



# Summary Evaluation Report

A Report from the Northeast Center to Advance Food Safety (NECAFS) Regarding Evaluation Conducted at the 2024 NECAFS Annual Conference and Meeting, Portland, ME.

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Elizabeth J. Newbold – UVM Extension, NECAFS Assistant Director, Project Director

Christopher W. Callahan – UVM Extension, NECAFS Director, Co-Director

Elizabeth A. Bihn – Cornell University, Co-Director

Amanda J. Kinchla – University of Massachusetts, Co-Director

Luke F. LaBorde – Pennsylvania State University, Co-Director

Annie Fitzgerald – UVM Extension, NECAFS Research Specialist

Sean Fogarty – UVM Extension, NECAFS Research Specialist

Anna Loewald – UVM Extension, NECAFS Research Specialist

## Summary

Attendees at the NECAFS Annual Conference and Meeting overwhelmingly reported that they learned something new (99%), 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 *“learn how other states are addressing the same issues we are having as well as other issues not yet considered.”* Notably, attendees described that they learned through discussion of examples that operationalize the rule. Further, many described they learned about the challenges surrounding research and translating that research to practice based outputs. Finally, attendees valued the detailed and in-depth review of regional observational data, citing the specificity and connectiveness between inspections and on-farm readiness review findings to be especially meaningful.

Attendees (96%) 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 8<sup>th</sup> 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. 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 *“collaboration brings a stronger impact.”* When asked to describe key challenges in the region, attendees reported a need for topic based tailored and supplemental material as their leading concern. The leading topics listed include water, record keeping, and employee training. Attendees described a need to find technological solutions as well as approaches that address 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, 99% 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 they *“learn from those who are seeing challenges out in the field”* and that the Annual Meeting also provides important *“professional development, collaboration, and opportunity to become aware of what other work is being done in region.”*

When asked about specific NECAFS activities, (where 5 = excellent), 51% rated regional communication as a 5 and 45% as a 4. Attendees rated building regional capacity, competence, and collaboration as a 5 (57%) or a 4 (39%). And attendees rated developing and delivering educational programs as a 5 (58%) or a 4 (32%). All three areas are consistent with 2023 ratings. Notes of suggestions for the future from attendees included continuing to connect research results to practice implementation, 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 8<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference and Meeting in Portland, ME on January 22 – 23, 2024. January 22<sup>nd</sup> featured a plenary session that described in detail NECAFS framework, hosted concurrent sessions with a Northeast Regulator and Program Staff meeting and a Food Safety Educator (produce safety and preventive controls) meeting. The Food Safety Educator meeting highlighted an apple research panel that introduced the complexity of translating researcher into practice based educational material using cleaning and sanitizing apple picking bag as an illustrative case study. That group then learned about three different risk-based decision tools in late-stage development, piloted the use of those tools, and provided user feedback on their usability and applicability. Following the formal program, participants joined a poster session and visited with presenters. January 23<sup>rd</sup> 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. The produce safety workgroup discussion centered around the complexity of defining research questions, the multiple organizations that contribute to produce safety research, and how to inform research with on-farm data.

NECAFS distributed a paper evaluation tool at the conclusion of the meeting and asked attendees to complete it. Approximately 150 people attended the event and 79 (53%) completed and returned evaluations. On the evaluation, attendees reported on both their perceptions of (1) the 2024 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?" 79 (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:

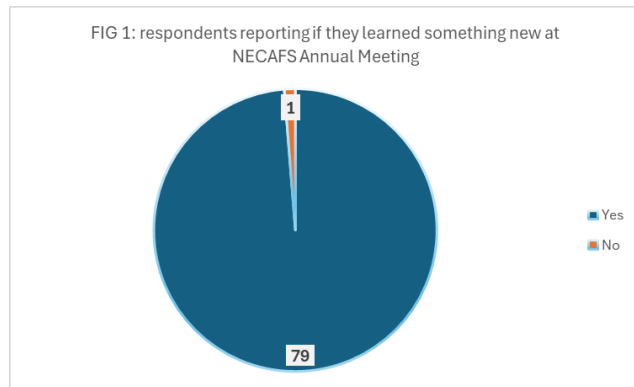
- Increased knowledge about partner efforts (n=25),
- Others' perspectives or experiences (n=14),
- Observational data (n=14), and
- Continuing education (n=14).

