



Summary Evaluation Report

A Report from the Northeast Center to Advance Food Safety (NECAFS) Regarding Evaluation Conducted at the 2022 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 (97%), most notably about individual needs of food safety community members. By learning more about these individual needs, attendees described that they would take a new approach in educational or evaluation. This new knowledge *“Informs future project planning and provides guidance to project partners on needs/approaches”* allowing attendees to provide more informed trainings and an ability to develop new projects based on need.

Attendees (91%) 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 91% 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 made them aware of *“a new resource”* and that they *“gained a new perspective.”* 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 areas include cleaning and sanitizing, and worker training issues seen on farms.

Overall, when asked if NECAFS has helped improve food safety training, education, and outreach, 94% of attendees said yes and explained that this was accomplished through networking and communication with other stakeholders with increased fundamental knowledge resulting from NECAFS intentional approach to focus on specific topics for greater discussion. Respondents stated that they are *“learning more about food safety”* and that *“subjects are moved forward”* with *“access to depth and breath of info and knowledge.”*

When asked about specific NECAFS activities, (where 5 = excellent), 81% rated regional communication as 4 (22%) or 5 (59%), 96% rated building regional capacity, competence, and collaboration as 4 (35%) or 5 (61%), and 91% rated developing and delivering educational programs as 4 (26%) or 5 (65%). All three areas are up from 2021 ratings. While these areas improved there is still a need for more communication throughout the year as described by one respondent *“I feel like I'm still struggling to stay engaged with the materials, resources, and initiatives NECAFS develops in between annual meetings. More structured and regular communication and/or training opportunities for us as regulators and educators would be great.”*

Discussion and Results

The Northeast Center to Advance Food Safety (NECAFS) held the 6th Annual Conference and Meeting virtually February 16 – 18, 2022. 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 150 people attended the event and 34 (23%) completed and returned evaluations. In 2022 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 to not provide feedback at the same rate as when in-person and given time to respond.

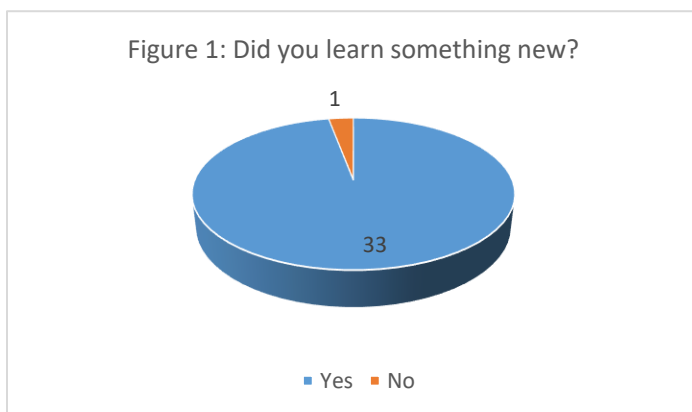
On the evaluation, attendees reported on both their perceptions of (1) the 2022 NECAFS Annual Conference and Meeting and (2) the NECAFS resources that were made available throughout the previous year. The evaluation was designed to allow NECAFS staff to understand if and how both impacted the respondents' 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?" 33 (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:

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



Significantly less common themes also emerged, including:

- different perspectives,
- awareness of other experiences from across the region,
- increased knowledge about partner efforts, 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.

