



# Summary Evaluation Report

A Report from the Northeast Center to Advance Food Safety (NECAFS) Regarding Evaluation Conducted at the 2020 NECAFS Annual Conference and Meeting.

USDA Grant# 2018-70020-28878

Project Title: The Northeast Center to Advance Food Safety (NECAFS)

USDA Project Performance Period: 9/1/2018 – 8/31/2021

Evaluation Date: 2/11/2020-2/12/2020

August 25, 2020

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## Summary

Attendees at the NECAFS Annual Conference and Meeting overwhelmingly reported that they learned something new (94%), most notably about efforts led by partners in the NECAFS network. Knowing about these efforts led attendees to feel better prepared and informed since having a comprehensive understanding of on-going work *improved attendee's awareness of regional needs and varying perspectives* that allows them to provide more informed trainings and an ability to develop new projects based on need. When comparing with past NECAFS Annual Conference and Meeting evaluations, the leading theme of what attendees learned has not deviated, however, how that knowledge will change their approach to FSMA and food safety is different this year. In the past, this new knowledge allowed attendees to answer questions and pass along knowledge, responses that are more aligned with information sharing, while this year, the responses centered on improved decision making and taking a new approach to training and future projects based on knowledge gained from partner attendees. *This is noteworthy and indicates that the attendees are progressing along the collaboration continuum from information exchange (consulting) to decision-making based on interpersonal trust and shared language (coordinating)*. Additionally, (93%) of attendees stated that they met someone new at the Annual Conference and Meeting and reported that this new relationship created opportunities for collaboration on education, research and future funding. Additionally, many attendees indicated that collaborative conversation began at the meeting with follow-up planned and that resulting work will be more detailed and accurate with improved partner contributions. In the past, attendees reported that the new relationship(s) would change their approach to FSMA and food safety through enhanced networking and improved communication, while this year, the responses centered on collaborative engagement. *Again, this change in responses is of interest and demonstrates an even greater progression along the collaboration continuum from crossing boundaries to share information and establishing new connections (communicating, connection, cooperating) to developing integrated interdependent relationships based on similar needs, interests and goals that have potential to result in collective action (community building and contracting)*.

Overall, when asked if NECAFS has helped improve food safety training, education and outreach, 93% of attendees said yes and explained that this was accomplished through networking and communication with other stakeholders. When asked to describe key challenges in the region, attendees reported a need for communication, research, education, and qualified personnel as their leading concern. The challenge arises because there is, generally, a need to provide more technical assistance and help answer the commonly heard "What do I need to do?" question. When looking at responses of attendees by their role in the food safety community, we found that it had no bearing on the specifics of how NECAFS has helped respondents. However, this review did find that *the regulatory role benefited very little from webinars, conference calls, and newsletters while the education role greatly benefited from these forms of communication and information sharing. This suggests that this programming has been tailored to benefit educators and should be reimaged or expanded to include programming that addressed the detailed needs of the regulatory network members*. When asked about specific NECAFS activities, (where 5 = excellent), 62% rated regional communication as 4 (41%) or 5 (21%), 73% rated building regional capacity, competence, and collaboration as 4 (51%) or 5 (22%), and 85% rated developing and delivering educational programs as 4 (45%) or 5 (30%). All three areas are down from 2019 ratings. While not a significant decrease, *this drop, and associated comments suggests that NECAFS*

has many new network members and needs to work to integrate and include these new voices into its existing structural framework.

## Discussion and Results

The Northeast Center to Advance Food Safety (NECAFS) held the 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference and Meeting in Philadelphia, PA February 11 – 12, 2020. Tuesday, February 11<sup>th</sup> started with a welcome and plenary session where the highlights of NECAFS were presented and the full conference participated in a group exercise selected to understand their current and future perception of NECAFS collaboration and sustainability activities. The morning session also featured regional project updates. The remainder of the day focused on workgroup meetings dedicated to Produce Safety and Preventive Controls for Human Food in two parallel tracks. Wednesday, February 12<sup>th</sup> featured national updates from federal partners (Regional Centers, FDA, USDA, Indigenous Food and Ag Initiative, Local Food Safety Collaboration, and National Association of State’s Departments of Ag) with the remainder of the day focused on workgroup meetings dedicated to the topics of Buyers and Produce Safety Needs Assessment.