Less common themes also emerged, including:

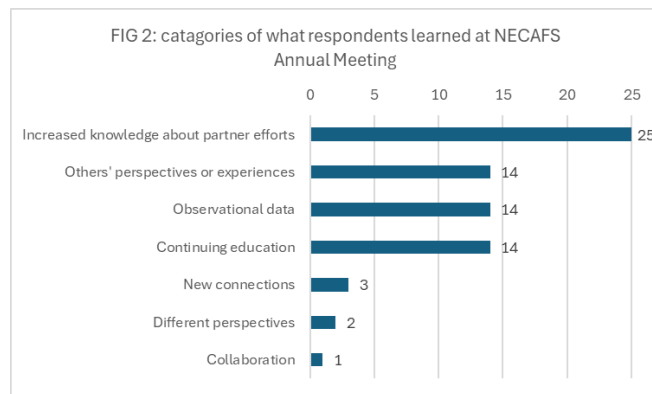
- New connections (n=3),
- Different perspectives (n=2), and
- Collaboration (n=1).

The agenda this year focused more heavily on continuing education and professional development with sessions dedicated to piloting risk-based decisions making educational tools and sharing various research-education communication gap perspectives.

The goal of the professional development and continuing education session were 3-pronged: 1.) increase participants science-based knowledge by conveying summarized findings that informed the development of the risk-based educational tools, 2.) expose participants to new approaches of interactive tailored educational materials, and 3.) improve retention of content through interactive learning. Therefore, it is not surprising that respondents overwhelmingly reporting that their knowledge about partner efforts was increased at the Annual Meeting. Many respondents expressed that they learned about “*new research on picking bag sanitation,*” “*risk decision tools,*” and “*FDA’s future plans for research.*”



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. Additionally, respondents explained that after hearing about similar issues they also heard that the decided approaches to address the issue are consistent. Learning this brings “*relief*” to attendees and affirms their own decision-making. On the other hand, some attendees expressed value in hearing about other’s approach and that someone else “*handles situations slightly differently and it’s great to listen to what issues are situations and how they have handled the situation.*”



Finally, the summary of observational data was presented differently this year and focused on sharing inspection aggregate data and On-Farm Readiness Review results. Historically, this data was shared with the goal of showing trends among areas of non-compliance and misunderstanding. This year, observational data centered less on trends and more on specific instances of non-compliance and varying approaches to inspections across the region. This more detailed analysis was well received with respondents stating that it was “*fascinating [to hear] direct data from both regulator and grower perspectives*” and that it was “*valuable to hear what the Northeast feels and sees about inspectional data and areas for improvement.*”

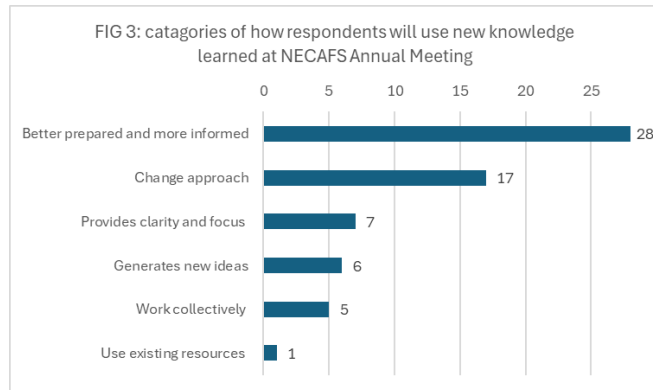
### How will new knowledge change your approach to FSMA?

