

FSSAI's Pioneering Role in Enhancing Food Safety and Quality in the Indian Subcontinent

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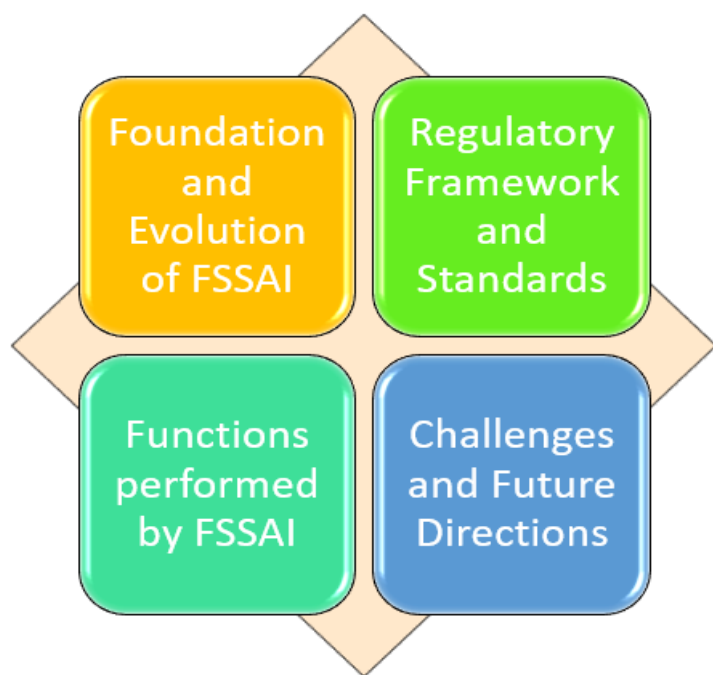
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In the rich tapestry of the Indian subcontinent, where diverse cultures, traditions, and flavours converge, the significance of food cannot be overstated. However, ensuring the safety and quality of the food supply is a formidable challenge, given the vastness and complexity of the region. The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) has emerged as a crucial player in this landscape, working tirelessly to uphold the highest standards of food safety and quality. In this article, we delve into the pivotal role played by FSSAI in improving the overall food safety scenario in the Indian subcontinent.



Foundation and Evolution of FSSAI

Established in 2006 under the Food Safety and Standards Act, FSSAI operates as an autonomous body under the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India (FSSAI, 2011). Its primary mandate is to regulate and monitor the manufacture, storage, distribution, sale, and import of food products to ensure they meet the prescribed safety and quality standards (Ajay, 2018). The journey of FSSAI has been marked by a commitment to continuous improvement and adaptability. Over the years, the authority has evolved to address emerging

challenges and incorporate international best practices into the Indian food regulatory framework. This evolution has played a pivotal role in enhancing the food safety and quality landscape in the subcontinent.

Regulatory Framework and Standards

A cornerstone of FSSAI's efforts lies in the establishment of a robust regulatory framework and the formulation of comprehensive standards for various food products. The Food Safety and Standards (Food Products Standards and Food Additives) Regulations, 2011, provide a detailed set of guidelines covering a wide spectrum of food items. This includes provisions for permissible limits of contaminants, food additives, and labeling requirements, among other critical aspects. By setting and regularly updating these standards, FSSAI not only ensures the safety of consumers but also fosters a culture of compliance within the food industry. The standards are designed to align with global benchmarks, promoting trade and assuring consumers that the food they consume adheres to international quality norms (Somveer *et al.* 2023).

Functions performed by FSSAI

Enhanced Surveillance and Enforcement

FSSAI has significantly bolstered its surveillance and enforcement mechanisms to monitor the food supply chain effectively. The authority conducts regular inspections, sampling, and testing of food products to verify compliance with established standards. Rigorous enforcement actions are taken against entities found violating regulations, including fines, product recalls, and, in severe cases, license cancellations. The use of technology has been instrumental in these endeavours. FSSAI has implemented initiatives such as the Food Safety Compliance System (FoSCoS) to streamline regulatory processes, enhance transparency, and facilitate real-time monitoring. This digital platform allows food businesses to obtain licenses, submit compliance reports, and undergo inspections seamlessly,

contributing to a more efficient and accountable regulatory ecosystem.

Capacity Building and Training

Recognizing that a well-informed and skilled workforce is essential for effective implementation of food safety measures, FSSAI has placed a strong emphasis on capacity building and training programs. These initiatives target various stakeholders, including food businesses, regulatory officials, and consumers. For food businesses, FSSAI conducts training sessions to enhance awareness about regulatory requirements and good manufacturing practices. This not only empowers businesses to operate within the legal framework but also promotes a culture of self-regulation.

Regulatory officials are provided with specialized training to stay abreast of the latest developments in food safety and quality management. This ensures that inspections are conducted with precision, and regulatory decisions are based on a deep understanding of the evolving challenges in the food industry. Consumer education is another vital component of FSSAI's outreach efforts. Through campaigns, workshops, and digital platforms, the authority disseminates information about safe food practices, reading labels, and reporting concerns. Empowering consumers with knowledge makes them active participants in the broader mission of food safety.

International Collaboration and Best Practices

FSSAI recognizes the global nature of the food supply chain and actively collaborates with international agencies and organizations to stay informed about best practices and emerging trends. This collaborative approach helps in benchmarking India's food safety standards against global norms, fostering a culture of continuous improvement.

Participation in international forums and adherence to Codex Alimentarius, the international food standards body, further aligns India with global expectations. By adopting internationally accepted practices, FSSAI contributes not only to the safety of domestically consumed food but also facilitates exports by ensuring compliance with destination country requirements.