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 the day. Approximately 150 people attended the event and 81 (54%) completed and returned evaluations. **Table 1** represents the roles in regional food safety selected by attendees who completed the evaluation, delineated by individuals’ roles. When selecting roles, attendees were asked to “Check all that apply” and 25 people selected that they have more than one role in regional food safety; the majority of these individuals selected both research and education. Individuals working in regional food safety education or regulation represented the largest cohorts of attendees to the Annual Conference, at 51% and 35% respectively among those who responded to the evaluation.

<b>Role in Regional Food Safety</b>	<b>Number</b> (also selected education)	<b>Percentage out of 81 Respondents</b>
Education	41	51%
Government/Regulation	28	35%
Research	22 (19)	27%
Industry (Producer, Processor, Buyer)	10 (4)	7%
Consultant	2 (2)	1%
Did not Identify Role	3	2%

**Table 1. Role Breakdown for Annual Conference Attendees Who Responded to the Evaluation**

On the evaluation, attendees reported on both their perceptions of (1) the 2020 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 of these impacted 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 our 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?” 76 (94%) respondents answered “Yes.” Answers to the follow-up evaluation question “If so, what did you learn?” resulted in broad themes among attendees, most notably: increased knowledge about partner efforts. Other oft-cited themes, although much less than the leading theme, included:

- awareness around existing resources,
- individual needs for growers, buyers and processors, and
- awareness of other experiences from across the region.

Significantly less common themes also emerged, including:

- still a lot of outreach and/or research questions to answer,
- greater understanding of FSMA and the individual PCHF and PSR rules,
- different perspectives, and
- different collaborative opportunities.

Many attendees included multiple responses that corresponded with several themes, indicating that they learned more than one thing from attending the Annual Conference and Meeting.

First, respondents generally described learning about several educational efforts underway on the regional and national levels. Specifically, several attendees articulated new knowledge about specific project activities, such as NECAFS and Food Safety Outreach projects, and the expected deliverables as a result of those projects. Additionally, many respondents described that they learned information from the many different updates featured on the agenda, with the FDA update being cited most often.

Second, responses explained that they learned about existing resources with some listing specific resources that cover the topic of washing machines and cleaning and sanitizing. Importantly, one respondent pointed out that there were several instances where someone said, “I could use this information” and someone else said “we did that” but no one was aware. This type of discussion took place throughout the conference but most notably during the Produce Safety Workgroup meeting where the group prioritized tailored activities for the coming year to address specifically articulated needs. The group identified the need to share existing research in an approachable way to increase fundamental knowledge and inform on-farm decision making. NECAFS will be working on this activity over the next three years.

### *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?” resulted in: new knowledge made respondents feel better prepared and more

informed. Interestingly, in previous years this theme was also cited as first by attendees but their comments reported that the information learned will be used to enhance their grower trainings, citing tips and tricks, as well as knowing what add-on and supplemental materials exist and where to find them. However, this year, the comments reported that they heard about other experiences and challenges resulting in a more comprehensive understanding and improved decision-making that will lead to new approaches in training and future projects based on knowledge gained from partner attendees. Some went on to acknowledge that this comprehensive understanding will allow them to better serve their growers and processors by providing a critical reference point. One attendee described that the information learned will allow them to “think about different experiences of growers [when] implementing food safety practices” and another said that they now have a “better ability to develop projects that address a need.” The change seen this year from past years is noteworthy and indicates that the attendees are progressing along the collaboration continuum from information exchange (consulting) to decision-making based on interpersonal trust and shared language (coordinating). Slightly less common themes that also emerged in response to this question included:

- will look for existing resources to use in education and outreach and reduce redundancy,
- taking a new approach, in education or evaluation, of producers and/or processors,
- work collectively,
- better understanding of various stakeholder efforts,
- generated new ideas, and
- provides clarity and focus moving forward in the FSMA landscape.

