Summary Evaluation Report

A Report from the Northeast Center to Advance Food Safety (NECAFS) Regarding Evaluation Conducted at the 2026 NECAFS Annual Conference and Meeting, Providence, RI.

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Summary

Attendees at the NECAFS Annual Conference and Meeting overwhelmingly reported that they learned something new (97%), most notably it increased their knowledge about partner efforts. By learning more about these efforts, attendees described that they feel better prepared and more informed about food safety. The approach of the NECAFS Annual Meeting allows attendees to "*think through problems from a different perspective*." Notably, attendees described that they learned through discussion of the updated Food Safety Clearinghouse and resources available on the site. Further, many described they learned about others approach to Agricultural Water Assessments. Finally, attendees valued the interconnectedness of NECAFS, praising "*how complex this organization (NECAFS) is and what a large impact it has*."

Attendees (100%) stated that they met someone new at the Annual Conference and Meeting and reported that this new relationship provides for enhanced networking and communication. To help facilitate networking and connection, the agenda was built with several networking opportunities (welcome reception, long breaks across both days, and a poster session) as well as several breakout group discussions. Even though this was the 10th Annual Meeting, there is a lot of turnover and new faces across the region, continuing to result in attendees meeting new people. Several attendees described how their networking experience offered the opportunity to gain and learn from others' perspectives as they felt this is the "*best place, best people, best culture for collaborations.*" Furthermore, they explained how this perspective helped them to understand that others are having the same issues resulting in similar solutions. Hearing about common approaches provides affirmation to attendees about their own decision-making. Respondents continue to describe the value of the Annual Meeting's collaborative approach and explained that NECAFS "*is continually showing me that we need to collaborate more and get things aligned.*" When asked to describe key challenges in the region, attendees reported a need for topic based tailored material as their leading concern. The leading topics listed include agricultural water, sanitizer use, food safety plans, and employee training. Attendees described a need to find approaches that address implementation of the Agricultural Water Rule and producers' and processors' lack of time and money for food safety.

Overall, when asked if NECAFS has helped improve food safety training, education, and outreach, 97% of attendees said yes and overwhelming explained that this was accomplished through networking and communication with other stakeholders that is facilitated through a regional structure that brings the network together in a facilitated and collaborative format. Respondents stated that "*NECAFS has informed my entire approach to FS training and education*" and that the Annual Meeting also provides important networking through "helping identify collaborators with PCHF rule" and "meeting people from other fields like extension programs and industry people."

When asked about specific NECAFS activities, (where 5 = excellent), 58% rated regional communication as a 5 and 32% as a 4. Attendees rated building regional capacity, competence, and collaboration as a 5 (62%) or a 4 (32%). Attendees rated developing and delivering educational programs as a 5 (61%) or a 4 (32%). And attendees rated coordinating and supporting regionally relevant produce safety research as a 5 (58%) or a 4 (35%). All four areas are consistent with 2025 ratings. Suggestions for the future from attendees included increased facilitation of funding and project planning during the year, broaden the network to recruit additional preventive controls regulatory partners, and continue the interactive learning approach introduced at this year's Annual Meeting.

Discussion and Results

The Northeast Center to Advance Food Safety (NECAFS) held the 10th Annual Conference and Meeting in Providence, RI on February 4 – 5, 2026. February 4th featured a plenary session that described in detail the NECAFS framework, hosted a presentation on the updated Food Safety Resource Clearinghouse, presented on 2025 inspectional and observational data from farm and processor visits, and facilitated a breakout group exercise to tie together farm and processor needs and gaps in resources on the updated Clearinghouse. The afternoon consisted of concurrent sessions with a Northeast Regulator and Program Staff meeting, a Produce Safety Educator meeting, a Preventive Controls Regulators meeting, and a Preventive Controls Educators meeting. The Produce Safety Educator meeting highlighted post farm visit survey data, research on treating harvested rainwater, and how to integrate produce safety into a whole farm system lens. The Preventive Controls Educator meeting focused on how to meet FDA training requirements for small-scale processors, a food processing sanitation online training, a food hub audits discussion, and lessons from engaging food business in preventive controls. Following the formal program, participants joined a poster session and visited with presenters. February 5th was comprised of morning and afternoon networking and workgroup meetings dedicated to the topics of Produce Safety and Preventive Controls. The Produce Safety Regulator and Educator discussion centered around building knowledge and confidence across the Produce Safety Rule and a panel discussing Agricultural Water Assessments. The Preventive Controls Regulator and Educator meeting was comprised of a presentation on a traceability digital tool for Small Food Manufacturers, a validation resource overview, an FSPCA panel, and a discussion on how to enhance food safety extension through collaboration, student engagement, and funding opportunities.

