

Summary Evaluation Report

A Report from the Northeast Center to Advance Food Safety (NECAFS) Regarding Evaluation Conducted at NECAFS Annual Conference and Meeting.

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Christopher W. Callahan – UVM Extension, Project Director

Elizabeth J. Newbold – UVM Extension, Center Administrator

Luke F. LaBorde – Pennsylvania State University, Co-Director

Amanda J. Kinchla – University of Massachusetts, Co-Director

Elizabeth A. Bihn – Cornell University, Co-Director

Christopher S. Walsh – University of Maryland, Co-Director

Summary

Attendees at the NECAFS Annual Conference and Meeting overwhelming reported that they learned something new (95%), most notably about existing educational efforts. This new knowledge leads attendees to feel more prepared and informed as trainers and/or researchers and because of this comfort in answering questions and passing along knowledge they will be more effective educators. Additionally, the majority of attendees met someone new (98%) at the Annual Conference and Meeting and reported that this new relationship will allow for enhanced networking and improved communication. The opportunity to network with partners across the region was often cited as one of greatest benefits of attending the Annual Conference and Meeting. Attendees reported that there are food safety challenges in our region with the leading concern being implementation and compliance of FSMA. The challenge arises because of the lack of guidance and resulting confusion around the rule, insufficient resource (financial and educational) to help growers and processors with technical assistance and implementation, and the need to tailor resources to meet the needs of small to mid-sized operations.

Respondents reported that NECAFS has helped them improve their food safety training, education and/or outreach (92%) through facilitation of regional networking and communication and the sharing of resources. When asked about specific NECAFS activities (where 5 = excellent), 87% rated regional communication as 4 (41%) or 5 (46%), 90% rated building regional capacity, competence, and collaboration as 4 (45%) or 5 (45%), and 85% rated developing and delivering educational programs as 4 (44%) or 5 (41%).

Discussion and Results

The Northeast Center to Advance Food Safety (NECAFS) held the 2nd Annual Conference and Meeting in Baltimore, MD January 23 – 24, 2018. Tuesday, January 23rd focused on workgroup meetings dedicated to Produce Safety and Preventive Controls for Human Food in two parallel tracks.  Wednesday, January 24th featured a joint conference session that included a keynote address from STOP Foodborne Illness, presentations from representatives of each Northeast[[1]](#footnote-1) state providing regulatory, research and extension updates, and three panel sessions that highlighted producers, processors and buyers.

NECAFS distributed paper evaluations at the start of the joint conference session on Wednesday and asked attendees to complete and return at the end of day. Approximately, 100 people attended. **Table 1** represents the roles in regional food safety selected by attendees that completed the evaluation, illustrated as individual roles. However, 15 people selected that they have more than one role in regional food safety. Total number of conference attendees who responded to the evaluation is therefore lower than the total depicted in table 1. Of those that attended, 43 completed and returned evaluations. Attendees working in regional food safety education represented the largest cohort of attendees (42%) at the Annual Conference who responded to the evaluation. When selecting roles, attendees were asked to “Check all that apply” and education was also the most cross-cutting role identified, with 15 individuals selecting education along with another role.

**Table 1. Role breakdown for Annual Conference attendees who Responded to the Evaluation**

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| --- | --- | --- |
| **Role in Regional Food Safety** | **Number** | **Percent** |
| Education | 25 | 42% |
| Government/Regulation | 15 | 25% |
| Research | 10 | 17% |
| Industry (Producer or Processor) | 7 | 12% |
| Consultant | 2 | 3% |
| Auditor | 1 | 2% |
| **Total** | 60 | 100% |

On the evaluation, attendees reported on both their perceptions of (1) the 2018 NECAFS Annual Conference and Meeting and (2) the NECAFS resources that were made available throughout the previous year. Our evaluation was designed to allow us to understand if and how both of these impacted the respondents’ (or participants’) regional food safety work. Regarding the Annual Conference and Meeting, we asked specifically if they learned something or met someone new and, if so, what did they learn and will this new knowledge or new relationship change their approach to FSMA and food safety in general. Further, we asked what key food safety challenges they see in our region and/or in their state. Regarding the resources made available by NECAFS throughout the year, we asked if the resources helped improve respondents’ ability to provide food safety training, education and/or outreach and, if so, how. Finally, attendees rated NECAFS in the areas of regional communication, building regional capacity, competence, and collaboration and developing and delivering educational programs. Include a sentence about why this type of evaluation is useful to NECAFS, and if there is any larger message about the community of food safety professionals in the NE at this point in time.