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 (n=28), and
- Change approach (n=17).

Many comments cited that what they learned will “improve” their educational efforts. Respondents described that these improvements would occur because the “baseline knowledge is so helpful” and the “tools will make training more effective” and that the “knowledge and examples...will make me better at what I do.”

When changing their approach, attendees described the intent to adopt something learned into their approach of doing something. Attendees stated that they will “implement some of the engagement methods into produce regulator meetings” and “incorporate some of the extension models in our own non-profit models” and “input strategies from others in a way that will help us.”



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

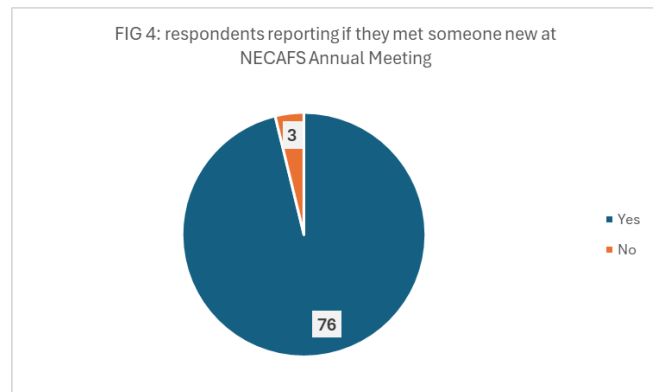
- Provides clarity and focus (n=7),
- Generates new ideas (n=6),
- Work collectively (n=5), and
- Use existing resources (n=1).

Respondents described that the information presented during the sessions at the Annual Meeting allowed them to “focus on issues to be targeted” and to “shape priorities” with a sprout policy and a marketing program listed as examples.

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

When asked “Did you meet someone new?” 76 (96%) 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:

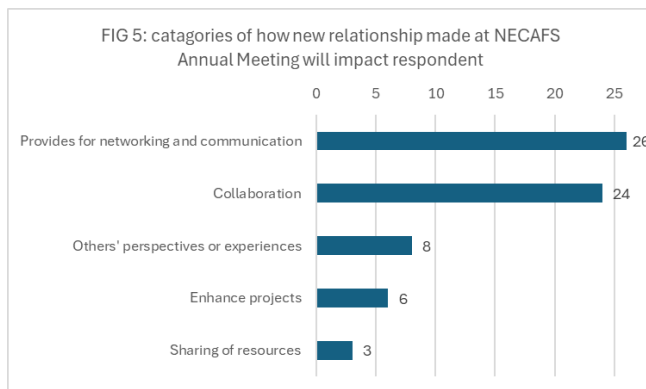
- Provides for networking and communication (n=26), and
- Collaboration (n=24).



Respondents cited both 1.) connection and 2.) communication from these new relationship(s), describing that they have broadened the network of “contacts to ask questions and refer to when clients have challenges and questions” that it allows for “open communication to problem-solve especially when there are shared issues” and that they now “definitely intend to contact new people to pick their brains.”

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

- Others’ perspectives or experiences (n=8),
- Enhances projects (n=6), and
- Sharing of resources (n=3).

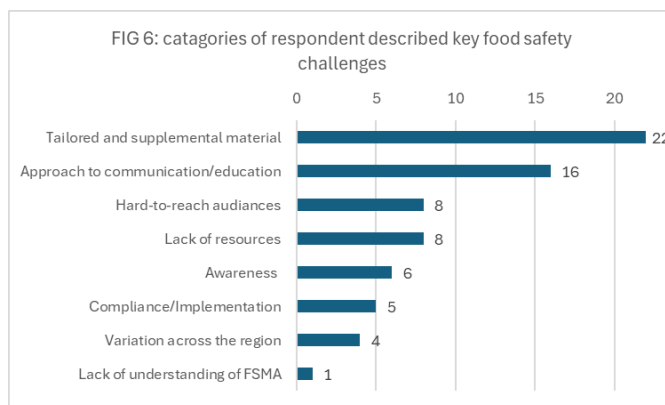


When describing others’ perspectives or experiences, attendees included that “different perspectives are useful to keeping an open mind,” “it made me more aware of the challenges educators face,” “will help me analyze the importance of new perspectives, new challenges of food safety research” and “always get more information from the regulatory side.”