NECAFS distributed a paper evaluation tool at the conclusion of the meeting and asked attendees to complete it. Approximately 120 people attended the event and 78 (65%) completed and returned evaluations. On the evaluation, attendees reported on both their perceptions of (1) the 2026 NECAFS Annual Conference and Meeting and (2) the NECAFS resources that were made available throughout the previous year. The evaluation was designed to allow NECAFS staff to understand if and how both the meeting and on-going efforts impact the respondents' regional food safety work. Regarding the Annual Conference and Meeting, we asked specifically if attendees learned something or met someone new and, if so, what they learned and if this new knowledge or new relationship would change their approach to FSMA and food safety in general. Further, the evaluation asked what key food safety challenges individuals saw in the region and/or in their state. Regarding the resources made available by NECAFS throughout the year, respondents were asked if resources helped improve their 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 while developing and delivering educational programs.

NECAFS Annual Conference and Meeting Impact Results

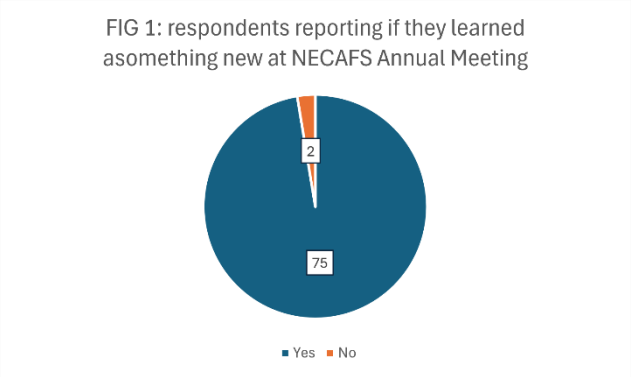
Did you learn something new?

When asked, "Did you learn something new?" 75 (97%) respondents answered "Yes" (**Figure 1**). Answers to the follow-up evaluation question "If so, what did you learn?" (**Figure 2**) resulted in broad themes among attendees. Two dominate themes emerged:

- Increased knowledge about partner efforts (n=30), and
- Others' perspectives or experiences (n=17).

Less common themes also emerged, including:

- Collaboration (n=6),
- Continuing education (n=6),
- Awareness around existing resources (n=3),
- Still a lot of outreach and/or research questions to answer (n=3),
- Observational data (n=2), and
- New connections (n=2).



The agenda this year continued to focus heavily on continuing education and professional development with sessions dedicated to enhancing knowledge of federal rules and sharing various research-education communication gap perspectives. The goal of professional development and continuing education was 3-pronged: 1.) increase participants science-based knowledge by conveying summarized findings and engaging in discussion 2.) expose participants to various projects and explore lessons and takeaways, and 3.) improve retention of content through interactive learning. Therefore, it is not surprising that respondents overwhelmingly report that their knowledge about partner efforts was increased at the Annual Meeting. Many respondents expressed that they learned about the "*Clearinghouse update and how to use it*," "*how different states are enacting and rolling out the Ag water rule*," and "*AFSO and FDA updates*."



When describing others' perspectives and experiences respondents expressed learning that everyone is having the same issues and struggles as they are experiencing. This is a theme heard year over year in evaluation feedback. Amidst current concern over funding sources, respondents shared relief that collaboration could aid this problem. They expressed that while "*it's harder for educators to get grant funding at the moment, there many be opportunities for regulators to provide data that could assist*," that "*there may be more opportunity for work than the current funding landscape suggests*," and that "*there is more interest in network-based solutions for collaboration bottlenecks than I thought*."

How will new knowledge change your approach to FSMA?