NECAFS Annual Conference and Meeting Impact Results

*Did you learn something new?*

When asked “Did you learn something new?” 41 (95%) respondents answered “Yes.” Answers to the follow-up evaluation question “If so, what did you learn?” resulted in broad common themes among attendees, most notably: 1.) learning about existing educational efforts, 2.) the individual needs of growers, buyers and processors, and 3.) variation between states in implementation of FSMA. Less commonly cited themes also emerged, including: a better understanding of FSMA, different views from stakeholder partners, the differences between audits versus inspections, different avenues to receive financial support, and similar challenges shared with colleagues. Attendees often included multiple responses that corresponded with several themes, explaining that they learned more than one thing from attending the Annual Conference and Meeting.

First, respondents described learning about several education efforts underway on the regional and national levels. Some attendees garnered a greater understanding of On-Farm Readiness Review (OFRR)[[2]](#footnote-2) while others articulated new knowledge of specific university and regulatory based efforts around FSMA research and education. Several respondents described generally their new knowledge of add-on and supplemental material, and the then-upcoming launch of the NECAFS Clearinghouse.

Second, responses around the individual needs of growers, buyers and processors were the most diverse of any within one theme. Attendees reported that it was helpful to hear about specific educational needs of growers and processors and how they can support that need. Attendees also described that they appreciated hearing the point of view and perspective of the grower, buyer and processor panels, which presented complex and multi-faceted experiences with food safety in general and FSMA in particular. The examples given by attendees to illustrate their knowledge gained in this area were wide ranging, from process based strategies such as the decision making around implementation plans to articulated concerns and struggles within a shifting FSMA landscape. One attendee described this complex perspective by explaining that she learned about the “intricate and complete relationship between growers, buyer requirements and regulatory requirements” and the need to “focus efforts on reconciling the three entities.”

Third, respondents explained that the information shared by state representatives on how they plan to implement FSMA was “illuminating.” The responses indicate that attendees were interested to learn about these variations and take back ideas from other states.

*Will new knowledge change your approach to FSMA?*

Answers to the evaluation question “How will this new knowledge change your approach to FSMA and food safety in general?” resulted in one overwhelming common theme cited by the majority of attendees: new knowledge made respondents feel more prepared and informed as trainers and/or researchers. Respondents reported that the information learned makes them more effective educators, giving them an improved ability to answer questions and pass along education to growers and processors. Having both education and regulation audiences present at the Annual Conference and Meeting allowed attendees to hear and learn from each other. One attendee described her appreciation for hearing from both educators and regulators, and explained that FSMA now “feels less overwhelming to explain and help growers through.” Less common themes that also emerged in response to this question included reports that respondents were more likely to try a new approach in education or evaluation, use existing resources in education and reduce redundancy, and/or respondents gained clarity around FSMA and human impact and storytelling.

*How will new relationships change your approach to FSMA?*

When asked “Did you meet someone new?” 42 (98%) respondents answered “Yes.” Attendees were asked “How do you expect this new relationship to change your approach to FSMA and food safety in general?” One nearly unanimous theme emerged: change will occur through enhanced networking and improved communication. Respondents described either broadly or specifically how these new relationship(s) provide for enhanced networking and communication. For example, some respondents explained planned intentions to, for example, co-teach or send questions to colleagues while others highlighted potential opportunities for exploration of on-farm education and regional collaboration and funding opportunities. Overall, respondents cited that these new relationship(s) “will help to facilitate future lines of communication,” that it is “always beneficial to expand range of resources to help…improve your…program” and that this networking opportunity was the “best part of the conference.”

Several subthemes also emerged in response to this question, including: sharing of resources, collaboration on education/research/funding, help answering stakeholder questions, strengthened contacts, coordination that leads to enhanced project outputs, and enhancement of current projects.

*What food safety challenges you see?*

Answers to the evaluation question “What is the key food safety challenge you see in our region and/or in your state?” resulted in one broad common theme: implementation and compliance of FSMA. Subthemes also emerged, including: (1) need for communication, research, education and qualified personal, (2) engagement of hard to reach audiences, (3) lack of funding, (4) audits and inspections, and (5) inconsistency of implementation across the region.

