



Summary Evaluation Report

A Report from the Northeast Center to Advance Food Safety (NECAFS) Regarding Evaluation Conducted at the 2023 NECAFS Annual Conference and Meeting, Hartford, CT.

USDA Grant# 2021-70020-35497

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

USDA Project Performance Period: 9/1/2022 – 8/31/2023

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Summary

Attendees at the NECAFS Annual Conference and Meeting overwhelmingly reported that they learned something new (99%), most notably about individual needs of food safety community members. By learning more about these individual needs, attendees described that they feel better prepared and more informed about food safety. This new knowledge allows attendees to *“better serve the farmers in [their] state”* since they now have more information give producers and *“new ways to approach trainings.”*

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. It is noteworthy that several attendees described how their networking experience offered opportunity to gain and learn from others’ perspectives. Furthermore, they explained how this perspective allowed them to identify innovative solutions and that the Conference framework *“models a collaborative, open source, constructive process.”* When asked to describe key challenges in the region, attendees reported a need for topic tailored material as their leading concern. This includes not only food safety topic-based content such as cleaning and sanitizing and worker training, but it also includes hands-on experiential learning for educators and regulators. Attendees also described a need to shift messaging away from inspection as the motivating factor to adopt practices and move toward the importance of producing safe food and establishing a food safety culture.

Overall, when asked if NECAFS has helped improve food safety training, education, and outreach, 96% 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 breadth of info and knowledge.”*

When asked about specific NECAFS activities, (where 5 = excellent), 54% rated regional communication as a 5 and 37% as a 4. Attendees rated building regional capacity, competence, and collaboration as a 5 (51%) or a 4 (41%). And attendees rated developing and delivering educational programs as a 5 (60%) or a 4 (29%). 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 7th Annual Conference and Meeting in Hartford, CT on January 18 – 19, 2023. January 18th featured plenary session with state produce safety program updates, concurrent sessions with a Northeast Regulator and Program Staff meeting and a Food Safety Educator (produce safety and preventive controls) meeting. Following the formal program, participants joined a poster session and visited with presenters. January 19th morning and afternoon

networking, welcome and plenary session with NECAFS activity updates and state educational partner updates, and the remainder of the day focused on workgroup meetings dedicated to the topics of produce safety and preventive controls.

NECAFS distributed a paper evaluation tool at the conclusion of the meeting and asked attendees to complete. Approximately 150 people attended the event and 76 (51%) completed and returned evaluations. In 2022 the NECAFS Annual Conference and Meeting was held virtually which resulted in fewer responses (23%) to the evaluation. 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. Now that the meeting is back in-person where paper evaluations are distributed and participants are given time during the event to provide feedback, the response rate has returned to former in-person levels.

On the evaluation, attendees reported on both their perceptions of (1) the 2023 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

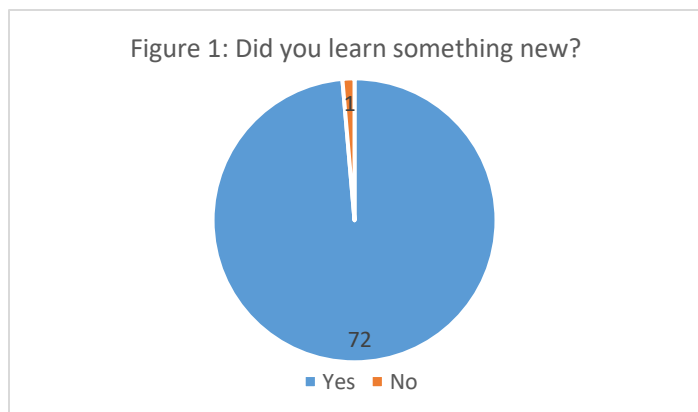
Did you learn something new?

When asked, "Did you learn something new?" 72 (99%) 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 dominate themes emerged:

- individual needs for produce safety community members,
- different perspectives, and
- increased knowledge about partner efforts.

Less, although not significantly, common themes also emerged, including:

- great understand of FSMA and the individual rules, and



- awareness around existing resources.

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.

Several respondents described learning that everyone is having the same issues and struggles as they are experiencing. Additionally, respondents explained that they learned about the frequency of state inspections with some occurring every 3-5 years. As a result, the motivating factor for adopting food safety should be around establishing a culture of food safety with less motivation being focused on the enforcement of the regulation.