It is noteworthy to point out that “work collectively” is a theme that emerged this year that has not been seen in the past. Attendees expressed that they will either intentionally work to engage with colleagues and stakeholders more in the future or they identified specific connections or ideas discussed at the Annual Meeting that they will be developing collaboratively in the coming year. NECAFS worked specifically to establish structure and stakeholder relationships over its first four years, resulting in interdependent collaborative work that draws from each individual’s expertise.

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

When asked “Did you meet someone new?” 75 (93%) respondents answered “Yes.” Attendees were asked “How do you expect this new relationship to change your approach to FSMA and food safety in general?” Two dominant themes emerged:

- opportunity for collaboration on education/research/future funding, and
- provides for enhanced networking and communication.

Respondents described collaborative engagement that occurred while forming the new relationship(s). For example, some respondents explained planned intentions to collaborate on new research and that it will be improved with more detail and accurate information from expanded expert input, improving existing relationships resulting in confidence to work together and be more effective, and collaboration generally with some mention of specific activities (training of small producers and buyer outreach). Respondents cited that these new relationship(s) allowed them to “bec[o]me better acquainted with educators across the region...I now feel confident we can work together to be as effective as possible educating industry.” The responses demonstrate that attendees are successfully developing integrated

interdependent relationships based on similar needs, interests and goals that have potential to result in collective action.

Several subthemes also emerged in response to this question, including:

- coordination that leads to enhanced project outputs, and
- sharing of resources.

### *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?” resulted in several themes, most notably the need for communication, research, education and qualified personnel. Importantly, comments associated with this theme pointed to technical support as the main need. The type of support is wide ranging with cleaning and sanitizing as the most cited need. Others includes: worker training (need for materials in other languages and generally), connecting growers to existing resources, need to summarize existing research into usable factsheets, water standards, and answers to the common question of “What do I need to do?”.

Subthemes also emerged, including:

- compliance and implementation by growers and processors for various reasons,
- audience engagement of hard-to-reach growers and processors,
- lack of understanding of how FSMA individually applies to operators,
- variation across the region,
- lack of sufficient funding, and
- not enough collaboration.

Respondents were particularly concerned with challenges surrounding the mindset of some growers and processors explaining that some still underestimate the importance of proper food safety. In the past, audience engagement focused on finding and reaching hard-to-reach audiences in order to make them aware of FSMA. This year, interestingly several responses outlined a need to tailor resources to best support small and very small processors and small producers.

Respondents reported challenges around lack of understanding how FSMA applies. Producers and processors need technical assistant and support in understanding how to “apply the rule on their farm.” There is confusion in understanding FSMA compliance requirements based on farm or facility size and how that impacts or is impacted by meeting a 3<sup>rd</sup> party audit or cottage law requirements.

Respondents less frequently cited variations across the region as a key challenge when compared to previous years. Although, when discussed all the comments spoke to consistency and calibration across the states. Several responses added that inconsistency adds to buyer concerns and variety in market requirements.

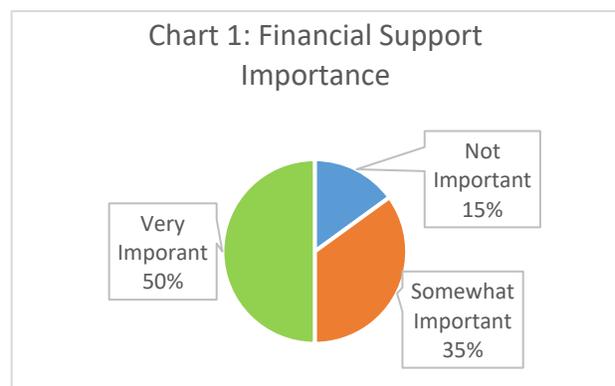
Producers and processors need financial support for infrastructure and adoption of food safety practices. In the past, lack of sufficient funding included some emphasis on the need for money to support trainings and research, but this year, every comment pointed to the need for financial resources for producers and processors.