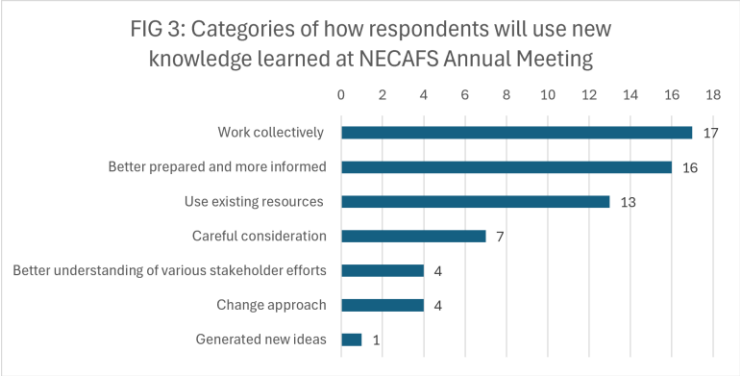
Answers to the evaluation question "How will this new knowledge change your approach to FSMA and food safety in general?" (**Figure 3**) resulted in three dominate themes emerging:

- Work collectively (n=17)
- Better prepared and more informed (n=16), and
- Use existing resources (n=13).

Attendees described the intent to work more collectively by "*expanding my capacity to support my regulatory colleagues as I work with produce farms in non-inspectional settings"* and that they "*want to try to collaborate with local educators to fix compliance rate gaps"* and they "*feel inspired to partner with local agencies to research the needs of our producers and processors and work with funders to fill the gaps."*

Many comments cited that what they learned will "*improve*" their educational efforts. Respondents described that these improvements would occur by "*providing more avenues to support the understanding of PC/food safety*" and through "*making validation resources accessible for everyone.*" Participants stated that they will not be able to "*do better inspections and outreach*" and "*assist farmers with individual issues*."

Attendees of this year's meeting stated that they'll use existing resources (n=13) significantly more compared to last year's meeting (n=1). This increased attention to existing resources is likely a cause of the update to the Food Safety Clearinghouse, which was presented upon during the meeting.



Slightly less common themes that also emerged in response to this question included:

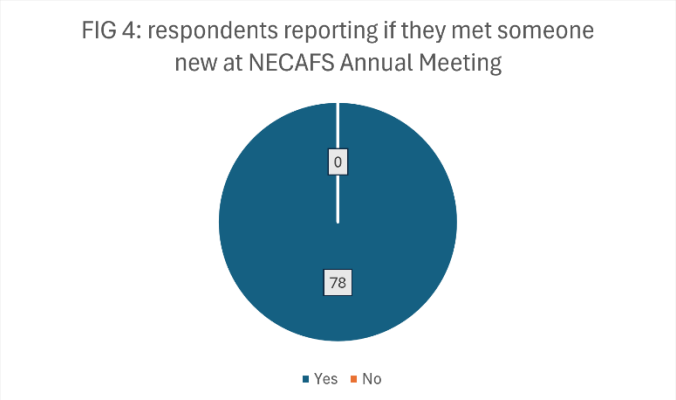
- Careful consideration (n=7),
- Better understanding of various stakeholder efforts (n=4),
- Change approach (n=4), and
- Generates new ideas (n=1).

Respondents described that the information presented during the sessions at the Annual Meeting allowed them to "*think through problems from a different perspective"* and to "*evaluate our own program/practices*" with pre-harvest water assessment and agricultural water treatment listed as examples.

How will new relationships change your approach to FSMA?

When asked "Did you meet someone new?" 78 (100%) respondents answered "Yes" (**Figure 4**). Attendees were asked "How do you expect this new relationship to change your approach to FSMA and food safety in general?" (**Figure 5**). Two dominant themes emerged:

- Provides for enhanced networking and communication (n=23), and
- Collaboration (n=19).