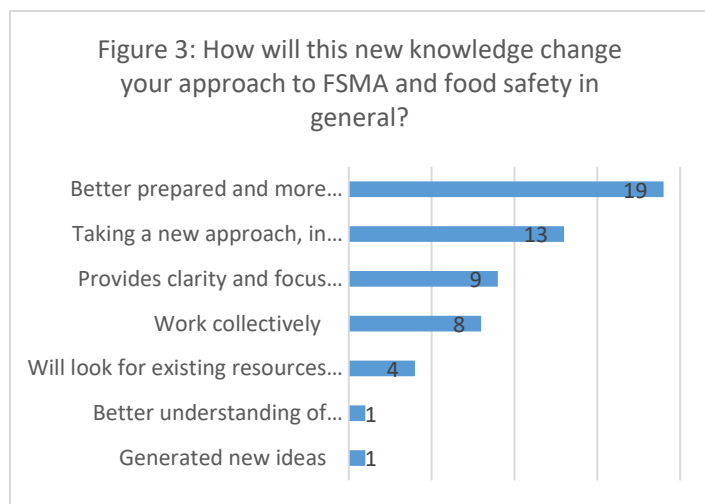
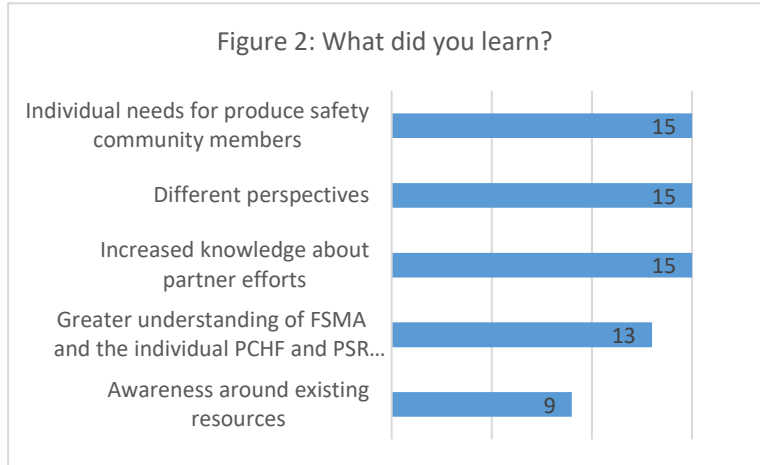
Many responses explained that they learned about variation among state produce safety programs and that approaches to implementation differ. It is interesting to see this as a top item learned since it has not appeared since being initially described in 2019. This may be due to the turnover across the regulatory and educational communities and these new attendees hearing about other state programs in detail. In addition to learning about these variations, respondents also explained that they learned how other states deal with issues. One respondent described that they *“learned about other issues states are dealing with during inspections and how to mitigate the issues.”* Similarity, one attendee explained that they are dealing with the *“same issues that other states dealt with”* and that they learned from those states by hearing *“how they handled [the issue].”*

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 two dominate themes emerging:

- better prepared and more informed, and
- taking a new approach in education or evaluation.

Many comments sited that they will now use resources with producers and processors that they learned about at the conference. When taking a new approach in education, attendees described the intent to expand their education beyond classroom trainings and



do more “*farmer peer to peer learning,*” “*hands on learning,*” and “*creating more relevant educational videos based on need.*”

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

- provides clarity and focus moving forward in the FSMA landscape,
- work collectively, and
- will look for existing resources to use in education and outreach to reduce redundancy.

As seen in the “What did you learn?” section above, respondents described that understanding the frequency of inspections will change their approach toward “*supporting crew culture assessment and implementations of best practices,*” that this low inspectional frequency “*highlights the need to address food safety culture... [as the] driving force...behind food safety conversations,*” and that “*it is not simply about certification but more about understanding and utilization.*”

How will new relationships change your approach to FSMA?