### 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 and supplemental material (n=22), and
- Approach to communication/education (n=16).



Attendees generally listed subject matter topics to this question, which were all sorted into the tailored and supplemental material category. Topics most listed included water (testing, ag water, wash water, postharvest water management), recordkeeping, and working training as the top areas. Several respondents included specific need for efficiency measures through technology and tailored tools.

When describing approach to communication and education, respondents explained 1.) communication between researchers and extension, 2.) bringing science-based quality information to farms, and 3.) adjusting messaging to highlight the importance of food safety (i.e., the “why” behind the work).

Subthemes also emerged, including:

- Hard-to-reach audiences (n=8)

- Lack of resources (n=8),
- Awareness (n=6),
- Compliance/implementation (n=5)
- Variation across the region (n=4), and
- Lack of understanding of FSMA (n=1).

Hard-to-reach audience continues to focus on building farm inventories, reaching small and very small processors, and getting farmers to attend trainings. Lack of resources highlights the lack of time and money for practice implementation among the region’s producers and processors.

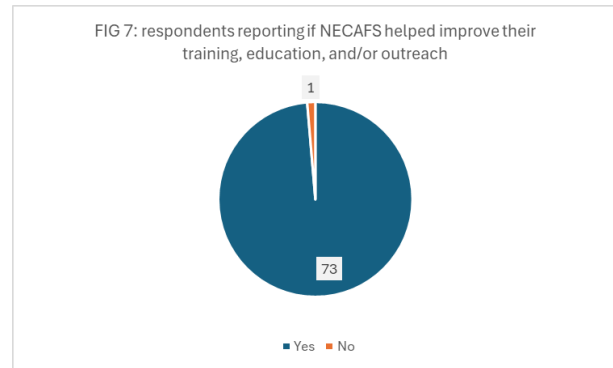
## Impact Results of NECAFS Ongoing Efforts

When asked “Has NECAFS helped you improve your food safety training, education and/or outreach?” 73 (99%) respondents answered “Yes” (Figure 7). Answers to the follow-up evaluation question “If so, how?” resulted in one dominate leading theme:

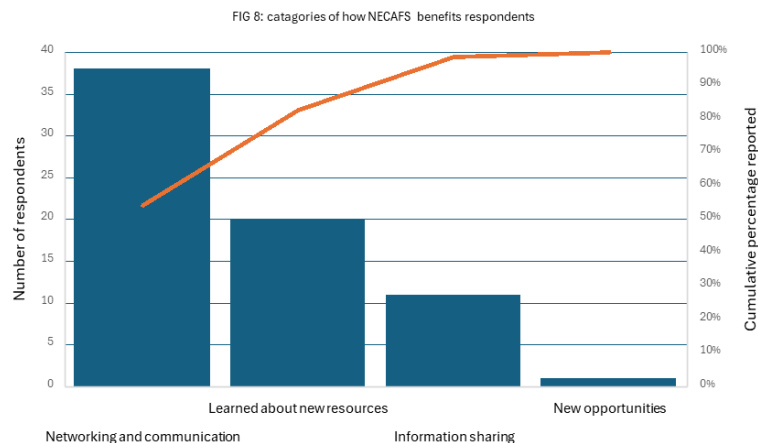
- Networking and communication (n=38).

Several subthemes emerged, including:

- Learned about new resources (n=20),
- Information sharing (n=11), and
- New opportunities (n=1).



