

THE TIMES OF INDIA

Coming soon: Safety norms for food banks

TNN | Aug 1, 2019, 04.32 AM IST

NEW DELHI: It will soon be mandatory for food banks and organisations distributing surplus food to register and comply with safety norms such as hygiene practices and labelling besides maintaining surplus food records and facilities for transport, storage and reheating.

The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) is set to come up with draft regulations for recovery and distribution of surplus food to ensure that the food distributed among the poor and needy is safe for consumption, official sources said.

The draft regulation – a copy of which has been accessed by TOI – has been approved by the health ministry and is likely to be placed in the public domain by the food regulator within a week, seeking comments from stakeholders.

The move comes in the wake of efforts by the government to prevent food wastage, resulting in a number of food recovery and distribution organisations coming up in the recent past. At present, there are over 150 such recovery and distribution agencies across the country.

In 2017, FSSAI had launched an initiative to create a web-based common platform to establish a network of agencies that collect surplus food and distribute among the needy.

In the first phase, the regulator has already verified and registered nearly 50 agencies.

"The idea is to increase the outreach and encourage safe collection and distribution of surplus food," FSSAI chief executive Pawan Agarwal told TOI.

Official statistics show more than 50,000 tonnes of food is wasted in social gatherings annually, whereas around 15.2% of people in the country are undernourished and 38.7% of the under five children are stunted. As per the 2018 Global Hunger Index, India ranked 103 out of 119 qualifying countries.

While the new regulations are aimed at ensuring safety of surplus food, it will also facilitate systematic recovery of such food and prevent wastage at weddings, birthday parties and other public functions.

In fact, various companies selling food products such as cereals, rice, dry fruits, confectionaries and baby milk products are also interested in giving away surplus stocks closer to expiry but find it difficult in the absence of a regulated mechanism as there are concerns about such products finding their way back into the retail even after the expiry date. "The proposed regulations are aimed at facilitating such distribution," says Agarwal.

The proposed regulations state that "no surplus food distribution organisation shall distribute surplus food after the expiry of its shelf life".

It also defines the responsibilities of food business operators and distribution agencies dealing with surplus food.

To ensure regular monitoring, the draft regulation suggests setting up of monitoring committee at state level consisting of members from state enforcement agency, department of consumer affairs and NGOs. It also defines the functions of the monitoring committee and gives detailed guidelines about handling and distribution of surplus food.