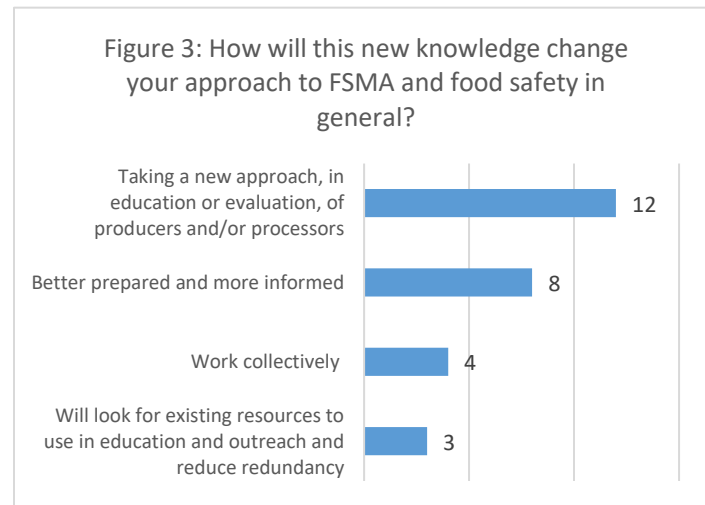
First, respondents generally described learning more about risk assessment and worker training, both topics that were featured during the produce safety workgroup meeting. Additionally, that it is difficult to follow the preventive controls (PC) regulation, there is a need for more communication from the PC workgroup, and that there is a need to increase awareness to processors.



Second, responses explained that they learned about existing resources with some listing specific resources that cover the topic of dropped produce and risk assessment. Importantly, one respondent described that they “*really enjoyed the risk assessment portion of the Produce Safety Working Group meeting,*” that they “*learned from the literature review*” and that the approach of modeling risk assessment decision making “*was a good learning opportunity.*” Another attendee stated that they learned “*Tons!*” and that they “*Very much appreciated the risk-assessment discussion.*” This is noteworthy because in 2020 the group identified the need to share existing research in an approachable way to increase fundamental knowledge and inform on-farm decision making. NECAFS successfully secured Food Safety Outreach Program funding to complete this work and hosted this produce safety workgroup meeting on risk assessment and dropped produce as an activity under that award.

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: taking a new approach in education or evaluation. Some comments reported that the information helped to refine their understanding and that it “*informs future project planning and provides guidance to project partners on needs/approaches.*” Other comments focused more generally on improving or adjusting existing programming by using more “*common sense,*” “*slowing down and not trying to pack too much into trainings,*” and to use “*visual aids to account for different learning levels and styles.*” Slightly less common themes that also emerged in response to this question included:



- better understanding of various stakeholder efforts,
- work collectively, and
- will look for existing resources to use in education and outreach and reduce redundancy.

How will new relationships change your approach to FSMA?

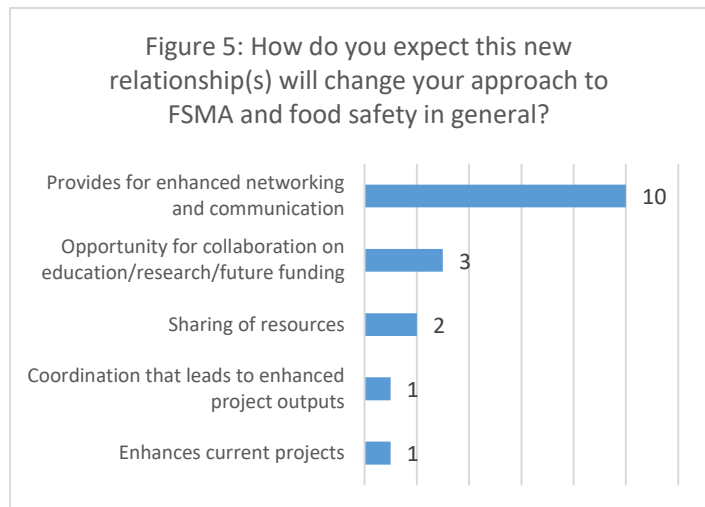
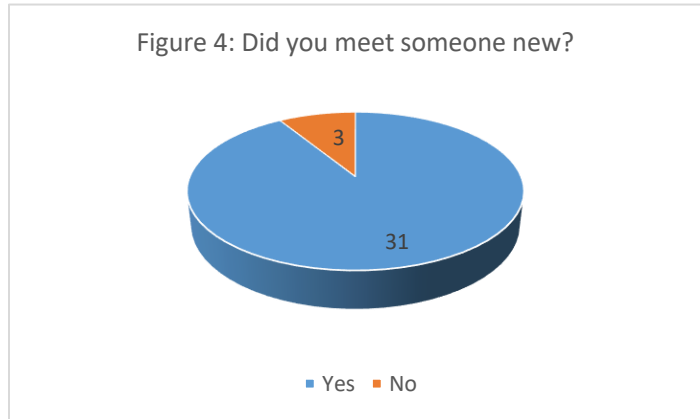
When asked “Did you meet someone new?” 31 (97%) respondents answered “Yes” (Figure 4). Attendees were asked “How do you expect this new relationship to change your approach to FSMA and food safety in general?” (Figure 5). One dominant theme emerged:

- provides for enhanced networking and communication.

Respondents cited connection and communication from these new relationship(s), describing that they “*feel more connected to state partners*” that “*communicating...feels easier*” and that there is someone to “*reach out to when in need of assistance or further insight into a scenario.*”

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 in response to this question, including:

- opportunity for collaboration on education/research/future funding,
- sharing of resources,
- 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 cleaning and sanitizing and addressing working training issues seen on farms. Cleaning and sanitizing were raised independently of any

presentations or topic discussed during the Annual Meeting while worker training issues seen on farms was covered extensively during this meeting with an inspector panel and break out group discussions. On the topic of cleaning and sanitizing, respondents cited “*knowing the difference between the two and implementation.*”

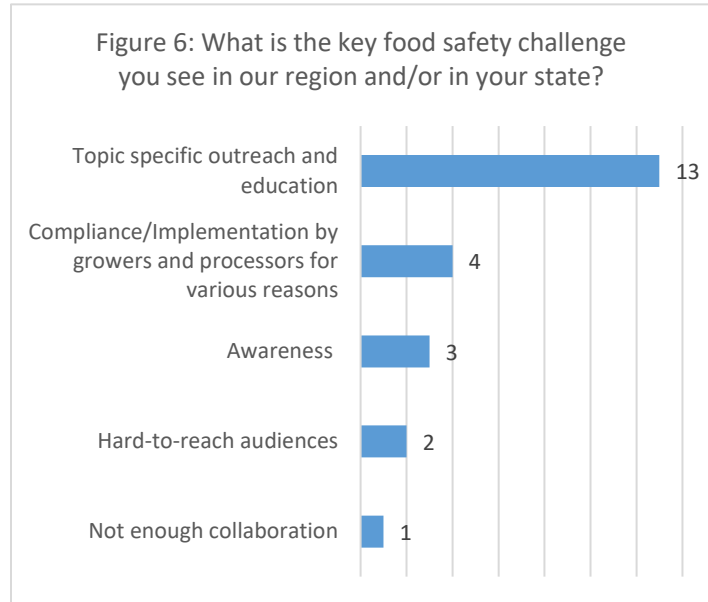
Subthemes also emerged, including:

- compliance and implementation by growers and processors for various reasons,
- awareness,
- hard-to-reach audiences, and
- not enough collaboration.

Respondents were particularly concerned with challenges surrounding the confidence of some growers explaining that some have trouble keeping up or know they are in compliance.

While there are a other challenges other than topic specific outreach and education listed, that are very few in number.

The challenges in the region have shifted to the development and creation of more specific and tailored outreach and education that tackles individual topics.



