, the proposed regulations envisage minimal entry barriers. The number of documents required to be attached with the license application has been reduced from the current 19 to seven. However, it entails stringent effective compliance requirements by the food business operators (FBOs)," said Vaibhav Kulkarni, chairman, technical and regulatory committee, and board member, Health and Dietary Supplement Association (HADSA).

He added that these proposals were to focus on large food businesses with a wider impact and improve compliance interface with multi-site, multi-state FBOs. For petty food businesses, the focus will shift to capacity building and reduced interface with enforcement staff.

S Jindal, president, All India Food Processors' Association (AIFPA), said that overall the proposal was a step in the right direction, but the limit for FBOs to be exempted from license should have been about Rs 30 lakh.

Adding that the current limit of Rs 20 lakh was still very low, he said, "This means Rs 1.5 lakh per month, which boils down to about Rs 5,000 a day. Given the expenses FBOs incur on running the business, the amount still needs to rise." Jindal reiterated that the amount should be at least Rs 30 lakh to make it even better.

He said, "The limit of Rs 12 lakh for licenses was fixed in 2006 when the Act was passed. The food industry demanded that it be Rs 25 lakh even then. Now, FSSAI has set it at Rs 20 lakh. Therefore, it is a step in the right direction."

It is pertinent to mention here that the country's apex food regulator, in order to make FBOs more compliant, has decided to focus more on the spreading awareness about the food safety ecosystem, and has decided to make practical changes in the licensing and registration norms to include and facilitate the FBOs.

Entry into licensing and registration has been made easy under the proposed changes, which state that the registration is to be issued on the basis of self-declaration without inspection. Further, the categorisation on the basis of low-risk and high-risk categories shall determine the actions by FSSAI.

Nilesh Lele, secretary, Association of Food Scientists and Technologists India [AFST(I)], said, "The changes proposed will encourage more and more FBOs to obtain licenses/register. Secondly, FSSAI's Food Safety Training and Certification (FoSTaC) initiative, and making FoSTaC-trained supervisors a compulsory requirement for license application, will improve the hygiene and food safety awareness in the FBOs."

Meanwhile, start-ups have also opined that the rationalisation of the licensing and registration norms would help more food businesses.

ParulTusele, chief executive officer, Paco Meals, a food start-up, said, "In this new convenience economy, a host of start-ups are providing food to customers on demand. Here, the regulation problem is not with the large companies working in the sector today, but with the new players entering the ecosystem."

"Lately, we have seen many instances how kitchens are running under big franchise names with almost zero regulations and delivering via food delivery apps," she added.

"So, today it has become very easy to enter this space, and people who are unaware about the regulations are doing so. The front face looks polished and appealing on the mobile app, but nobody knows what is going on at the back-end kitchen. Neither the consumers nor the authorities are aware of what is cooking and how. Making a self-declarative statement without the backing of proper inspection will only add to the problems," Tusele said.