FSSAI plans ‘one nation, one food safety law’

Food safety regulator FSSAI seeks to standardize surveillance, sampling, inspection and testing across states to increase transparency

Pawan Kumar Agarwal, chief executive officer of Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI). Photo: Pradeep Gaur/Mint

**New Delhi:** The concept of ‘one-nation, one-tax’ behind the goods and services tax (GST) implemented across the country seems to be influencing other organisations. The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI), the country’s apex food regulator, is working on a ‘one-nation, one-food-safety-law’ so that every state-level food authority follows a standard practice for the implementation, compliance and surveillance of food safety regulations, which in turn will ensure smoother operations for food companies.
“The law has always been same for everyone. But there have been consistency issues at state level. Also, we need to standardize food testing laboratories. With ‘one-nation, one-food-safety-law’, we will be able to remove those and make things more transparent,” said Pawan Kumar Agarwal, chief executive officer, FSSAI.

Under the ‘one-nation, one food-safety-law’ regime, state-level food safety officers will have to follow a 10-point code-of-ethics set by FSSAI. “At present, there is no such thing, and food safety officers across states do things the way they think best. This should not be the practice. We need to standardize this,” said Agarwal.

Under the regime, FSSAI wants to erase discrepancies in food safety regulations across states, and standardize surveillance, sampling and inspection. “This is to enable states with good practices,” said Agarwal. Under the new regime, inspection and sampling will be monitored as everything will be “on the cloud” as part of the agenda to increase transparency, he added.

To bring consistency in food testing, FSSAI is introducing guidelines that food testing laboratories will have to abide by. Under the draft norms, laboratories will have to come under the Indian Food Laboratory Network (InFoLNet), a digital solution to connect all food labs in India to a centralised lab management system.

So far, 154 laboratories have listed on InFoLNet. FSSAI has made this compulsory for all FSSAI-notified laboratories. With this, details of all tests and the results will be available on this platform.

“In the past, there have been questions regarding authenticity of tests done by certain laboratories. Besides upgrading the laboratories, InFoLNet will abolish the discrepancies and ensure transparency,” said Agarwal.

The regulator, which owns and operates two laboratories and has approved 82 others in various states, allocated Rs482 crore earlier this year to strengthen the food testing infrastructure, including upgrading and modernizing laboratories. Besides, FSSAI will also set up 62 mobile testing labs. There are currently four mobile food testing labs in Punjab, Gujarat, Kerala and Tamil Nadu.

In 2015, FSSAI questioned safety standards of Swiss packaged food company Nestle India Ltd’s Maggi instant noodles based on reports by one of its testing
laboratories in Kolkata, prompting questions about the capacity and state of the laboratory.

Under the new regime, the food regulator also wants to abolish intervention of multiple agencies for things such as import of food products. Going forward, there will be a single standard for every authority.