Citizens can trust food they get: FSSAI on CAG report

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New Delhi, Dec 20: Food safety regulator FSSAI today assured citizens that they can trust food they get, a day after government auditor CAG pulled up the sectoral watchdog over licensing process and poor testing labs.

Responding to the CAG's audit finding, the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) said it is committed to raise the bar of food safety and hygiene for which it is investing Rs 480 crore to modernise state food testing labs. FSSAI CEO Pawan Agarwal said the regulator has requested the government to recruit 600 people in the central authority to help meet manpower shortage and discharge its function of framing standards as well as ensuring compliances.

He said the regulator is reviewing the Food Safety and Standards Act, 2006 and will make recommendation to the health ministry in the next 3-4 months.

"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.

The Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG) had yesterday pulled up the FSSAI for issuing licences to food business operators without complete documents and questioned it on the quality of testing with 65 out of 72 state labs not being accredited by the National Accreditation Board for Testing and Calibration Laboratories (NABL).

The auditor 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".

Reacting to the CAG report, the FSSAI said it "appreciates the inputs from CAG to improve performance of food safety."

"The CAG report should, however, be seen in the context of the huge and complex task at hand and the fact that the FSSAI is new an evolving organisation and it faces severe constraints of manpower and resources," he said.
Stressing that the regulator has over the past couple of years taken several steps to improve food safety in the country, he said, "The FSSAI continues to be committed to raise the bar for food safety and hygiene in the country so that citizens can trust food they get in the marketplace."

Elaborating on food labs, Agarwal said the Centre is making an investment of Rs 480 crore for strengthening of the state food laboratories and referral laboratories. Overall 45 labs across States/UTs would be supported.

The FSSAI is also upgrading its own two labs and will set up two new laboratories, he said, adding that the regulator will also soon finalise reference labs to deal with inconsistency.

There are currently 240 labs across the country, of which 152 are private accredited with NABL.

On framing of standards, Agarwal said barring few products, norms and regulations have been framed for all the products, including organic food, specified under the Act.

Asked about the CAG's findings on the licensing process, he said the FSSAI is reviewing the document list and doing away with those which are not needed for getting its registration and licences.

Welcoming CAG's performance audit, Agarwal said: "This report will help us in sensitising those states which are not doing enough on the food safety front."