Addressing Emerging Challenges

The dynamic nature of the food industry presents new challenges regularly, including the rise of novel food products, changing consumption patterns, and evolving technologies. FSSAI remains vigilant in adapting its regulatory framework to address these challenges effectively.

One such example is the regulation of genetically modified (GM) foods. FSSAI has established guidelines for the safety assessment of GM foods and derived products, ensuring a cautious and science-based approach to their introduction into the market. This reflects the authority's commitment to balancing technological advancements with safety considerations.

Contaminant Management and Risk Assessment

FSSAI places significant emphasis on managing contaminants in the food supply chain. Regular monitoring and assessment of contaminants such as pesticides, heavy metals, and mycotoxins are conducted to ensure that food products remain within permissible limits.

The authority employs a risk-based approach to prioritize and address potential hazards. This involves assessing the level of risk associated with specific contaminants and tailoring regulatory measures accordingly (Nair *et al.*, 2023). By focusing resources on high-risk areas, FSSAI optimizes its efforts to safeguard public health.

Issuing Licencing Number

The FSSAI number is a 14-digit unique code assigned to food businesses in India. Each digit carries specific information:

- Digit 1: Indicates registration status (1 for registered, 0 for unregistered)
- Digits 2-3: State code
- Digits 4-5: Year of registration
- Digits 6-9: Serial number in that state and year
- Digits 10-14: Check digit for verification

Types: Different types of licenses exist based on the nature and size of the business, each with its own FSSAI number format and eligibility criteria. These include:

- Basic Registration
- State License
- Central License
- Import License
- Manufacturing/Processing License
- Hotel/Restaurant License

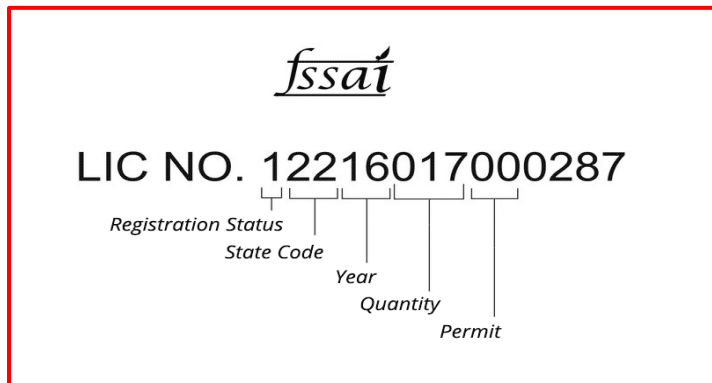


Figure 1. FSSAI Licence Number

Validity: License validity depends on the type, ranging from 1 year (Basic Registration) to 5 years (Central License). Renewal is required before expiry.

Validation: The FSSAI number can be verified online through the FoSCoS portal (Food Safety Compliance System) using the search features.

Obtaining the FSSAI Number

Application Process: The application process is online through FoSCoS, with varying document requirements based on the license type. It involves fees, self-declaration forms, and inspections.

Online Portal: FoSCoS provides a streamlined platform for applicants to submit details, track progress, and receive the license electronically.

Professional Assistance: Consultants and food safety experts can assist with understanding regulations, preparing documents, and navigating the application process.

Significance of the FSSAI Number

- Mandatory Requirement:** For any food business operating in India, obtaining the FSSAI license and displaying the number is mandatory by law.
- Consumer Confidence:** The FSSAI number assures consumers that the business adheres to food safety standards and regulations, promoting trust and brand reputation.

- Legal Compliance:** Possessing a valid FSSAI number protects businesses from legal penalties and ensures smooth operations.
- Market Access:** Many retailers and distributors require suppliers to have a valid FSSAI number for product listing and distribution, making it crucial for market access.
- Public Database:** The FSSAI number is listed in a public database, allowing consumers to verify the business's registration status and hygiene ratings.

Promoting Innovation and Research

FSSAI recognizes the role of innovation in the food industry and supports research initiatives that contribute to the development of safer and higher-quality food products. The authority collaborates with research institutions, academia, and industry stakeholders to stay abreast of technological advancements and scientific developments.

Encouraging the development of food safety technologies, novel food products, and sustainable practices is essential for the long-term improvement of the food safety landscape. FSSAI's proactive approach in this regard not only fosters innovation but also ensures that advancements are aligned with safety and quality considerations.

Challenges and Future Directions

While FSSAI has made remarkable strides in enhancing food safety and quality in the Indian subcontinent, challenges persist. The vastness and diversity of the region, coupled with varying levels of infrastructure and awareness, pose ongoing hurdles. To address these challenges, FSSAI is focused on expanding its outreach, leveraging technology, and strengthening collaborations with state and local authorities.

The future trajectory of FSSAI involves continued vigilance in the face of emerging risks, harnessing technology for more efficient regulatory processes, and promoting a culture of self-regulation within the food industry. The authority's commitment to staying abreast of global best practices and fostering international collaborations will remain central to its mission.

Conclusion

In conclusion, FSSAI stands as a beacon of progress in the realm of food safety and quality in the Indian subcontinent. From formulating stringent standards to leveraging technology for efficient monitoring, the authority has played a pivotal role in transforming the regulatory landscape. Through capacity building, international collaborations, and a commitment to addressing emerging challenges, FSSAI is not only safeguarding sustenance but also contributing to the overall well-being of millions across the subcontinent. As the journey continues, the authority's dedication to excellence will undoubtedly shape the future of food safety and quality in this diverse and vibrant region.

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