While only two comments fit the theme of not enough collaboration, it is important to remark on this newly emerged theme. One comment explained a need for more extension and regulatory coordination of farmer education and the other expressed that they are working in a silo and would like to become more engaged with NECAFS where “trust as a team” was observed.

The challenges identified by the 2020 respondents remained the same as those of the 2019 NECAFS Annual Conference and Meeting. Supporting producers and processor with implementation and compliance, with an emphasis on tailoring resources to meet the needs of the audience, focus on specific action needed to meet regulatory compliance (including farm or facility size requirements) and lack of financial resources available to make necessary changes, remain the key challenge in the region.

## NECAFS Ongoing Resources Impact Results

Some attendees who needed financial support to attend the 2020 Annual Conference and Meeting were offered travel reimbursements to make their attendance possible. These attendees were asked “how important was that support?” Of the 54 attendees who requested financial support, 27 (50%) indicated that the support was critical to making their attendance possible while the remaining reported that the support was helpful but that they could have attended the Annual Conference and Meeting without it.

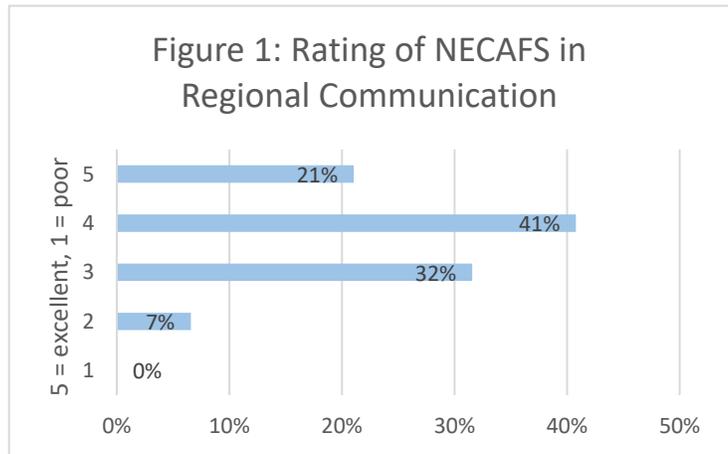


When asked “Has NECAFS helped you improve your food safety training, education and/or outreach?” 71 (93%) respondents answered “Yes.” Answers to the follow-up evaluation question “If so, how?” resulted in themes focused on the value of sharing resources, as well as communication and networking, both in general but also that which led to collaborative work.

One attendee stated that information sharing provides “knowledge about where to get education and outreach materials” and that “networking has also allowed [them] to partner with others to think of solutions to issues.” Respondents reported that funding from NECAFS to support training delivery made it possible to “bring in trainers to rural locations.”

### Regional Communication

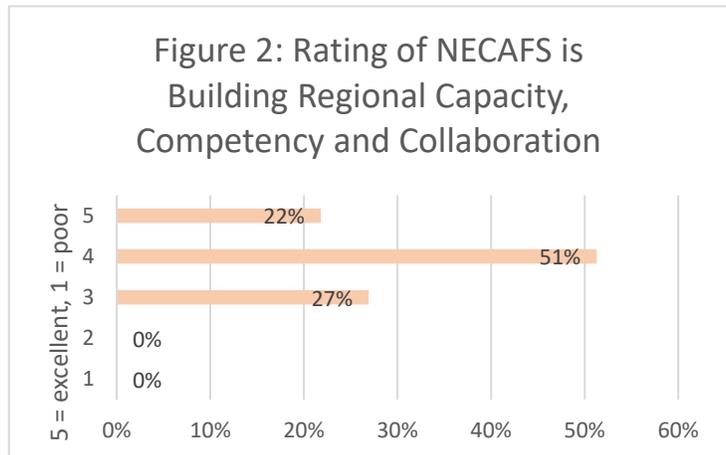
Attendees were asked how they would rate NECAFS in the area of regional communication about food safety topics. NECAFS newsletters and the website were provided as examples of this work. **Figure 1** shows that on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is poor and 5 is excellent, respondents (n=16, 21%) rated NECAFS regional communication as excellent with a ranking of 5. At 41% (n=31), the majority of respondents rated NECAFS regional communication as a 4. Finally, 32% (n=24) of respondents rated this activity as a 3 and 7% (n=5) rated it a 2.



