

For immediate release

Press Release

Consumers can now get food tested through consumer organizations Network of consumer organizations for food and nutrition (NetCOFaN) created

New Delhi, 13th December 2019: In order to earn consumer trust, country's food regulator has decided to get food testing done through the consumer organizations. Food safety law provides for reimbursement of testing fees if a consumer sample fails. This provision has however never been used due to some practical difficulties. With a view to address these difficulties, FSSAI has now decided to authorize credible voluntary consumer organizations (VCOs) to assist consumers in getting such tests done. Reimbursement of testing fees in such cases will be done even if the consumer sample does not fail.

This decision was taken by the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) in a workshop at New Delhi with representatives of over eighty (80) voluntary consumer organizations (VCOs). The VCOs decided to create a nation-wide *network of consumer organisations for food safety and nutrition* (NetCOFaN) with the support of FSSAI. This network will initially work in three specific areas, namely – 1) awareness and training, 2) mobilization of small and petty food businesses for various schemes, and 3) food testing and surveillance.

FSSAI has large volume of high quality content on food safety and nutrition. The VCOs with their ground level connect will use this content for awareness and training programmes by translating and adapting it to the local conditions. On-ground presence of VCOs will help reach the messages to local areas across the country. Support of VCOs will also be taken to mobilize small and petty food businesses to participate in hygiene rating, cluster certification and food safety training and certification (FoSTaC) programmes. VCOs will be provided '*Food Safety Magic Box*' that has over 100 simple do-it-yourself tests for common adulterants and kit for testing in midday meal scheme.

Supported by the FSSAI, VCOs can play an important role in food testing and surveillance activities. To kick-start this, FSSAI has partnered with Delhi-based Consumer Voice for conduct of surveillance for safety and quality of milk products in Delhi NCR area. For which samples of paneer, khoya and desi ghee and other milk products were picked up recently from Delhi NCR area by volunteers of consumer Voice with the support of state food safety authorities. These samples were coded by Consumer Voice and tested in FSSAI's National Food Laboratory at Ghaziabad. The results of this surveillance would be compiled soon and shared with all concerned. Preventive and corrective action would then be initiated jointly by Consumer Voice and the State food authorities.

Evidence based point system has been put in place to monitor work of VCOs and they would be provided token funding based on of activities to ensure sustainability and continuity.

FSSAI has earlier asked top-200 food companies to appoint nodal persons for consumer grievances. These persons have been trained for effective consumer grievance redressal. FSSAI would now explore ways of using services of VCOs in effective redressal of consumer grievances.

Expressing gratitude for the enthusiastic response of VCOs from across the country and their decision to form NetCOFaN, CEO FSSAI Pawan Agarwal said that *'the VCOs are key part of the system to build an atmosphere of trust, transparency and accountability in the area of food safety and nutrition. He hoped that 'VCOs will themselves take up this work with full responsibility and accountability and provide last mile connectivity to the consumers.'*

Pushpa Girimaji, an expert on consumer issues, who was present at the workshop, said *'consumer organizations can play a vital role in ensuring food safety in the country.'* She added that *'creation of network would help to build synergies amongst them and is very innovative way of FSSAI in reaching out to the consumers across the country'.*

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