When asked “Did you meet someone new?” 75 (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). One dominant theme emerged:

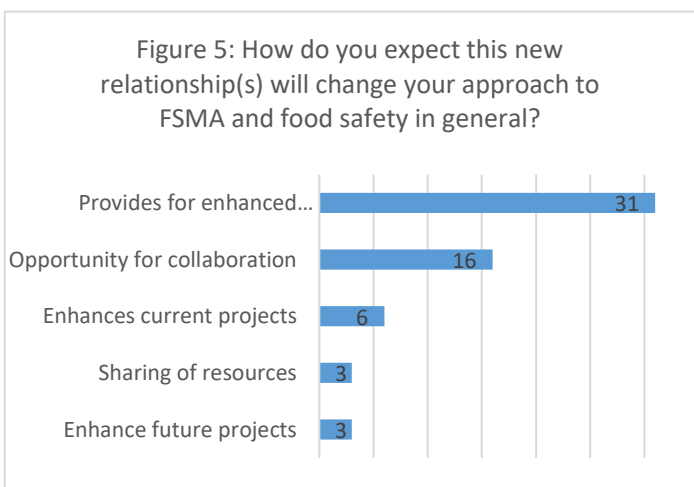
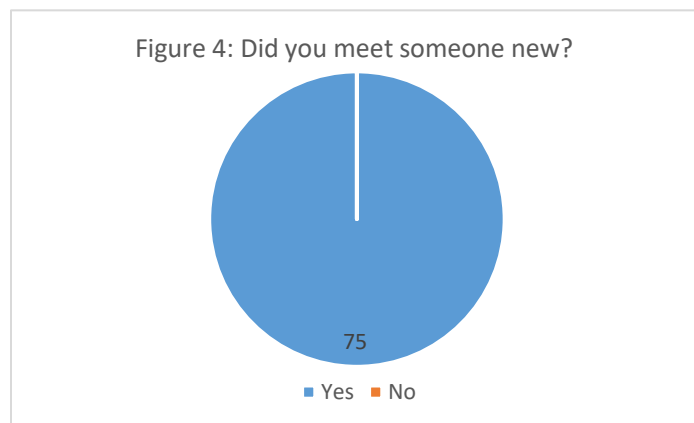
- provides for enhanced networking and communication.

Respondents cited both 1.) connection and 2.) communication from these new

relationship(s), describing that they have broadened the network of “*people I will reach out to for resources or to run ideas by,*” that “*these new relationships will be valuable in gaining new perspectives on regional issues and collaborating with them to identify innovative solutions*” and that they now “*feel more connected, making it easier to approach others with questions.*” Several subthemes also emerged in response to this question, including:

- opportunity for collaboration on education/research/future funding,
- enhances current projects,
- sharing of resources,
- enhanced future projects.

The collaborative opportunities described by attendees ranged to include: “*assisting in training and educating,*” “*reviewers of grant materials,*” “*writing an article,*” “*organize an IAFP proposal,*” and “*program planning.*”



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, and
- approach to communication and education.

Comments overwhelming listed ag water, cleaning and sanitizing, and working training as the top areas needing tailored educational material. Several respondents included record keeping along with the above listed topic-specific areas.

When describing approach to communication and education, respondents explained 1.) communication between regulators and educators, 2.) consistency of information when education, and 3.) adjusting messaging away from inspection and toward culture of growing safe food.

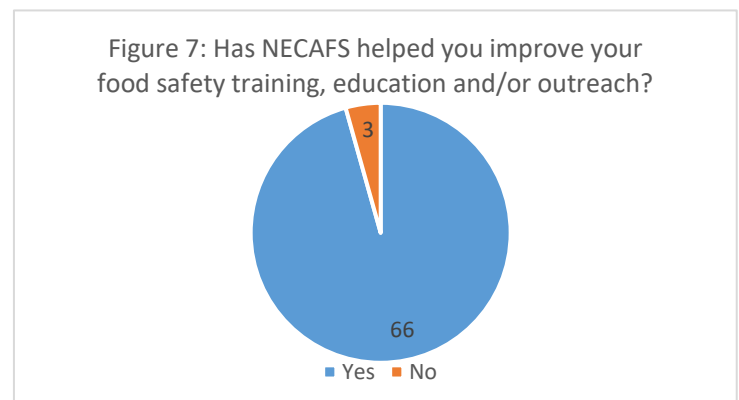
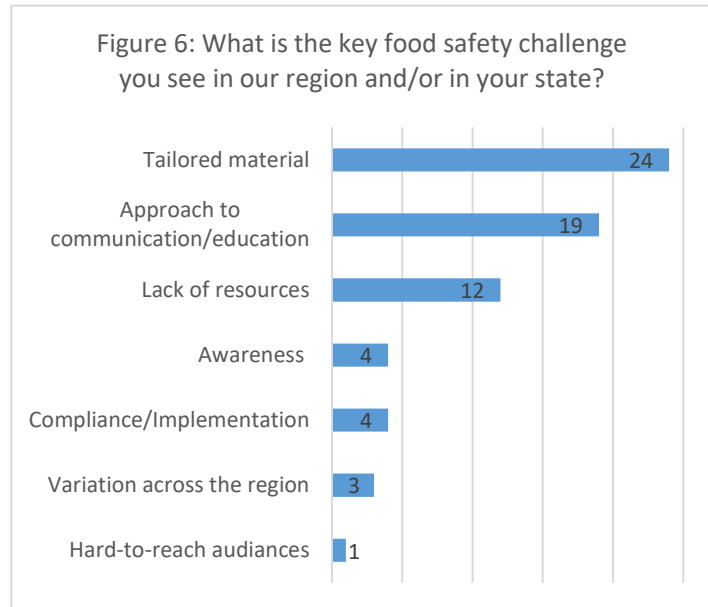
Subthemes also emerged, including:

