

FSSAI conducts 6th stakeholder forum on scientific food safety advances

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As an endeavour to promote latest advances in food safety and food security, the CII Confederation of Indian Industry)-HUL (Hindustan Unilever Ltd) Initiative on Food Safety Sciences (CHIFSS) in partnership with FSSAI organised its sixth Stakeholder Forum on Scientific Advances in Food Safety and Food Security.

Given the triple challenges of food safety, food security and nutritional security faced by the country, there is an urgent need to drive improvements in efficiency and effectiveness of overall foodsystem. However, the collaborations between the country's apex regulator and the industry to strengthen science-based food safety capability in India are progressing rapidly.

The context of the forum was set by Alok Dhawan, director, CSIR - Indian Institute of Toxicology Research, Lucknow. He outlined advanced scientific capabilities being built in the country to help food safety and food security for the nation.

During his talk, he also highlighted the critical importance of timely adoption of next-generation science based, risk-based, objective safety evaluation approaches, application of sensors and diagnostic techniques into regulatory frameworks, so that India can keep pace with developed world, whilst ensuring a great future for its farmers and food industry and the health of its vast population.

Dhawan emphasised the need to focus at the origin of food supply chain, viz, agriculture production end, which will help deliver safe foods to the consumers.

Highlighting the critical importance of next-generation risk assessment (NGRA) and its regulatory adoption, Paul Hepburn, SEAC programme director, Food Safety and Environmental Assurance Centre, Unilever, UK, showcased risk assessment tools and shared compelling case studies illustrating practical application of these principles to food safety decision-making.

Shannon Olsson, head, Naturalist Inspired Chemical Ecology (NICE) at National Centre for Biological Sciences (NCBS), Bengaluru. Against the backdrop of India's current and emerging agricultural and food security challenges, NICE is a promising new area of ecological science that depends on natural means of improving agricultural productivity, protect crops, and prevent food wastage.

Olsson presented interesting case studies where principles like push and pull were employed to ensure crop protection.

Rita Teatota, chairperson, FSSAI, spoke of the scale of challenges faced by India where 1.3 billion population is vulnerable to both under nutrition and over nutrition whilst facing several food safety concerns.

Among others, she emphasised the need for partnerships and collaborations with all stakeholders to successfully address the complexities and challenges. She highlighted that food security and food safety, and therefore, a forum where both the subjects are deliberated through the lens of science was very much the need of the hour.

A Sivakumar, regulatory affairs director, Hindustan Unilever Limited, welcomed the audience to the event. He highlighted the need to institutionalise food safety and build capacity and capability, and the work done by CHIFSS so far in the area of mitigation of food-borne illness, microbiological food safety and need for risk-based approaches by coordinating with international and national experts to bring in best global practices.

Indrani Ghose, strategic advisor, CII-FACE, concluded by stating that CHIFSS, in partnership with FSSAI, is becoming one of the pioneering examples of scientific capability-building platform.

CHIFSS will continue to focus on building advanced scientific capabilities and enabling acceleration of technical capacity building in the country with the aim of achieving food safety excellence at par with the global standards.

As a part of the deliberations, a panel discussion on scientific advances in food safety and food security – How to integrate this into practice was conducted with domain experts who talked during their respective sessions, along with Dr Debabrata Kanungo, chairman, FSSAI panel for pesticides and antibiotic residue; Satyanarayana K V, associate vice-president, Life Science Advisory Group, Sathguru Management Consultants, and Nimish Shah, director, partnership and advocacy, Hindustan Unilever, emphasised the criticality of leapfrogging country capability build in these newer areas of food safety and food security sciences, discussed some of the key challenges and way forward in adoption of new concepts and methods (like NGRA and NICE approaches).

Like wide-ranging issues, e.g., anti-microbial resistance, microbiome and pesticide residues in food. Kanungo shared his view that as a country, we should be proactive in adopting newer risk assessment approaches as only these will help in ensuring safe food for our vast population. Also the need to include farm level safety in regulation was discussed.

The day concluded with some thoughts on taking the recommendations ahead from each of the talks and panel discussion by scoping relevant pilot projects.

The Stakeholder Forum was attended by stakeholders, including eminent scientists, government officials and professionals from academia and industry, along with students from related fields.