



Summary Evaluation Report

A Report from the Northeast Center to Advance Food Safety (NECAFS) Regarding Evaluation Conducted at the 2021 Virtual NECAFS Annual Conference and Meeting.

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Summary

Attendees at the NECAFS Annual Conference and Meeting overwhelmingly reported that they learned something new (100%), most notably about increased knowledge about partner efforts. By learning more about these efforts, attendees described that they had a broadened understanding. One respondent summed it up by stating *"I can't point to just one thing...it was just great exposure to a lot of new people, ideas, and real-world examples."* Since the Annual Meeting was virtual and hosted several breakout groups, we learned that respondents really valued this approach as described here *"the breakout groups were really positive because it provided space for everyone to contribute, even those who may be newer or more hesitant to speak to a larger group."* Furthermore, regional produce safety inspectional non-compliance and misunderstanding observational data was presented for the first time and was very well received by attendees. Generally, we see that respondents learn new information based on the content that is presented at the Annual Meeting. The value to NECAFS future planning is when respondents provide comments with excitement or demonstrated fundamental learning based on approach or information shared. We saw that this year about breakout groups and presenting inspectional observational data and these successful topics or learning approaches will be used in future Annual Conference and Meeting planning.

Attendees (95%) stated that they met someone new at the Annual Conference and Meeting and reported that this new relationship provides for enhanced networking and communication. It is noteworthy that 95% of attendees met someone new since the meeting was held virtually. To help facilitate networking and connection the agenda was built with several morning networking opportunities as well as several breakout group discussions. In the past when we met in-person, attendees indicated that collaborative conversation began at the meeting with follow-up planned. However, in the virtual space respondents did not create such collaborative relationships and reported that the new relationship *"makes it easier to reach out for questions."* It is noteworthy that there were a lot of new attendees at the meeting. Many noted the value of *"putting a face with a name."* When asked to describe key challenges in the region, attendees reported a need for topic specific outreach and education as their leading concern. The leading topic area was lack of food safety culture.

Overall, when asked if NECAFS has helped improve food safety training, education, and outreach, 100% of attendees said yes and explained that this was accomplished through networking and communication with other stakeholders. Respondents' comments focused on *"sharing resources"* and *"learning about other's approaches."* It is unknown why there were so much new attendees, but it aligns with the networking and communication theme identified. On the collaboration continuum, communication and information sharing is an early step in forming trusting relationships (which networking and communication represents).

When asked about specific NECAFS activities, (where 5 = excellent), 72% rated regional communication as 4 (41%) or 5 (31%), 66% rated building regional capacity, competence, and collaboration as 4 (33%) or 5 (33%), and 67% rated developing and delivering educational programs as 4 (36%) or 5 (31%). All three areas were consistent with 2020 ratings. The shift to a virtual Annual Conference and Meeting was successful. Attendees reported *"Thanks so much! You did a wonderful job organizing this conference and there were many useful conversations. I'm looking forward to seeing where this evolves next!"* and *"Great meeting; best virtual meeting I have attended!"*

Discussion and Results

The Northeast Center to Advance Food Safety (NECAFS) held the 5th Annual Conference and Meeting virtually February 16 – 18, 2021. February 16th featured a Northeast Regulator and Program Staff Working Meeting. The agenda included State Presentations with Round Table Q & A, Break Out Group Discussion, Concurrent Group Meetings. February 17th morning and afternoon networking, welcome and plenary session with NECAFS activity updates, and the remainder of the day focused on workgroup meetings dedicated to the topics of produce safety and preventive controls. Following the formal program, participants joined a virtual poster session and visited with presenters. February 18th being with morning networking, welcome and plenary session with national updates from federal partners, concurrent workgroup meetings dedicated to the topics of produce safety and preventive controls, and the day concluded with report out and closing remarks.

NECAFS distributed a link to the evaluation tool at the conclusion of the meeting and asked attendees to complete. Approximately 160 people attended the event and 36 (23%) completed and returned evaluations. In 2021 the NECAFS Annual Conference and Meeting was held virtually which resulted in fewer responses to the evaluation. When in-person, a paper evaluation is distributed, and participants are given time during the event to provide feedback and we receive around a 55% response rate. When asked to respond on their own in a virtual setting, respondents do not provide feedback at the same rate as when in-person and given time to respond.