- lack of resources,
- awareness,
- compliance/implementation
- variation across the region, and
- hard-to-reach audiences.

Lack of resources covered areas including time, labor, financial, and educational resources. While there are subthemes describing food safety challenges, it is noteworthy that there is good consensus across the network to develop tailored resources and focus on varying approaches to communication and education.

NECAFS Ongoing Resources Impact Results

When asked “Has NECAFS helped you improve your food safety training, education and/or outreach?” 66 (96%) 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:

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

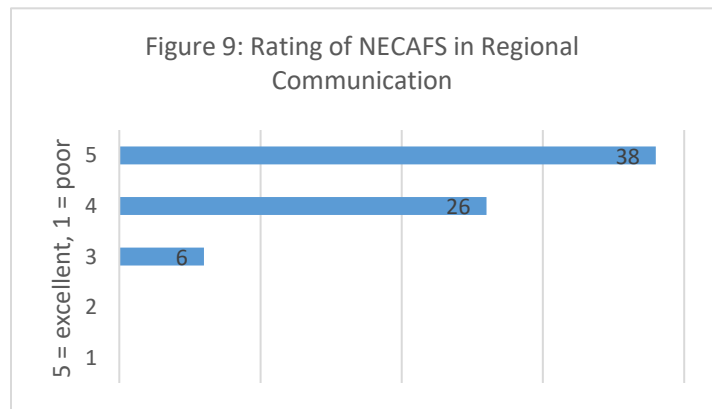
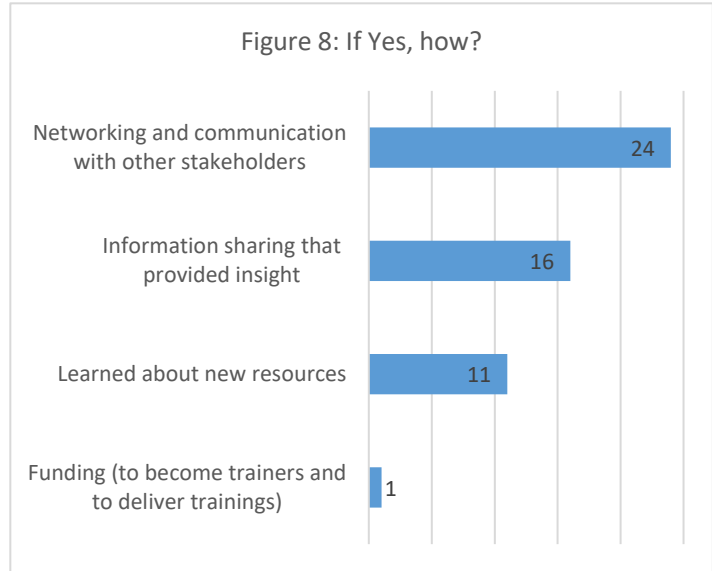
Networking and communication have long been the leading benefit NECAFS provides to its stakeholders as explained by one attendee that *“Networking is really important. Sometimes someone just articulates or frames something in a slightly different way and I can incorporate that into my trainings and technical assistance.”*

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.

