India's FSSAI chief slams auditor’s report, reiterates commitment to food safety

India's food regulator has strongly rebutted a report by the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) that has been highly critical of its licencing, standards and testing processes.

Seeking to assure consumers that they can trust food sold in India, the chief of the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) stressed the regulator's commitment to its remit to ensure food safety, and pointed out that it is currently investing Rs4.8b (about US$75m) in upgrading its laboratories.

The report’s criticisms alleged:

* The shoddy state of food-testing labs under the FSSAI.
* A lack of standards for regulating some food items.
* Poor infrastructure for the collection of samples.
* Lapses in issuing licences and clearances.
* Financial lapses within the FSSAI.

The auditor said it had found "systemic inefficiencies, delays and deficiencies in the framing of various regulations and standards, amendments to regulations in violation of the Act and the specific direction of the Supreme Court".

Systematic rebuttal

Countering the CAG's findings point by point, Pawan Agarwal, the FSSAI's chief executive, said the auditor’s office had ignored the work the regulator has been doing recently, and had only assessed years up to 2016.

He also highlighted the FSSAI's request to the government for 600 more staff and its review of the Food Safety and Standards Act, from which it will make recommendations later this year.
In his response, Agarwal insisted: "The CAG report should... be seen in the context of the huge and complex task at hand. The fact is that the FSSAI is a new and evolving organisation and it faces severe constraints of manpower and resources."

"We assure citizens that they can trust food they get. The FSSAI is confident that the country's food safety ecosystem is well on the way to become more robust and globally benchmarked in the years to come," he told reporters.

Answering questions about the standards of the FSSAI's central and state food labs, he said that the authority has been upgrading its facilities and will soon set up two new testing centres.

The regulator is also due to finalise reference labs to deal with any inconsistencies between the centres, Agarwal added, to address a key criticism by the CAG.