

Centre to extend fortified rice scheme to 112 districts

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

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New platter: Children being served lunch at a school in Dharwad, Karnataka. File

Existing pilot scheme has failed to take off in 2/3 of States so far

Children in anganwadis and government schools could soon be eating rice infused with iron, folic acid and vitamin B-12.

In a bid to combat chronic anaemia and undernutrition, the government is making plans to distribute fortified rice through the Integrated Child Development Services and Mid-Day Meal schemes across the country from next year, with a special focus on 112 aspirational districts, according to a statement from the Food Ministry.

However, an existing pilot scheme to distribute fortified rice through the Public Distribution System in 15 districts has only been implemented in five districts so far, although more than half the project duration is over.

The Food Corporation of India has now been asked to come up with a comprehensive plan to scale up the annual supply of fortified rice from the current 15,000 tonnes to at least 1.3 lakh tonnes, said the statement.

The centrally-sponsored pilot scheme was approved in February 2019, and allocated a total budget outlay of ₹174.6 crore for a three-year period from 2019-20 onwards. However, only five States — Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and Chhattisgarh — have started the distribution of fortified rice in their identified pilot districts. The remaining 10 States have only now identified their respective districts, and will soon start distribution, but less than one and a half years remain in the pilot scheme period.

At a review meeting last week, the new Food Minister Piyush Goyal emphasised the need to scale up the distribution of fortified rice.

Accordingly, at a meeting chaired by Food Secretary Sudhanshu Pandey on Monday, the Ministry asked FCI to develop a plan to procure and distribute fortified rice under the schemes from 2021-2022, starting with the 112 aspirational districts. On Tuesday, further discussions on the supply chain and logistical implications were held with NITI Aayog, the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI), and non-governmental stakeholders including the Tata Trust, World Food Programme, PATH and Nutrition International.

Fortifying rice involves grinding broken rice into powder, mixing it with nutrients, and then shaping it into rice-like kernels using an extrusion process. These fortified kernels are then mixed with normal rice in a 1:100 ratio, and distributed for consumption.

Currently, there are only 15,000 tonnes of these kernels available per year in the country. To cover PDS, anganwadis and mid-day meals in the 112 aspirational districts, annual supply capacity would need to be increased to about 1.3 lakh tonnes. To cover PDS across the country, 3.5 lakh tonnes of fortified kernels would be needed. FCI has also been asked to invest in equipping rice mills with the blending machines needed to mix the kernels into normal rice, added the statement.