In addition to networking, comments also explained that they like the *“facilitation of conversations with educators that focus on common goals and priorities”* that NECAFS annual meeting program help them *“learn different approaches”* and allows them to *“learn from peers and inspectors about what works and what doesn’t.”*

Regional Communication

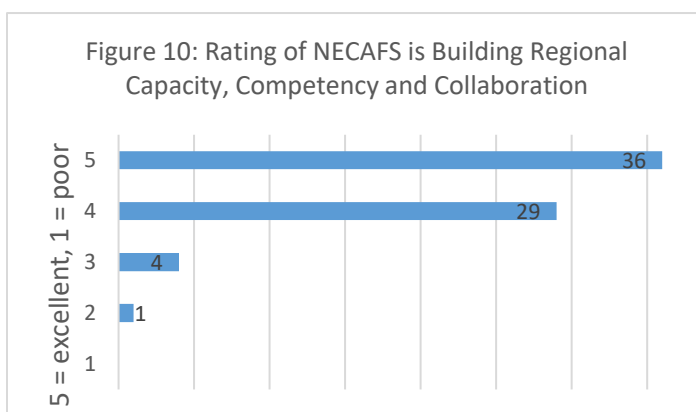
Attendees were asked how they would rate NECAFS around regional communication about food safety topics. NECAFS newsletters and the website were provided as examples of this work. **Figure 9** shows that on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is poor and 5 is excellent, respondents (n=38, 54%) rated NECAFS regional communication as excellent with a ranking of 5. At 37% (n=26) respondents rated NECAFS regional communication as a 4. Finally, 9% (n=6) of respondents rated this activity as a 3.



While ratings were good, attendees listed specific areas for improvement. Specifically, the recommended that NECAFS *“generate more attention-grabbing subject lines”* since they *“tend to miss many of the emails.”* In addition to drawing people in, they suggested *“more frequent communication and networking opportunities.”*

Regional Capacity, Competency and Collaboration

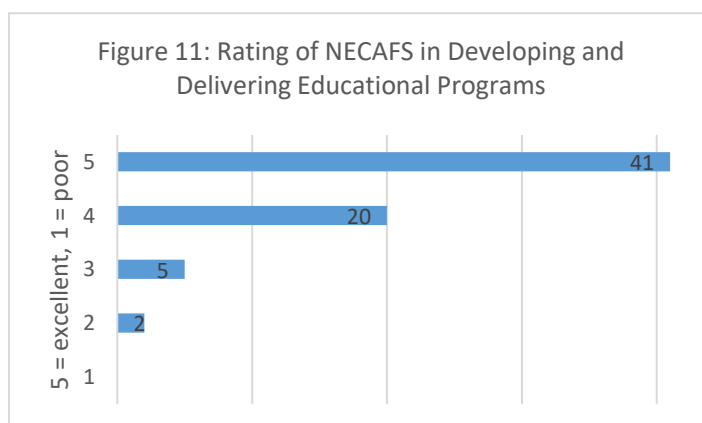
Attendees were asked how they would rate NECAFS around regional capacity, competency, and collaboration. The following were provided as examples of this area of work: webinars, the training support stipend program, and working groups. **Figure 10** shows that on a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 is poor and 5 is excellent, the respondents rated NECAFS regional capacity, competency, and collaboration with 52% (n=36) choosing rating 5, 41% (n=29) choosing rating 4, 6% (n=4) choosing rating 3, and 1% (n=1) respondents rated NECAFS in this area as a 2.



Respondents are interested in more continued learning opportunities throughout the year. Specifically, attendees expressed a lot of interest in facilitating a continuing education type environment with more hands-on activities, more discussion of research that informs practices, and more scenario-based discussions. The discussions are appreciated, and attendees are *“impressed with group being comfortable sharing thoughts,”* they also like the joint PS and PC educator’s meeting that allowed for *“great cross communication.”*

Developing and Delivering Educational Programs

Conference attendees were asked how they would rate NECAFS around 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 (60%, n=41) rated NECAFS regional communication as excellent with a ranking of 5. At 29% (n=20), respondents rated NECAFS regional communication as a 4. Finally, 10% (n=7) of respondents rated this capacity as a 3 or 2.



Conclusion and Next Steps

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. 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.

The structure of the Annual Conference and Meeting remains successful. However, turnover is constant which results in a need to always go back to the basics to keep everyone on the same page. Attendees like breakout group activities and benefit greatly from the networking and perspective sharing they offer. One need described is the network's interest in more discussion that focuses on operationalizing the rule. Attendees specifically asked for facilitation that allows for continuing education type environment with more hands-on activities, discussion of research that informs practices, and more scenario-based discussions/breakouts.

Finally, attendees identified the need to shift messaging away from inspection as the motivating factor to adopt practices and move toward the importance of producing safe food and establishing a food safety culture.