Respondents reported challenges around implementation and compliance of FSMA for various reasons. While the rule has been released, there is concern that the industry lacks guidance and clarity from the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), leading to industry (growers and processors) not understanding how the rule applies on an individual basis. Additionally, there are not sufficient resources (financial, educational, and outreach personnel) available to help industry with implementation efforts, resulting in confusion around the rule and the perception that compliance is impossible. Attendees also reported a lack of acceptance among growers and processors or the deeply held belief that “food safety is extremely cumbersome and expensive” as a challenge. Additionally, attendees reported that there are many on-farm and in-facility changes needed for industry to become compliant. Respondents explained the need to “tailor resources” to meet the varying needs of producers and processor based on size and individual needs, including training delivery, research, and technical support.

Respondents were particularly concerned with challenges surrounding engaging hard to reach audiences. Respondents reported that they struggle with reaching industry stakeholders who are impacted by the rule, but who think that it does not apply to them or are unaware of it. This audience is often very small and dispersed, making them hard to identify and locate. They are not currently attending trainings or being included in farm inventories.

Respondents also cited confusion around audits and inspections as a significant challenge. There are multiple state and national audit programs which are different from each other, in addition to the FSMA inspection. There is currently confusion around expectations and requirements among industry members.

Attendees often included multiple responses that corresponded with several themes, identifying more than one food safety challenge in the region of state. These articulated challenges show a need for continued emphasis on communication across stakeholder groups, outreach, education, research, and technical support.

NECAFS Ongoing Resources Impact Results

Some attendees who needed financial support to attend the Annual Conference and Meeting were offered travel reimbursements to make their attendance possible. These attendees were asked “how important was that support?” Of the 32 attendees that requested financial support, 17 indicated that the support was critical to making their attendance possible while the remaining reported that the support was helpful but that they would have attended the Annual Conference and Meeting without it.

When asked “Has NECAFS helped you improve your food safety training, education and/or outreach?” 36 (92%) respondents answered “Yes.” Answers to the follow-up evaluation question “If so, how?” resulted in themes focused on the value of networking and communication, as well as sharing of resources and information. Networking that led to training delivery and direct funding were also cited by respondents, though less frequently.

Overwhelmingly, attendees reported that NECAFS activities around sharing of resources and information has led to successful networking and communication across the network. One attendee stated that networking is “gold” while another said that is it the “biggest thing” that NECAFS provides. Sharing of resources and information included the following NECAFS activities: topical webinars, the eNewsletter, the Clearinghouse, working groups, and the Annual Meeting and Conference. One attendee reported that these activities “have given [him] ideas of how to improve [his] program...to branch out to other people…[and] great insight on what has and what hasn’t been working.”

*Regional Communication*

Attendees were asked how they would rate NECAFS in the area of regional communication about food safety topics. The following were provided as examples of this area of work: enewsletters and the website. **Figure 1** shows that on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is poor and 5 is excellent, the majority of respondents (n=18, 46%) rated NECAFS regional communication as excellent with a ranking of 5. At 41% (n=16), respondents rated NECAFS regional communication as a 4. Finally, 13% (n=5) of respondents rated this activity as a 3.

*Regional Capacity, Competency and Collaboration*

Attendees were asked how they would rate NECAFS in the area of regional capacity, competency and collaboration. The following were provided as examples of this area of work: webinars, training support stipend program and working groups. **Figure 2** shows that on a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 is poor and 5 is excellent, the respondents equally rated NECAFS regional capacity, competency and collaboration with 45% (n=18) choosing rating 5 and 45% (n=18) choosing rating 4. At 8% (n=3), respondents rated NECAFS in this area as a 3. Finally, 2% (n=1) of respondents rated this activity as a 2.

*Developing and Delivering Educational Programs*

Attendees were asked how they would rate NECAFS in the area of developing and delivering educational programs. The following were provided as examples of this area of work: training delivery support, special projects grants, annual meeting, and the clearinghouse site. **Figure 3** shows that on a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 is poor and 5 is excellent, the majority of respondents at 44% (n=17) rated NECAFS regional communication as excellent with a ranking of 5. At 41% (n=16), respondents rated NECAFS regional communication as a 4. Finally, 15% (n=6) of respondents rated this activity as a 3.

1. Connecticut, Delaware, Maine, Massachusetts, Maryland, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont, and West Virginia [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. OFRR is a plan and tool-kit designed to be used by regulators and educators to prepare farmers for compliance with the FSMA Produce Safety Rule.  [↑](#footnote-ref-2)