The Food Safety Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) has issued an expression of interest (EOI) to establish national reference laboratories (NRLs). A total of 14 reference labs will be set up with respect to specialisation in risks or food categories.

“However, the final decision on the number of facilities and functions assigned to them will be decided by a high-level evaluation committee, which will be set up by FSSAI for this purpose,” it stated.

FSSAI invited EOIs from eligible laboratories to be designated as NRLs and proposed to implement a network of such labs to be designated as the National Reference Laboratory (NRL) Network.

The reference lab would be to set up a countrywide standard for routine procedures and reliable testing methods, validate such standard procedures/testing methods, develop new methods and ensure proficiency in testing across the food labs with special reference to the risks or food categories.

Stated the country’s apex food regulator, “It is proposed to set up about 14 NRLs on product basis (milk and milk products, fish and fish products, meat and meat products, cereal and cereal products, fruits and vegetables, etc.), analyte basis (pesticide residues, mycotoxins, veterinary drug residues including antibiotics, heavy metals, etc.) or a combination of product and analyte [veterinary drug residues in fish products, pesticides in a specific agricultural commodity, food contact surfaces, genetically-modified organisms (GMOs), etc.]

Pawan Kumar Agarwal, chief executive officer, FSSAI, said, “Every country, for the purpose of method development, proficiency testing, training, etc., has reference labs.”

“India, so far, has no concept of such a lab. We have developed this concept for the country, and now we are into the process of empanelling or recognising the reference labs. It could either be a private or public entity,”
Agarwal said that the creation of the reference laboratory would enhance the reliability of results and continuous adherence to international laboratory practices, result in greater availability of competent laboratories and proficient personnel, allow uniformity in protocols and procedures across the laboratory network, reduce litigations among the stakeholders or trade partners and allow effective utilisation of existing laboratory infrastructures.

According to the EOI, the vision of the Reference Laboratory is to ensure that (a) the laboratory system meets the national and international regulatory requirements and obligations; (b) the laboratory results on which the regulator(s) make decisions are valid and reliable, and (c) there is a greater availability of competent laboratories with best practices in line with the global trends, and (d) provide guidance and flexible but consistent solutions for the different stakeholders.

Further, the scope of work of a NRL - though not limited to these - would be as specified:

- It shall develop countrywide standards for routine testing procedures and reliable testing methods, develop and validate newer methods, provide proficiency testing in selected areas and provide training in the area of competence
- It shall be the resource centre for providing certified reference materials (CRMs) or standard reference materials (SRMs) in the specific domain
- It shall provide technical support in the area of competence
- It shall evaluate the performance of other notified laboratories in the area of competence
- It shall coordinate exchange of information amongst notified laboratories
- It shall collaborate and collate data generation for purposes of data banking related to their specific domain
- It shall carry out such other functions, as may be specified by the food authority from time to time in the related areas