

SECTOR WATCH LOGISTICS

Yet to be roped in, pvt cold chains start preparations for Covid immunisation

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FROM PLANNING to convert food processing, refrigerated units into vaccine storage facilities to cranking up the vehicles to transport them, private cold chain and distribution firms have begun preparing capacities ahead of India's July 2023 target to begin immunising its population against Covid-19.

While the government continues to map cold chain capabilities for a Covid-19 vaccine rollout next year, some industry experts feel that the current capacity will have to at least be doubled. Given the demand, India's existing Universal Immunisation Programme (UIP) infrastructure — which will be used to vaccinate the priority groups identified by the government — may need more private sector involvement, some feel.

While private firms wait to be roped in, they have already begun preparing for such a scenario. For instance, Snowman Logistics has undertaken an exercise to understand what would be required if the firm had to convert over 30 of its cold chain units for storing food into a vaccine storage facility.

"We have mapped out our capacity in the country and other capacities by other operators to find out what capacity is available immediately," said Snowman Logistics CEO Saral Nair. The firm currently has 33 cold storage facilities across the country, of which two are already dedicated for pharmaceutical products. While there is no clarity on the packaging for these Covid-19 vaccines, going by a thumb rule of around 1,000 doses on a pallet, Snowman has the capacity to store around 850 million doses. With the same assumption, its network partners would have another 400 million dose capacity, said Nair.

"At the same time, we have also involved our technical team in terms of finding out if we have to convert a food facility into a pharmaceutical, what does it take for us. Those sorts of things are now done... if the vaccine comes to two to eight degrees centigrade, which is what is being talked about, we can quickly convert these facilities — it is just a setting that we need to change," he said.

As per him, such a conversion would help the firm "fully prepare" to engage in the primary and secondary logistics distribution of a Covid vaccine "anywhere" in the country.

Gati Kaurav, the cold chain

OVER 27K COLD CHAIN POINTS SUPPORT UIP

■ India's Universal Immunisation Programme (UIP) is supported by over 27,000 functional cold-chain points.

arm of logistics giant Gati Ltd, says it has already initiated talks with the government and is ready to collaborate with other industry associations and logistics players "to ensure the safe and efficient delivery" of Covid-19 vaccines. The firm is "already geared up" with a fleet of 120 trucks — both primary and secondary — to meet "emerging requirements" ahead of the commercialisation of the Covid-19 vaccine.

"... Warehousing staff will need to be trained to handle temperature-sensitive vaccines. Stringent monitoring capacities will need to be put into place to ensure adherence to compliance," the firm added.

DHL is also known to be conducting an assessment of India's overall cold chain capacity. India's UIP — one of the largest in the world — is supported by over 27,000 functional cold chain points, as per the Health Ministry's comprehensive multi-year UIP plan for 2019-22. Of this, 3 per cent are located at the district level and above, while about 97 per cent are located below district level.

"I don't believe there are constraints on the quality of the cold chain infrastructure... it's only the capacity of the cold chain infrastructure," said Biological E managing director Mahima Datta. The UIP currently requires the storage of, "at best", around 300 million doses of the vaccine that it administers, according to her.

"That, in contrast, for Covid, you're talking about a population cohort of 1.3 billion people, and if that's a two-dose vaccine — which majority of them are — you're talking about now 2.5 to 3 billion doses annually. Now, it's a different story that you may not have the availability of 3 billion annually... but even if it's half of that, even if it's a fourth, it would mean you still need capacity for 500 million doses," she said.

"You needn't even do it across the whole country. You can even have hubs in the north, south east and west, or just get manufacturers to stockpile inventory for you, these are not insurmountable problems," she added.

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