The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India called upon food business operators (FBOs) across the country to establish a robust, effective and efficient system of redressing consumer complaints in the food sector.

Addressing FBOs at a training programme organised to sensitisate them to the rights of consumers, particularly their right to quick and satisfactory resolution of their complaints, Pawan Kumar Agarwal, chief executive officer, FSSAI, said the food safety authority would soon come up with quantifiable metrics to accurately gauge the performance and efficiency of each FBO vis-a-vis their resolution of consumer complaints. “We want to make sure that no complaint goes unresolved,” he said.

Ashish Bahuguna, chairman, FSSAI, regretted that companies, particularly the larger ones, were prone to complacency when it came to consumer complaints. “This has to change,” he said. He advised corporates that criticism is good and should be looked at as a learning experience.

With its increasing focus on consumer rights, particularly their right to safe food and the right to redress of their grievances, the food regulator has provided as many as eight platforms through which consumers can register their complaints, concerns, views and opinions. Besides the toll-free number (1800112100), consumers can send their complaints via SMS or WhatsApp to 9868686868 or
send in their concerns to the web portal Food Safety Connect. They can also contact the regulator through its Facebook page and Twitter handle, e-mail a complaint to compliance@fssai.gov.in and walk in to or send it by snail mail to its regulatory compliance division.

From the time these facilities were set up to now (between June 2016 and February 2017), FSSAI has received as many as 1,722 complaints, out of which 1,307 pertained to food packaging. Another 415 grievances were about parcelled packages or take-aways, 98 were about food adulteration and 74 were on sale of expired food packages.

The FSSAI team handling these complaints sifts through them, categorises them and, depending on the nature of the complaint, refers them to the FBO or the state enforcement agency for appropriate action within the defined timelines. However, a careful scrutiny of the complaint redress showed that a large number of complaints were pending with the FBOs and the state governments.

So in a bid to correct this and tighten the complaint resolution system, FSSAI is planning a series of workshops with FBOs as well as state food safety officers (FSOs). In fact, FSSAI insisted that FBOs nominate a nodal officer for redress of consumer complaints, and this was the first of a series of workshops planned for such nodal officers. FSSAI has also taken an initiative to develop a Food Safety Phone Network (FSPN), wherein all food regulatory authorities shall be operating in a Closed User Group (CUG) across the country. This network will bring more coherence in the efforts of maintaining food safety standards in the country but shall also reduce the response time to the exigencies emerging out of food safety issues. It will empower the citizens in a big way to have direct access to the regulatory staff. This will bring more transparency and shall provide an effective mechanism for grievance redressal. These CUG numbers will be integrated with the Food License and Registration System (FLRS), thereby all the alerts generated by FLRS shall be messaged on these CUG numbers.