Respondents cited both 1.) connection and 2.) communication from these new relationship(s), describing that they have broadened the network of "*people to call on for questions/clarification,*" that it "*feels like a greater support for connecting farmers to market access vis food safety,"* and that they now "*intend to reach out to a number of people to improve [their] grasp on food safety.*" Respondents highlighted their intent on future collaboration with the people they met at the Annual Meeting as they now have "*a broader network of food safety colleagues to reach out to for collaboration and seeking knowledge.*"



Several subthemes, by a significant amount, also emerged in response to this question, including:

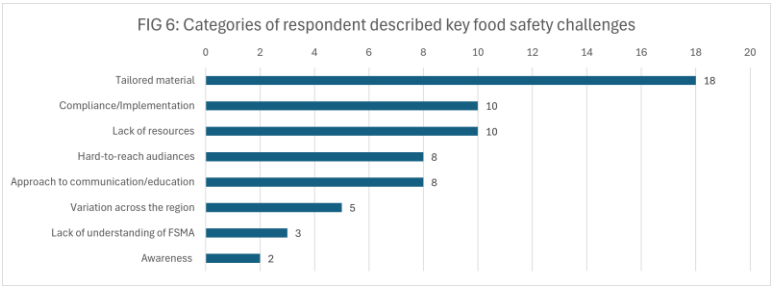
- Others' perspectives or experiences (n=9),
- Enhance projects (n=6),
- Sharing of resources (n=3), and
- No change or unsure (n=3).

When describing others' perspectives or experiences, attendees included that it "*will help fill in gaps of general understanding and knowledge,"* that *"learning from more experienced facilities managers will help me avoid mistakes," "the newer folks you meet, the more knowledge you will gain*" and that they "*had an engaging relationship with an inspector about valuable information that is needed to show impact."*

What food safety challenges do you see?

Answers to the evaluation question "What is the key food safety challenge you see in our region and/or in your state?" (**Figure 6**) resulted in several themes, most notably the need for:

- Tailored material (n=18), and



Attendees generally listed subject matter topics to this question, which were all sorted into the tailored material category. Most of the topics listed were about agricultural water, including water use, quality, supply, and rule requirements. Other topic areas were sanitizer use, food safety plans, and employee training.

Subthemes also emerged, including:

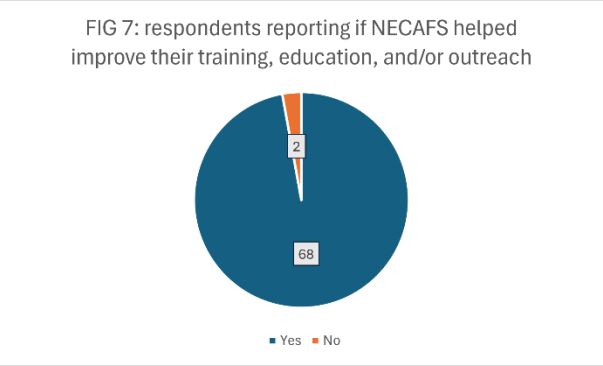
- Compliance/implementation (n=10),
- Lack or resources (n=10),
- Hard-to-reach audiences (n=8),
- Approach to communication/education (n=8),
- Variation across the region (n=5),

- Lack of understanding of FSMA (n=3), and
- Awareness (n=2).

When describing compliance and implementation, respondents highlighted difficulties in 1.) implementing the Agricultural Water Rule, 2.) getting growers and small-scale food processors to come into compliance with all aspects of their rule, and 3.) worker training and food safety culture. Lack of resources highlights the lack of time and money for practice implementation among the region's producers and processors.

Impact Results of NECAFS Ongoing Efforts

When asked "Has NECAFS helped you improve your food safety training, education and/or outreach?" 68 (97%) respondents answered "Yes" (**Figure 7**). Answers to the follow-up evaluation question "If so, how?" resulted in one dominate leading theme:

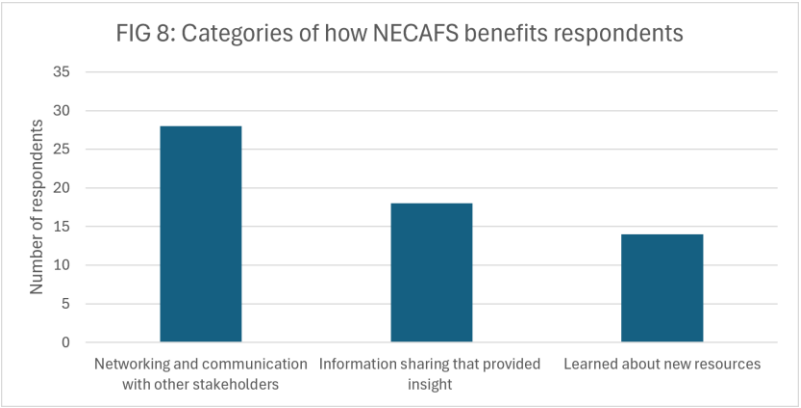


- Networking and communication (n=28).

