

DNA

Soon, packet labels to tell if food is healthy or not: FSSAI CEO Pawan Agarwal



Pawan Agarwal

[Anjul Tomar](#)

[Ashish K Tiwari](#)

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The biggest challenge before the food regulator today is to "fight the battle of perception. With mass and social media getting aggressive, the general sense today is that what we eat is far more unsafe than it was a few years ago. The reality may not be so," says **Pawan Agarwal**, CEO, Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) in an interview with *Anjul Tomar* and *Ashish K Tiwari*. FSSAI is working to make sure that the food available in the market is safe for consumption by creating awareness, training businesses and enforcement. It has a big task at its hand as it handles around 10,000-12,000 complaints every month and regulates over 28 lakh small, medium and big food businesses in the country.

What are the key measures instituted by FSSAI towards food safety in the last few years?

We have put in place standards for almost all foods. A food must meet a set of criteria if it is suitable for human consumption. While most of the food standards have been notified, the remaining ones will be notified in the near future. Recently, we released standards on antibiotic

and veterinary drug residues as there is a huge concern about its presence in poultry and meat. Honey standards have been notified and will take effect from January next year. Organic food standards have come into force from 1 July. Now, our enforcement officials will take samples of the foods and test them for residues. The businesses will be prosecuted in case the samples are found to have adulterants or residues beyond permissible limits. We are also getting 6,000 milk samples from organised as well as unorganised markets across 1,100 cities and towns tested, and will release the report by year-end. There is a perception that milk has antibiotics and pesticide residues. Over 250 food laboratories have been notified by FSSAI for testing food. There are over 3,000 food safety field offices under the state governments to carry out inspections and compliance. Recently, we have got an additional close to 500 positions under FSSAI to help us in better enforcement. Next, we are going to build capacities of food businesses so that they can ensure safety by themselves. We have started Food Safety, Training and Certification (FoSTaC) system. Under this, all food businesses need to have at least one person trained and certified as per our standards. Around 40,000 people, out of a total of 3.5 lakh, have been trained so far under this programme. The focus is largely on restaurants, hotel segment, manufacturing and processing units.

How effective have these measures been in ensuring safe food?

The results of these measures are difficult to quantify but these are steps in the right direction. As a regulator, we need to put in place a system. We can't pick up every sample as the entire food ecosystem is very large. Many of these things will take years to get embedded.

What more needs to be done to make food available in the market in packaged form as well as loose completely safe for consumption?

First and foremost, greater public awareness around food safety is needed. Second, training is required to build capacities around food safety in food businesses. Third is to have more effective enforcement. Since we have a large number of businesses to regulate and have small staff, we expect businesses to ensure food safety by themselves. But we do verify that they are meeting that trust or not through inspections, sampling and testing.

There is a significant shift towards healthy eating even in the packaged snacking category. What initiatives are being taken by FSSAI to promote this trend?

We recently came out with eat right movement on July 10 to nudge food businesses to reformulate their products so that they are healthy. Many companies have come forward and pledged to reformulate.

Labelling is another area of concern across packaged foods. What's been done on this front?

We are in the process of developing regulations for front-of-pack labelling to identify food as healthy and not so healthy. The draft is currently with the government for approval. The proposed packaging labels for food will depict if the food is healthy or not in terms of salt, sugar and saturated fat content. The industry has raised some concerns. The entire issue is about thresholds. The industry wants higher threshold levels, while the medical practitioners who deal with public health, World Health Organisation (WHO), Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR) define some other thresholds. We are trying to understand the concerns raised by industry and may make minor changes, if required, in the proposed regulation. Traffic light labelling can be used to indicate the status of the contents. Globally, there are many examples. We have not reached a conclusion on this yet.

There is also a major debate on Genetically Modified (GM) foods. How is FSSAI addressing this issue?

We are coming out with regulations on GM foods to regulate this segment. In India, our Food, Safety and Standards Act provides for the role of FSSAI to regulate GM foods. The regulation doesn't mean that we are allowing or disallowing it. Once we have regulations in place, we will be able to take a case-by-case approach. The concerns about GM foods vary across the countries. European Union (EU) has taken a certain view. In North America, a lot of their food is GM food, while Japan imports a lot of GM food.

What's been done on the advent of organic foods and the challenges related to authenticity associated with it? There are loopholes still being exploited by players in the market.

We have created organic food standards based on the existing certification system of National Programme for Organic Production and (NPOP) and Participatory Guaranteed Scheme (PGS). Any food that meets one of these standards gets FSSAI approval. The new standards have become effective from July 1. Organic foods will henceforth carry Jaivik Bharat logo. So with the new standards coming into force, the products can be tested for authenticity and if the products are found to have any pesticide residue above the threshold limits, the manufacturers will be liable to be prosecuted. Earlier standards were not under the law. The punishment for not complying with the food standards varies from six months' imprisonment to life term and a fine of up to Rs 10 lakh.

Overall food adulteration is on a rise despite strict norms put down by FSSAI. Why is this happening?

This is a perception issue. We are making more efforts towards better enforcement and compliance so that people have greater confidence in the food available in the marketplace.

However, if more people get caught it doesn't necessarily mean that things have gone worse from bad. As far as penal provisions are concerned, the current laws provide for strict punishment for offenders.

While compliance from branded food players is very high, that's not the case with unbranded players that form a significant part of the food market. Is there a way to make them equally compliant, responsible and accountable for products manufactured by such players?

We are moving towards making regulations and their enforcement more effective through large-scale surveillance and monitoring activities. As far as the law is concerned, it does not make any distinction between branded or non-branded players. The whole effort on building capacity in the food business is around making businesses more responsible from the food safety angle. So that unintentional incidents of food safety while manufacturing, transportation or storage could be avoided.

The food delivery business is also changing drastically in the digital age. How is FSSAI prepared to deal with this change?

We have been proactive on this front. We have come out with regulations for e-commerce platforms a few months ago and are now working towards its more effective implementation. We have had a series of meeting with the players. The e-commerce players, which include Swiggy, Zomato, Food Panda, Uber Eats, Amazon, Flipkart and BigBasket, are working towards making their platforms fully compliant with FSSAI norms.

The social media platforms are full of posts accusing food and beverage companies of use of ingredients by food companies that are harmful to health. It's very difficult to ascertain the authenticity of such information on various digital platforms. Is FSSAI doing anything on this front to curtail the unnecessary commotion in the general population?

Social media has a lot of fake news, which is a challenge for everyone including us. We monitor social media and take note of any information that requires attention. We do take it up with the companies as well as the local enforcement officials in case any action is warranted. There are these 15-20 posts which are going around and keep repeating. We seek a report from the company involved and advise it to take action if needed. But if the post is generic in nature, it becomes even far more challenging. We have a consumer complaint grievance cell. Ideally, these complaints should come there and we can take proper action. We get around 10,000-12,000 complaints every month. About 70-80% of them are consumer complaints or queries, the rest are licensing related queries from businesses.