

FRAMEWORK FOR TESTING WATER LAUNCHED

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Safety first: Detailed testing protocols and standards have been laid out to check for chemical and biological contaminants.

Citizens can now get the water quality in their taps tested at reasonable rates, as part of a monitoring framework rolled out by the Centre's flagship Jal Jeevan Mission on Saturday.

Using an information management system modelled on the COVID-19 testing framework, the samples tested by members of the public, as well as government officials, will create a nationwide database of water quality, Jal Shakti Minister Gajendra Singh Shekhaawat told presspersons after the launch.

However, a major hurdle remains as only 66 of the 2,033 water testing laboratories have been certified by the National Accreditation Board for Testing and Calibration Laboratories (NABL).

The "drinking water quality testing, monitoring and surveillance framework and guidelines" released on Saturday mandate a network of NABL accredited labs to be set up in every State, district and block over the next year. At the panchayat level, teams of women in the village water and sanitation committees will be given field testing kits. Of the Rs. 3.6 lakh crore Jal Jeevan budget, 2% has been earmarked for quality monitoring.

Detailed testing protocols and standards have been laid out to check for chemical and biological contaminants, which are present in more than half of all blocks, according to a 2018 assessment by the Central Groundwater Board. State governments can include private players as part of the network, but the Centre has capped tariffs to ensure that they remain within the reach of the common man.

The suggested tariffs would allow one to test a water sample's pH level, turbidity, alkalinity and hardness for a package rate of Rs. 50. Testing the water for the presence of chloride, sulphate or iron would cost Rs. 50 each, while tests for the more dangerous arsenic, fluoride, nitrate or coliform bacteria would cost Rs. 100 each. A package for all the 16 water quality parameters would cost Rs. 600. Turnaround time for chemical tests should not be more than 24 hours, while testing for the biological contaminants will produce results within 48 hours, the guidelines said.

Apart from voluntary tests by members of the public, officials have been mandated to do regular inspections. All results of testing will be fed into the Water Quality Information Management System, a portal developed with the support of the Indian Council of Medical Research.

Similarly, results of all tests will now be sent to the citizen who requested it, as well as the WQMIS database and a local official who will be deputed to take remedial action in case of contamination.

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