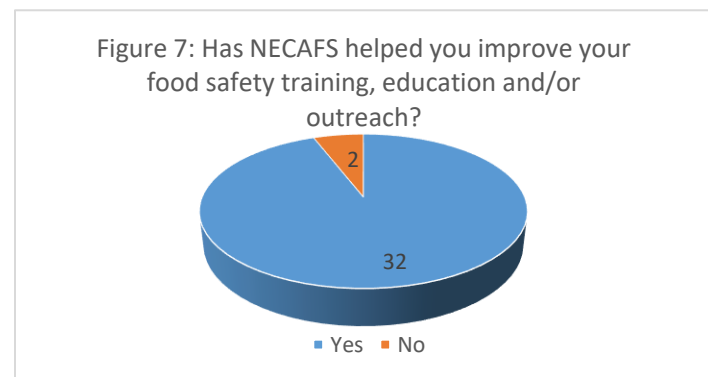
NECAFS Ongoing Resources Impact Results

When asked “Has NECAFS helped you improve your food safety training, education and/or outreach?” 32 (94%) 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,
- new opportunities, and
- funding.



Networking and communication has long been one of the leading, if not the top, benefit NECAFS provides to its stakeholders as explained by one attendee that “*networking remains a NECAFS strength.*” During this virtual Annual Meeting, the agenda provided specific opportunities to still provide attendees

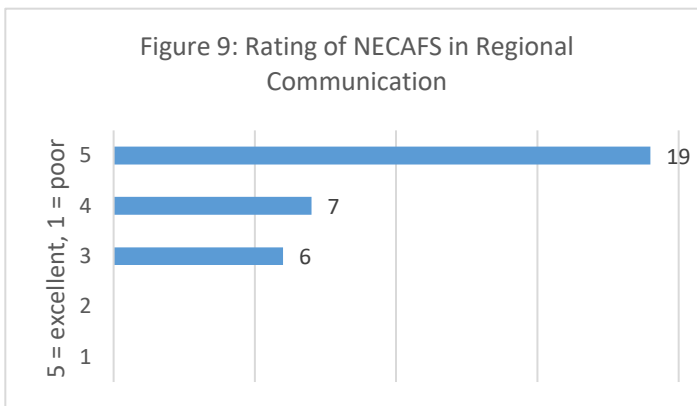
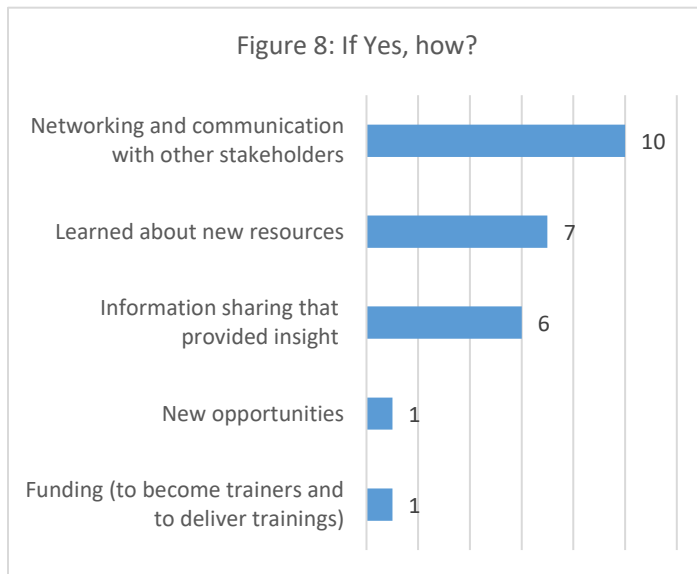
with networking opportunities. We hosted morning coffee hours through the Wonder application, breakout group discussions, and a poster session.

In addition to networking, comments also explained that they *“like that subjects are moved forward”* that programming *“assesses target areas”* and that NECAFS facilitates *“building networks and learning more around produce safety.”*

Outside of the programming provided at the Annual Conference and Meeting, attendees listed several benefits they receive from the Food Safety Resource Clearinghouse, including *“availability of different videos which may be able to use in our training,”* and *“supplemental materials & resources.”*

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=19, 59%) rated NECAFS regional communication as excellent with a ranking of 5. At 22% (n=7), the majority of respondents rated NECAFS regional communication as a 4. Finally, 19% (n=6) of respondents rated this activity as a 3.