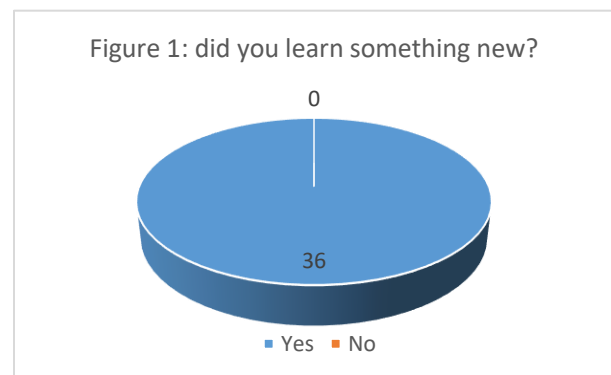
On the evaluation, attendees reported on both their perceptions of (1) the 2021 NECAFS Annual Conference and Meeting and (2) the NECAFS resources that were made available throughout the previous year. The evaluation was designed to allow NECAFS staff to understand if and how both impacted the respondents' 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?" 36 (100%) 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. Three top themes emerged:

- increased knowledge about partner efforts,



- awareness around existing resources, and
- individual needs for produce safety community members.

Less common themes also emerged, including:

- different perspectives,
- awareness of other experiences from across the region,
- greater understanding of FSMA and the individual PCHF and PSR rules, 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 overwhelmingly described that the FSPCA, FDA, FSOP, and USDA research federal updates were very helpful. Specifically, attendees found updates on research activities to be *“very interesting and pertinent”* and that literature reviews of existing research *“is going to be a SUPER important step in addressing the research gaps...in produce safety.”*

Second, responses explained that they learned a lot through the breakout group discussion approach at the meeting. Since the meeting was held virtually due to COVID, NECAFS planned an agenda that heavily featured breakout groups to encourage sharing and participation. This allowed attendees to learn about the individual needs and different perspectives of produce safety community members. One attendee reported that they *“had a couple of “aha” moments when the conversation sparked clarification of needs/issues and potential solutions to those needs.”* Another stated they learned *“Different viewpoints from different states and their process and ideas! This was awesome!”*

Finally, Produce Safety Rule Inspections began in 2019. The region’s regulatory partners collected the year’s on-farm produce safety inspectional non-compliance and misunderstanding issues. This information was summarized and presented at the Annual Meeting. Respondents reported that this was presentation was valuable and will be *“helpful to guide education efforts going forward.”* More generally, many comments described the value of the inspectional data presentation to their understanding of *“different roles in the region,” “approaches to inspections,” “PSR issues across states,”* and *“confirmation of specific compliance challenges”* on farms.

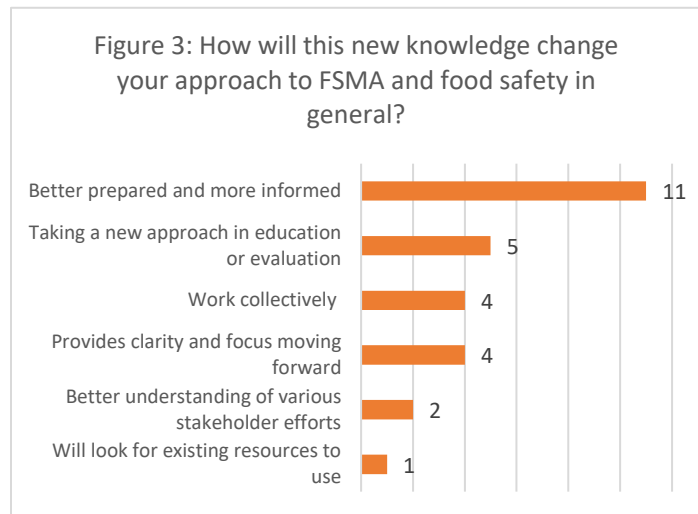
How will new knowledge change your approach to FSMA?

Answers to the evaluation question *“How will this new knowledge change your approach to FSMA and food safety in general?”* (Figure 3) resulted in being better prepared and more informed. Most of the comments reported that the information helped to confirm their understanding. Respondents did not provide specific information about how they plan to implement this new information and preparedness,

rather they generally stated that it *“informs guidance that [they] give producers, inform conversations [they] have with other TA providers”* and that the *“information will not change [their] approach but it enhances [their] knowledge.”*