Several subthemes emerged, including:

- Information sharing that provided insight (n=18), and
- Learned about new resources (n=14).

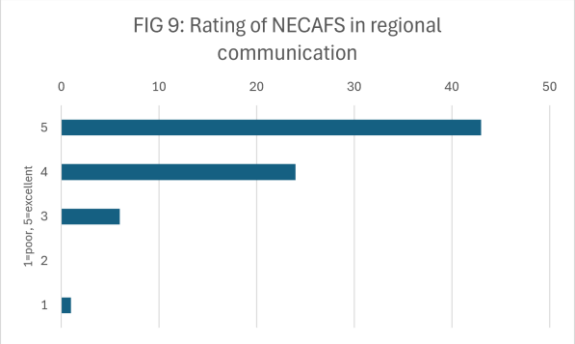
Networking and communication have long been the leading benefit NECAFS provides to its stakeholders with this year almost 50% of respondents listing it as NECAFS top benefit. One attendee explained that networking "*allows me to understand what [regulators and inspectors] are looking for to better serve farmers"* and another stated that "*it is great to hear from others and how they approach topics of concern. Networking and brainstorming are the best ways to accomplish this.*" During this Annual Meeting, the agenda provided specific opportunities to provide attendees with networking opportunities. We hosted a welcome reception, many session breaks, breakout group discussions, and a poster session. Additionally, the agenda sessions were designed to facilitate group discussion, give opportunities for attendees to ask questions, and for interactive learning.



In additional to networking, comments also explained that information sharing provided them with fresh insight, with respondents noting how it "*greatly helped in my approach to teaching*" especially in "*learning how educators approach teaching and generally disseminating info*" and how that "*has changed how I train staff and how I approach explaining issues to industry.*"

Regional Communication

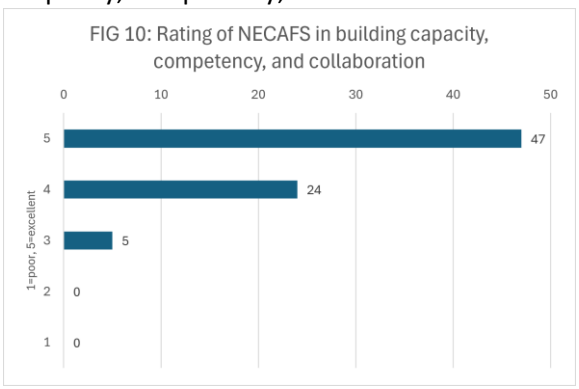
Attendees were asked how they rate NECAFS around regional communication about food safety topics. NECAFS newsletters and the website were provided as examples of this work. **Figure 9** shows that on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is poor and 5 is excellent, respondents (n=43, 58%) rated NECAFS regional communication as excellent with a ranking of 5. At 32% (n=24) respondents rated NECAFS regional communication as a 4. Finally, 8% (n=6) of respondents rated this activity as a 3. These ratings improved from previous results, which is significant since past needs described a desire for more regular and frequent communication. NECAFS has made good progress with regular and structured forms of communication via reintroducing a monthly newsletter. Through this newsletter we strive to keep the network apprised of new material coming out, alert them to upcoming webinars and trainings, highlight a few resources from the Clearinghouse, and update them on relevant information from federal partners.



While ratings were good, attendees listed areas for improvement. Specifically, it was recommended that NECAFS make an improved and more frequently used events calendar.

Regional Capacity, Competency and Collaboration

Attendees were asked how they would rate NECAFS around regional capacity, competency, and collaboration. The following were provided as examples of this area of work: webinars, the training support stipend program, and working groups. **Figure 10** shows that on a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 is poor and 5 is excellent, the respondents rated NECAFS regional capacity, competency, and collaboration with 62% (n=47) choosing rating 5, 32% (n=24) choosing rating 4, and 7% (n=5) choosing rating 3 in this area.