Communication rated highly among attendees, although it is important to note that these ratings dropped from 2019. Comments requested more email communication year-round, automatic subscription to NECAFS eNewsletter after attended the Annual Conference and Meeting, more awareness of resources, shorter and more targeted emails, and more articulation of needs from growers, processors and buyers.

### Regional Capacity, Competency and Collaboration

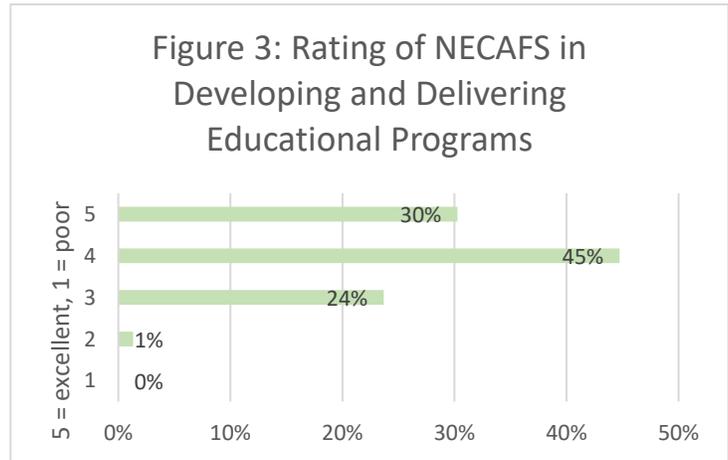
Attendees were asked how they would rate NECAFS in the area of regional capacity, competency and collaboration. The following were provided as examples of this area of work: webinars, the training support stipend program, and working groups. **Figure 2** shows that on a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 is poor and 5 is excellent, the respondents rated NECAFS regional capacity, competency and collaboration with 22% (n=17) choosing rating 5 and 51% (n=40) choosing rating 4. Finally, 27% (n=21), respondents rated NECAFS in this area as a 3.



Capacity, competency and collaboration rated well, however the ratings are lower than those in 2019. Respondents are interested in hearing from new voices during the Annual Conference and Meeting and throughout the year and have requested open conversation where new network members can become more involved in NECAFS.

## Developing and Delivering Educational Programs

Conference 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, the annual meeting and the Food Safety Resource Clearinghouse website. **Figure 3** shows that on a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 is poor and 5 is excellent, respondents (30%, n=23) rated NECAFS regional communication as excellent with a ranking of 5. At 45% (n=34), the majority of respondents rated NECAFS regional communication as a 4. Finally, 24% (n=18) of respondents rated this capacity as a 3 and 1% (n=1) rated it as a 2.



Respondents are interested in more webinars and regular updates on what is available on the Clearinghouse. Similar to above, the rating for developing and delivering educational programs dropped from last year. Several respondents commented that they are new to NECAFS and are still getting connected and have not yet participated in programming other than the Annual Conference and Meeting.

## Conclusion and Next Steps

Responses clearly articulated that they want more network communication through-out the year. NECAFS will focus on improved communication while tailoring programming to address the needs of both regulators and educators.

NECAFS is seeing increased participation as a result of new hires throughout the region's universities and State Departments of Agriculture and therefore, will create opportunities for these new voices to become involved and actively join the conversation.

The need for technical support of both processors and producers was articulated as a key challenge in the region. NECAFS will hire additional staff and submit grant proposals and work with our network to identify ways to support their needs so they can provide technical support.

Finally, the progression along the collaborative continuum seen by the attendees indicates NECAFS success in building a stakeholder network based on trust and shared language with common vision and goals. NECAFS will continue to facilitate these relationships and support this collaboration.