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

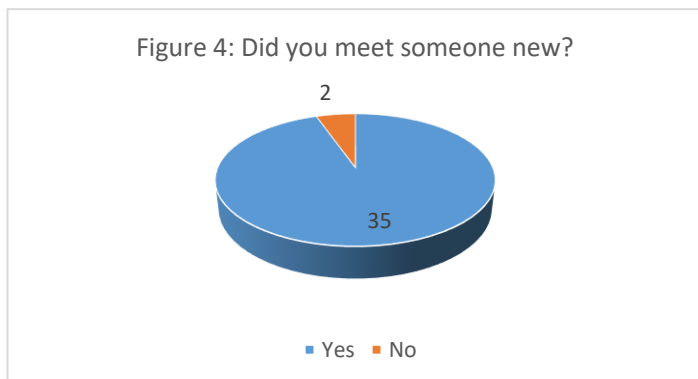
- taking a new approach in education or evaluation,
- work collectively,
- provides clarity and focus,
- better understanding of various stakeholder efforts, and
- will look for existing resources to use in education and outreach and reduce redundancy.



How will new relationships change your approach to FSMA?

When asked “Did you meet someone new?” 35 (95%) 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). One dominant theme emerged:

- provides for enhanced networking and communication.



Respondents cited connection and communication from these new relationship(s), describing that it is *“makes it easier to reach out for questions”* and that they are *“broadening their circle and adding new experts.”* Several comments reflected on putting *“a face with a name”* implying that there were many new people at the meeting. This may be because of turnover, new hires, or because the meeting was virtually, allowing people to join who had not previously when in-person. So many new people resulted in a greater importance being placed on early collaborative stages of connecting, communicating, and developing relationships.

This theme is a shift from 2020 when in-person and respondents described collaborative engagement that occurred



while forming the new relationship(s). When in-person, respondents reported successfully developing integrated interdependent relationships based on similar needs, interests and goals that have potential to result in collective action. However, when virtual, respondents did not report this level of collaboration and valued networking and communication more. Several subthemes also emerged (although very minor in response total), including:

- sharing of resources,
- opportunity for collaboration on education/research/future funding,
- coordination that leads to enhanced project outputs, and
- enhances current projects.

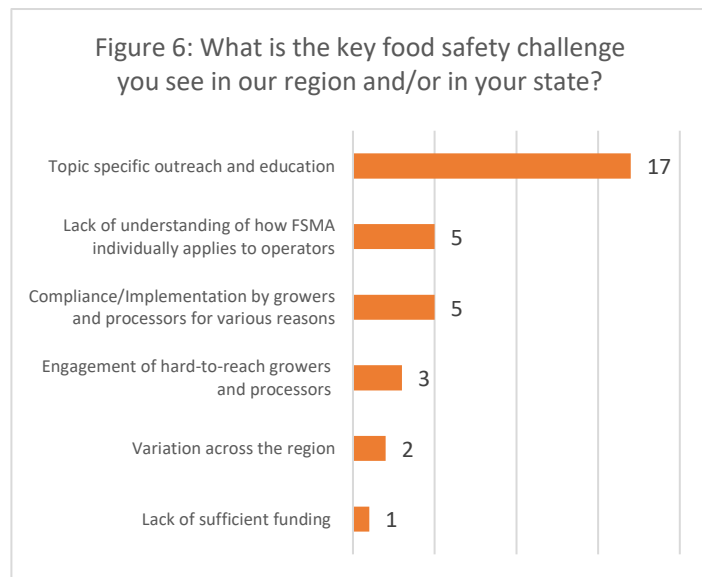
What food safety challenges do you see?

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 topic specific outreach and education. Importantly, comments overwhelming listed lack of food safety culture as the priority topic. Water and cleaning and sanitizing were also raised, though less commonly. On the topic of cleaning and sanitizing, respondents cited “*knowing the difference between the two and implementation.*”

Subthemes also emerged, including:

- lack of understanding of how FSMA individually applies to operators,
- compliance and implementation by growers and processors for various reasons,
- engagement of hard-to-reach audiences, and
- variation across the region.

Respondents were particularly concerned with challenges surrounding communication between “*Federal, State, and technical assistance providers on the FSMA PSR interpretations*” and the resulting “*confusion when informing farmers.*”



While there are challenges other than topic specific outreach and education listed, they are very few in number. The challenges in the region have shifted from compliance and implementation to the development and creation of more specific and tailored outreach and education that tackles individual topics.

NECAFS Ongoing Resources Impact Results

When asked “Has NECAFS helped you improve your food safety training, education and/or outreach?” 35 (100%) respondents answered “Yes” (**Figure 7**). Answers to the follow-up evaluation question “If so, how?” one leading theme:

- networking and communication with other stakeholders.

