

New food safety laws to boost imports, exports

The Food Safety Standards Act 2006 will replace the prevention of Food Adulteration Act, 1956. This will bring Indian food laws at par with global norms, and give food imports and exports a boost, CNBC-TV18's Shubhro Sen reports.

This is not old wine in a new bottle. The new Food Safety Standards Act, which is expected to come into force in December, will give Indian food laws a sharper and stronger set of teeth. For one, it will lay down rules to standardise separate segments of new generation foods.

A whole range like detox, pro- and pre-biotoc, anti-oxidants, organic, genetically modified and irradiated, among others will be dealt with.

So while the old act dealt with only adulteration, the new one will deal with even negligence-induced, unintentional sub-standardisation. The new law is expected to make Indian food processing companies meet international standards.

Seema Vyas, Commissioner, FDA Maharashtra, said, "In order to give a boost to our exports, certainly, our products have to be acceptable to the consumers of the country who we are targeting. Also they have to be in-line with the statutory requirements of those countries and have to comply with the international standards as well."

The new act also lays down a case-by-case punitive action plan—a nice change from the old law which prescribes compulsory prosecution, with a guilty verdict carrying a uniform minimum six months sentence and a Rs 1,000 fine.

"It is only in cases where the case is injurious to health, we'll be sending it to court, in rest of the cases, there are provisions for graded penalties and compounding of offences so that will reduce the burden on the courts and expedite the process," Vyas said.

Experts say the new law will help boost food imports, and attract more foreign food companies to the Indian market.

Gowree Gokhale, Partner, Nishith Desai Associates, said, "Typically, when a company tries to make a business plan for a certain country, they will want to be compliant with the local laws. And if the laws are silent on certain things, it gives them a lot of discomfort."

The Food & Drug Administration is gearing up to implement the new laws in December. Training sessions for officials should be over by September, and workshops with food industry players are expected to kick off by November.