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FSSAI to bring comprehensive recall policy by April

Regulator's to-do list includes guidelines on traceability mechanism, food recall portal and final notification of product approval regulations

WHAT'S ON OFFER

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- The idea is also to inform consumers of the presence of such food in the market and ensure it is contained and destroyed
- Once the policy comes into effect, it will be a guide to operators on how to establish a written 'recall plan' for executing such a process

Almost after a year of no food product being pulled out of the market, the regulator has decided to bring a comprehensive recall policy this financial year.

The last big food recall was in June 2015, of Nestle India's Maggi noodles. The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) had ordered the removal on reports that it contained traces of lead and monosodium glutamate. Subsequent lab tests cleared Maggi and the product is now back on retail shelves.

In the making for five years, the draft procedure for a food product's recall was put

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up for public comment on the body's website last year by FSSAI, where it has remained. Its latest newsletter lists "final notification of recall regulations" as among the 12 important things it plans for 2016-17.

Other items include guidelines on a traceability mechanism, a food recall portal, final notification of the product approval regulations and amendment of the Food Safety Act of 2006. An industry representative said another round of deliberations with businesses is expected before fine-tuning the draft food recall procedures.

Besides Maggi, several energy drinks, flavoured water, syrups and sauces had been recalled in the past for not adhering to prescribed food standards. While the current law has provision for a recall, there hasn't been a foolproof policy or procedures, unlike in mature markets such as the US or Britain.

In August 2015, FSSAI said it would not continue with the process of product approvals, citing a Supreme Court order allowing food and health care products to be launched freely. That saw the end of food recall, too.

According to the draft recall procedure, the objective is to "guide the food business operators on how to carry out a recall process, using global identification systems such as barcode and other mechanisms like e-mail, paper, fax, etc, which facilitates fast removal of the food under recall from the distribution chain..."

The idea is also to inform consumers of the presence of such food in the market and ensure it is contained and destroyed or rendered safe. Once the policy comes into effect, it will be a guide to operators on how to establish a written "recall plan" for executing such a process, in case the food is determined unsafe and to protect the health of consumers in such a situation.

It will be about the complete process of recall, post-recall report, closure of the recall process and follow-up action to prevent a recurrence.

The proposed regulation exempts retailers from having a recall plan unless they are also engaged in the manufacture or import of food. Restaurants, caterers and takeaway joints do not need to have a recall plan. But, every entity in the distribution chain must remove the recalled product, once notified.

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The draft procedures say a recall of food made abroad may also be initiated by reports of health authorities or from information received directly from such authorities or otherwise. Back in 2011, then FSSAI chairman P I Suvrathan had told this newspaper that food recall was a complex process and the Authority would come up with related norms in the following year.