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Food Beverage News



## INTERVIEW

### "FBOs shouldn't run for redressal of grievances"

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Ashwani Maindola



The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) in its more than a decade of operation has faced many challenges and subsequently overcome them by introducing measures such as updated norms and alignment with Codex. From the core issue of standard setting to ensuring licensing and registration of Food Business Operators (FBOs), to using technology in operations and working on international collaboration, the authority has adapted itself to sail the global food safety course. A 3600 approach is making it possible for the authority to think of all concerned - FSOs, FBOs and public. **Pawan Agarwal, CEO, FSSAI**, in conversation with **Ashwani Maindola**, highlights the organisation's journey so far as well as its plans going forward.

**Excerpts:**  
How are you working on strengthening FSSAI's governance and administration, towards a stronger food safety ecosystem in the country?  
We have already put together a proposal for creation of more posts in FSSAI and our recruitment rules are also being finalised and submitted to the government. Both of these proposals are under active consideration to strengthen the FSSAI. Meanwhile we have been hiring people from other services on contract and we have been extremely selective in taking people. Now we begin to receive a large number of applications and people want to join FSSAI. We have also created a performance-based work culture in the organisation. The work ethos in the organisation is very positive. Overall work environment has improved.

#### What has been the progress related to standards and their harmonisation with the Codex and how many of the standards have been finalised so far?

It's the core function of FSSAI. In most of the cases we have standards in place or they are in final stages of being formulated. We're identifying the gaps and changing our existing standards if they are required to be changed to bring them at par with Codex. We have created Standards Review Group with experts comprising all the stakeholders. In that forum, the industry reviews the existing standards to give their comments-suggestions on where the gaps are and what standards are required to be. This has helped in building confidence in the standards that FSSAI makes. We have also collaborated with US-based international database having info of standards across the world. Our team has access to those standards to benchmark our standards.

As regards to the number of standards, it is very difficult to count as it's an ongoing process and we can't put a number out as several additives have several applications. So, much of the work for standards setting is already done and we regularly analyse and work upon standards as and when required.

#### What has been the progress with respect to food safety compliance by food businesses?

Food safety compliance has been a weak area because the compliance rests with state and many state governments have capacity constraint. We're working with them and we are reasonably successful in pushing the agenda of food safety within the state governments. But I won't say that we were able to do it across the board. And now we are trying to figure out that with limited capacity how we can improve compliance.

One of the points is focus on self-compliance by the businesses and build their capacities to do so. Second is to introduce third-party auditing so that instead of food inspector or FSO going and verifying compliance, the third-party can do the compliance verification. Third is training and capacity building of the FBO's staff through Food Safety Management System (FSMS) which is about not only looking at the final product but also looking at the food across the value chain and how the food safety and hygiene are to be maintained.

Further we're using technology like online platform – Food Safety Compliance Through Regular Inspection And Sampling (FoSCoRIS). These kind of IT programs would be useful for carrying out our inspections. Also food safety manual were introduced that would help in more practical understanding of processes and how the law is to be implemented. So there are several ways in which we're trying to improve the compliances.

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**Recently India HACCP (Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point) and India GHP (Good Hygienic Practice) were launched, how they would help the food safety ecosystem?**

While there are global standards available these are India-specific requirements where HACCP and GHP can be done. I am sure the industry would be able to comply with it and once there is data available with regards to HACCP, the inspection load on the FSO (Food Safety Officer) would reduce considerably. It is an adaptation of what is happening globally.

**In recent times the FSSAI has been proactively collaborating with foreign agencies. Tell us about your global collaboration.**

We want Indian food safety ecosystem to be benchmark with global best. The first partnership was with the Global Food Safety Partnership under the World Bank that works with spiral agencies and private partners. They have been supporting us in capacity building conducting studies. Then we have partnership with France, Germany, the Netherlands, Australia, New Zealand, USFDA, Singapore etc. In many places it has been about exchange visits, training and capacity building. In many places we have structural programmes to be discussed amongst the agencies, and sharing experiences in dealing with the food safety related matters.

**Tell us about the food safety training and capacity building programmes for FBOs and FSOs. How the concept of one nation-one law is bringing uniformity in food safety related matters?**

We're raising our expectations that all FBOs in their premises will have a person trained and certified in all food safety related matters as per FSSAI's standards. And this has been done to help the FBOs to invest in capacity building for which the entire system of food safety training and certification was created. On street vendor, our focus is more on the food handling, waste management and hygiene.

Further for training and capacity building of FSOs, we're codifying the practices and processes under the FSS Act so that the discretion is minimised and the FSOs are trained and should act like true professionals in discharge of their duties.

As regards to one nation-one law, there are several agencies still dealing with various aspects of food safety matters and sometimes they are not on same page. The experience of FBOs remains different from state to state with respect to the food safety enforcement. Therefore the concept of one nation-one law was to bring a greater and effective vertical and horizontal coordination to bring uniformity in their experience vis-à-vis food safety issues. They shouldn't be roaming pillar to post for redressal of their grievances.

**Five years down the line what future do you see for FSSAI?**

In advanced countries people do not doubt the food safety and hygiene of the food packaged or served that is available in market. In India, people are not very confident about the food served in market or restaurant. Five years down the line, FSSAI jointly with the FBOs should be able to build that confidence in our citizens that the food that is available in the market is safe. It should be conveyed to the citizens that when they are eating out, food safety is a responsibility of the FBOs and if they are not responsible then the regulator will make them responsible. We also want to see that when food samples tested in our labs, testings should be credible, the FBOs have confidence in it and labs maintain integrity of the testing they are doing.

Further, we're also planning to develop our own offices in all the major metros Chennai, Mumbai and Kolkata. Currently many of the places are rented. We'll be making integrated offices which will have labs and training centre along side our administrative blocks.