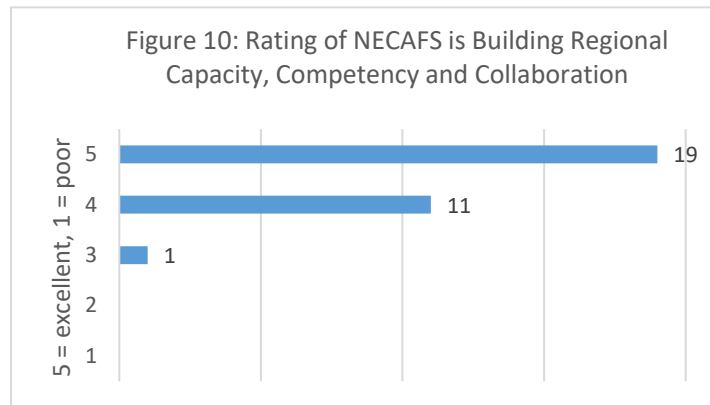
Communication rated highly among attendees and it is important to note that these ratings improved from 2019. Participation in NECAFS activities is open to anyone in the food safety community and on attendee noted that they *“Appreciate being welcome as someone from outside of the region to learn with you all! This is a great network of food safety professionals.”* While the overall rating improved, comments still pointed out that NECAFS can do more. Specifically, *“It would be helpful if NECAFS could help coordinate more regular meetings of educators across the region. It’s so nice getting together with them once a year. A couple times in between would be great.”*

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 10** shows that on a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 is poor

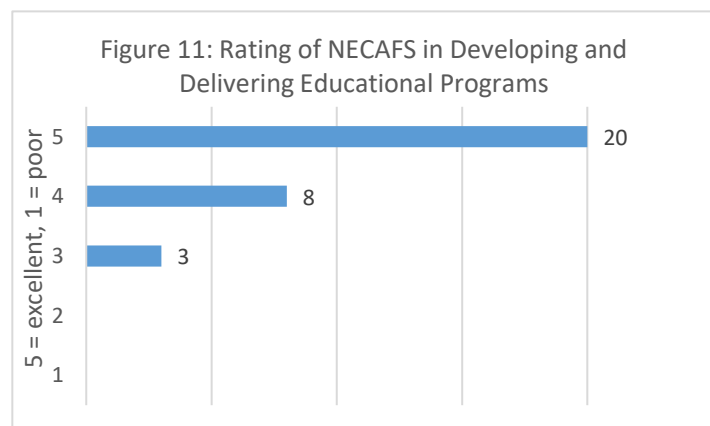
and 5 is excellent, the respondents rated NECAFS regional capacity, competency and collaboration with 61% (n=19) choosing rating 5 and 35% (n=11) choosing rating 4. Finally, 4% (n=1), respondents rated NECAFS in this area as a 3.

Capacity, competency and collaboration rated well and it is important to note that these ratings improved from 2019, likely because they enjoyed the topic specific dedication of the agenda to risk assessment and worker training issues on the farm. Respondents are interested in more continued learning opportunities throughout the year. Specifically, attendees would like *“more webinars/meetings on specific topics”* and are *“interested in regular risk-based thinking sessions.”*



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 (65%, n=20) rated NECAFS regional communication as excellent with a ranking of 5. At 26% (n=8), the majority of respondents rated NECAFS regional communication as a 4. Finally, 9% (n=3) of respondents rated this capacity as a 3.



Like above, the rating for developing and delivering educational programs increased from last year.

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 are able to spend time networking and communicating but that without the in-person time, these networking times are not developing into collaborative projects.

The challenges in the region focus on cleaning and sanitizing and worker training issues seen on the farm.

Moving forward, NECAFS plans to host its next Annual Conference and Meeting in-person. Some elements from virtual programming were well received by attendees and will be incorporated into the in-person meeting, including breakout groups and focused topic specific discussion.