FSSAI pushes dairy firms to start voluntary milk fortification

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Says process is cost-effective, will be eventually made mandatory

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Urging private and public dairy companies to begin voluntary milk fortification, the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India CEO Pawan Agarwal said food fortification is the most cost-effective and globally-recognised strategy to address micro-nutrient deficiencies.

“A large majority of stakeholders are in favour of food fortification but a few misinformed elements are creating confusion around the issue. We need to ensure it does not get derailed due to misinformation or lack of awareness,” he said.

Last month, FSSAI notified standards for fortifying staples such as edible oil, milk, atta, maida and salt. The food safety authority has been urging industry to undertake voluntary fortification of their products especially edible oil and milk, before it is made mandatory.

“Several ministries and government bodies have written to FSSAI to make fortification mandatory. However, we want to first assess whether the industry is ready. Fortification needs to be scaled up step-by-step before being made mandatory,” Agarwal said while speaking at the National Consultation of Milk Fortification on Wednesday.
Issues addressed
Hitting out at the critics of the FSSAI’s fortification strategy, he said the fortification standards were finalised by its Scientific Panel, which comprises scientists and public health experts, after careful deliberations for over one and half years. He said the panel finalised these standards keeping in mind the balance between health benefits and toxicity levels.
Swadeshi Jagran Manch, the economic-wing of RSS, has recently written to the Prime Minister opposing mandatory food fortification. It has raised several concerns such as costs of fortification, and use of synthetic vitamins made from animal sources. It has also alleged that making it mandatory will favour a few select multi-national companies and the proposal was influenced by some foreign-funded NGOs.
“Let the public health issues be dealt by scientists and experts in FSSAI. If there are some concerns regarding the standards, they need to be looked at by the scientific panel,” Agarwal said.
Talking about costs involved in fortification, he said, “Costs of fortification in the case of milk with Vitamin A and D is minimal, about 2-3 paise per litre, and players such as Mother Dairy who have undertaken large scale milk fortification have absorbed such costs.”
He also said as per FSSAI regulations, premixes used for fortification need to be manufactured from vegetarian sources, and not from animal sources. He said the prescribed dosage of the premix used in fortified staples is within safe limits and the focus is on ensuring the safety of the fortified food products rather than whether they are natural or synthetic. Currently 13 state co-operatives and 11 private dairies have begun offering fortified milk to consumers.