Several subthemes emerged, including:

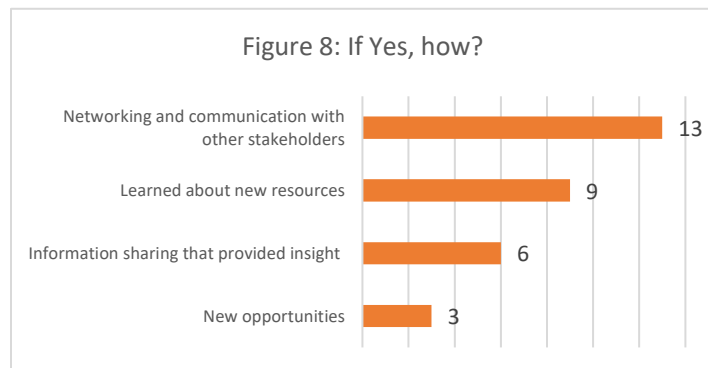
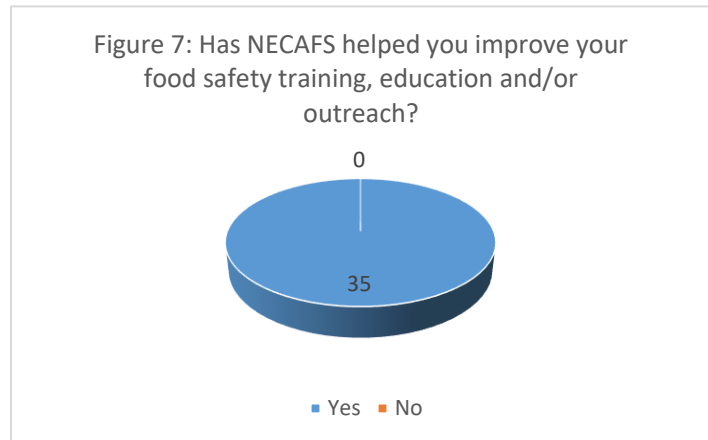
- learned about new resources,
- information sharing that provided insight, and
- new opportunities.

Networking and communication has long been one of the leading, if not the top, benefit NECAFS provides to its stakeholders. This year, every respondent in this theme named “*networking*” in their response with several giving examples of how that networking may be used in the future. Some examples include “*communication,*” opportunity for “*expressing achievements and challenges,*” support from “*educators for delivery and resource distribution,*” and “*learning about others' approaches...will help diversify [their] outreach efforts.*” During this virtual Annual Meeting, the agenda provided specific opportunities to still provide attendees with networking opportunities. We hosted morning coffee hours, breakout group discussions, and a poster session. It is often stated that networking is one of NECAFS best values, “*I love the conference. The networking aspect has been really key.*”

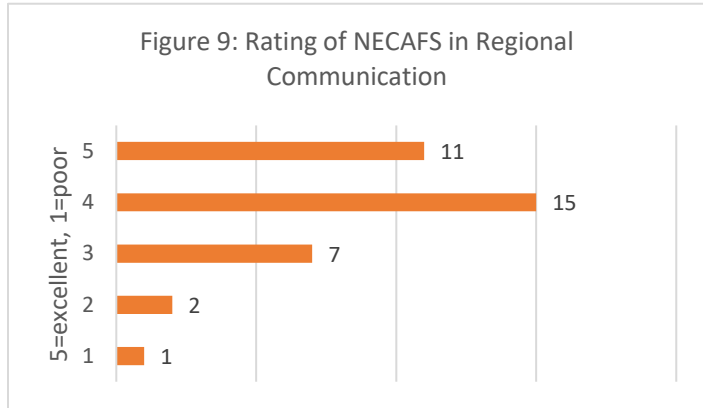
Outside of the programming provided at the Annual Conference and Meeting, attendees listed several benefits they receive from the Food Safety Resource Clearinghouse, including “*learning about alternative modalities; add on/supplemental materials,*” and “*material for teaching.*”

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 9** shows that on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is poor and 5 is excellent, respondents (n=11, 31%) rated NECAFS regional communication as excellent with a ranking of 5. At 41% (n=15), the majority of respondents rated NECAFS regional communication as a 4. Finally, 28% (n=7) of respondents rated this activity as a 3, 2, or 1.

