



FOOD

FSSAI Strengthens Food Safety Compliance for E-commerce: Key Recommendations and Impacts

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The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI), the regulatory body overseeing food safety under the Food Safety and Standards Act, 2006, issued a comprehensive advisory on December 3, 2024 (File No.RCD-13/1/2024-Rc regulatory-FSSAI(E-13150) (Advisory) . This advisory, aimed at e-commerce Food Business Operators (FBOs).

With the surge in online food orders, driven by convenience and accessibility, ensuring food safety, authenticity, and transparency has become more challenging yet essential. This article explores the key points of the advisory and its broader implications for e-commerce FBOs and consumers alike.

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Background: The Role of E-commerce in Food Safety

With the ever-increasing popularity of food delivery apps and quick commerce, the Indian e-commerce food industry has witnessed exponential growth. This rise has introduced new challenges to food safety, including concerns over the quality and authenticity of food products, misleading claims, inadequate shelf life, and risks of cross-contamination. There has also been significant customer dissonance as made out from the consumer complaints received by the regulators.

Recognizing these challenges, FSSAI has stepped up its efforts to ensure that e-commerce platforms comply with the same rigorous food safety standards as traditional food businesses. This advisory forms part of a broader initiative to enhance food safety compliance across the e-commerce supply chain and mitigate risks associated with foodborne illnesses and fraudulent practices.

The advisory aligns with existing food safety regulations, including the Food Safety and Standards (Labelling and Display) Regulations, 2020, which regulate how food products are labelled, advertised, and presented to consumers.

Key Elements of the Advisory

1. Training Delivery Personnel in Food Safety Practices

One of the advisory's key focus areas is the training of last-mile delivery personnel, who are central to maintaining the quality and safety of food during transit. FSSAI mandates that delivery staff be trained in the following:

- **Safe Handling and Transportation:** Ensuring food items are not contaminated during delivery.
- **Personal Hygiene and Sanitization:** Following best practices for cleanliness, including regular handwashing and wearing clean uniforms.
- **Separation of Food and Non-Food Items:** Ensuring food products are not stored or transported alongside non-food items to avoid cross-contamination.

This initiative highlights FSSAI's emphasis on food safety at every stage of the supply chain, right up to the consumer's doorstep.

2. Separation of Food and Non-food deliveries

The advisory emphasizes the requirement of the Food Business Operator (FBO) for separating food and non-food items for delivery to avoid risk of cross contamination thus safeguarding consumer health.

3. Regulating Online Product Claims

The advisory prohibits the display of misleading or unsupported product claims on e-commerce platforms. All claims made online must:

- Accurately reflect the details provided on the product's physical label.
- Comply with the FSS (Labelling and Display) Regulations, 2020.

By ensuring truthful advertising, FSSAI aims to build consumer trust and avoid regulatory action against errant FBOs.

4. Ensuring Adequate Shelf Life of Delivered Products

FSSAI has established a clear guideline on the shelf life of products sold via e-commerce platforms:

- Delivered products must have at least **30% of their shelf life remaining**.
- Alternatively, the product should be at least **45 days away from expiry** at the time of delivery.

This measure ensures consumers receive food items that are fresh and safe for consumption.

5. Promoting Transparency

To encourage consumer trust, FSSAI encourages e-commerce platforms to prominently display:

- **FSSAI License/Registration Numbers:** A mandatory requirement for all sellers operating on the platform.
- **Hygiene Ratings:** An optional but recommended practice to provide consumers with insights into the seller's food safety standards.

Transparency empowers consumers to make informed decisions and reinforces the credibility of e-commerce platforms.

Mandatory Licensing and Registration

E-commerce platforms must ensure that every food business operator listed on their site has a valid FSSAI License or Registration. Sellers without proper documentation should not be allowed to operate on the platform. This requirement emphasizes accountability and regulatory compliance among all stakeholders in the e-commerce food ecosystem.

Implications for E-commerce FBOs

This advisory places significant responsibility on e-commerce platforms to uphold food safety standards. Non-compliance may lead to penalties, reputational damage, and loss of consumer trust. Key action points for FBOs include:

- Establishing strong training programs for delivery staff.
- Implementing strict checks to verify product claims and shelf-life requirements.
- Enhancing transparency by displaying licensing and hygiene information.
- Display the FSSAI License / Registration Number of the sellers and Hygiene rating of the sellers /FBOs

Benefits for Consumers

For consumers, these guidelines are a step toward receiving safer, higher-quality food products. By improving transparency and mandating compliance, FSSAI aims to protect consumers from risks associated with expired or contaminated food and misleading claims and make informed buying decisions.

Conclusion: Building a Safer E-commerce Food Ecosystem

FSSAI's advisory reflects its commitment to creating a safe and reliable food ecosystem, even in the rapidly evolving e-commerce space. By addressing key challenges such as last-mile delivery, transparency, and shelf life, the advisory provides a roadmap for e-commerce FBOs to enhance compliance and consumer trust.

As the online food sector continues to grow, adherence to these guidelines will safeguard consumer health and strengthen the reputation and reliability of India's e-commerce food industry.

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