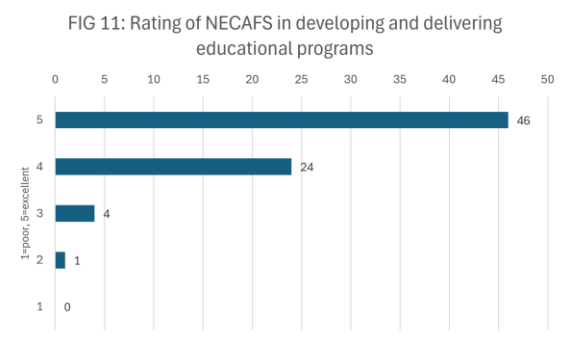


Respondents are interested in increased facilitation of funding and project planning during the year, especially support for collaboration among different states. They are also interested in "*better communication where it comes to inviting people to take part in this conference*."

Developing and Delivering Educational Programs

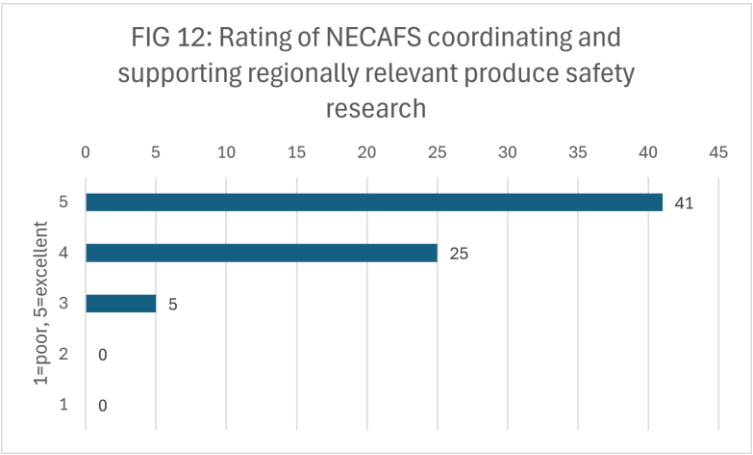
Conference attendees were asked how they rate NECAFS around developing and delivering educational programs. The following were provided as examples of this area of work: training delivery support, special projects grants, the Annual Meeting, and the Food Safety Resource Clearinghouse website. **Figure 11** shows that on a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 is poor and 5 is excellent, respondents (61%, n=46) rated NECAFS regional communication as excellent with a ranking of 5. At 32% (n=24), respondents rated NECAFS regional communication as a 4. Finally, 5% (n=1) of respondents rated this capacity as a 3.

These ratings are an improvement over previous ratings. This may be because of the emphasis placed on providing a continuing education type environment at the Annual Meeting. This included more hands-on activities, discussion of research that informs practices, and more scenario-based discussions/breakouts. However, improvement can be made to making discussions relevant to a wider audience, as one respondent felt that "*some context does not feel relevant to the urban/micro scale I am working on.*"



Coordinating and Supporting Regionally Relevant Produce Safety Research

Attendees were asked how they would rate NECAFS around coordinating and supporting regionally relevant produce safety research. The following were provided as examples of this area of work: produce safety research consortium and literature reviews of published research. **Figure 12** shows that on a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 is poor and 5 is excellent, the respondents rated NECAFS coordinating and supporting regionally relevant produce safety research with 58% (n=41) choosing rating 5, 35% (n=25) choosing rating 4, and 7% (n=5) choosing rating 3 in this area.



Respondents are interested in including context for urban and micro scale farm and hydroponic/aquaponic operations.

Conclusion and Next Steps

The structure of the Annual Conference and Meeting remains successful. Attendees continue to value networking, making connections, and sharing perspectives greatest at the Annual Meeting. The interactive hands-on learning was well received, and respondents learned a lot from the multiple research-based sessions. The pre-meeting PCQI training was highly praised, with many asking for trainings to be offered pre-meeting again next year. Lastly, the dedicated time and discussion of the updated Food Safety Clearinghouse had a significant impact on attendees.

NECAFS has made good progress with regular and structured forms of communication via reintroducing a monthly newsletter. All annual meeting attendees are automatically added to the newsletter list to ensure everyone receives the communications.

Finally, regarding continued need, attendees have asked for a continued focus on sharing research findings and translating those findings into practice. There is also a desire to continue building up the

Preventive Controls network and include consultants and an industry sponsor at the meeting. Lastly, attendees would like to see continued interactive learning opportunities at the Annual Meeting.