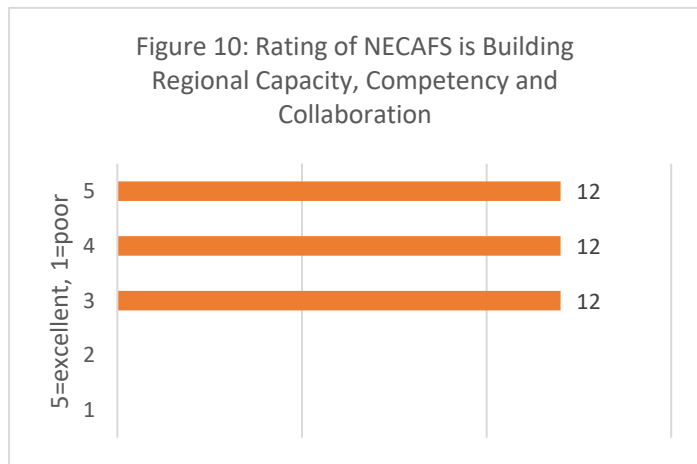


While communication generally rated highly among attendees there were specific calls for improvement. One attendee noted that they “*don't hear about projects until the annual meeting. It would be better to do this more regularly.*” Another comment pointed out that NECAFS can do more. Specifically, “*I love the idea of quarterly meetings to build on our work we did this week throughout the year. I also love the idea of topic specific webinars - drilling down on the science behind some of the regulations. I also love the idea about hearing more about research projects throughout the year.*”



Regional Capacity, Competency and Collaboration

Attendees were asked how they would rate NECAFS in 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 33% (n=12) choosing rating 5 and 33% (n=12) choosing rating 4. Finally, 33% (n=12), respondents rated NECAFS in this area as a 3.

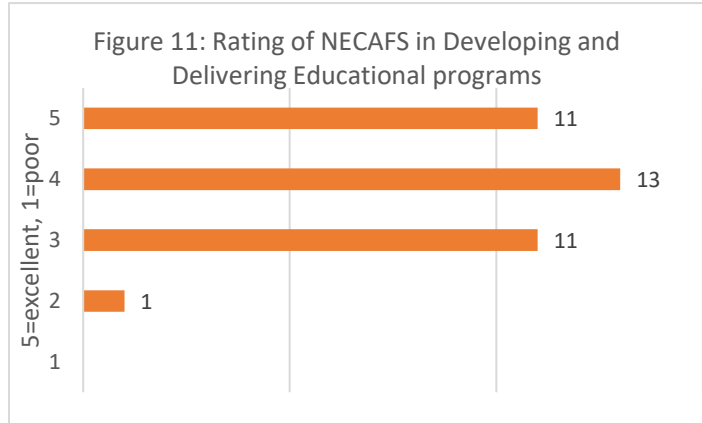


Capacity, competency and collaboration rated well and are consistent with the 2020 ratings. Respondents are interested in getting new people involved. Specifically, attendees would like NECAFS to “*involve new people and representatives on all states...sometimes it seems like it is the same states/folks are doing all the work/getting opportunities. NECAFS could reach out to others as these opportunities become available, leading to a projects and programs that are that is more diverse and informed by the wider community.*”

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 11** shows that on a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 is poor and 5 is excellent, respondents (31%, n=11) rated NECAFS regional communication as excellent with a ranking of 5. At 36% (n=13), the majority of respondents rated NECAFS regional communication as a 4. Finally, 33% (n=12) of respondents rated this capacity as 2 or 3.

Like above, the rating for developing and delivering educational programs is consistent with the 2020 ratings. Respondents reported that it *“would be beneficial to do these meetings virtually several times a year. The group collaboration and ideas have been wonderful! Also, voicing our challenges in the field and seeing resolve from other regulators/educators has been extremely helpful!”*



Conclusion and Next Steps

Responses clearly articulated value in the topic specific focus of the NECAFS Annual Conference and Meeting agenda and will continue to frame future agenda similarly.

The opportunities created to support networking in a virtual environment were successful. However, after two years of hosting the Annual Meeting virtually, we see that respondents can spend time networking and communicating but that without the in-person time, these networking times are not developing into collaborative projects.

Moving forward, NECAFS plans to host its next Annual Conference and Meeting virtually. We will incorporate more people in the planning process in order to ensure that more voices are represented in the approach. Some elements from virtual programming were well received by attendees and will be incorporated into the next virtual meeting, including breakout groups and focused topic specific discussion. Finally, several comments asked for more preventive controls content to be featured. Going forward, NECAFS will explore ways to increase the information on the agenda.