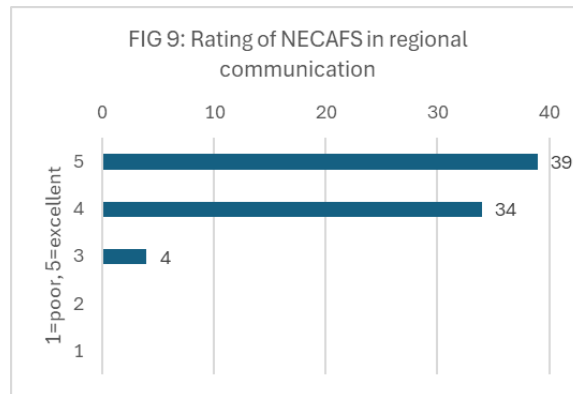
Networking and communication have long been the leading benefit NECAFS provides to its stakeholders with this year more than 50% of respondents listing it as NECAFS top benefit. One attendee explained that networking “gives me another perspective on challenges” and another stated that “coming together with my colleagues is very important to stay up to date, expand relationships, and receive answers to key questions in a group environment.” 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 addition to networking, comments also explained that they learned about new resources, with many specific references to supplemental material and that attendees plan to “pull resources to compile then and make the available to farmers who will never take the time to do that.”

### Regional Communication

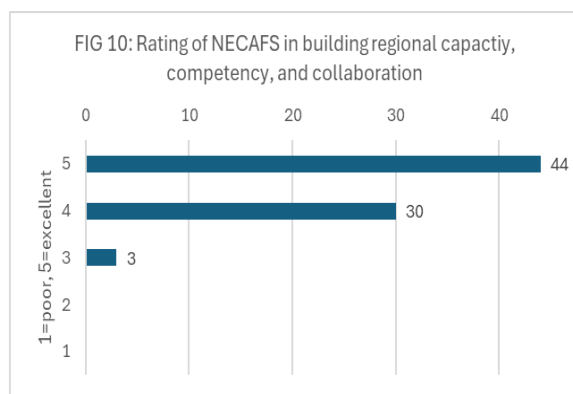
Attendees were asked how they rate NECAFS around regional communication about food safety topics. NECAFS newsletters and the website were provided as examples of this work. **Figure 9** shows that on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is poor and 5 is excellent, respondents (n=39, 51%) rated NECAFS regional communication as excellent with a ranking of 5. At 45% (n=34) respondents rated NECAFS regional communication as a 4. Finally, 4% (n=3) 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 share more information about ongoing research and research results to help keep educators and regulators up to date. Additionally, attendees expressed a need for continuing to “connect research and practice.”

### 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 57% (n=44) choosing rating 5, 39% (n=30) choosing rating 4, and 4% (n=3) choosing rating 3 in this area.

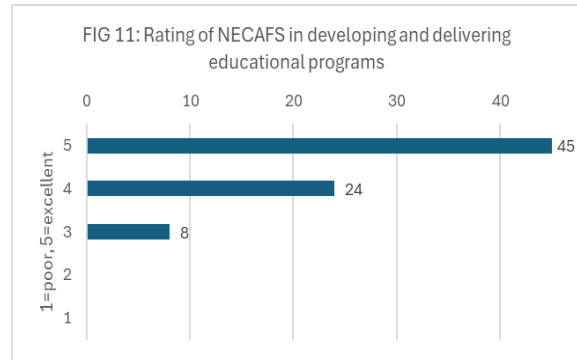


Respondents are interested in integrating more preventive controls regulators into the conversation. Others listed a need for a directory to more easily find subject matter experts, with another on a similar thread asking for more opportunities to hear perspectives directly from growers and processors.



## 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, 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 (58%, n=45) rated NECAFS regional communication as excellent with a ranking of 5. At 32% (n=24), respondents rated NECAFS regional communication as a 4. Finally, 10% (n=8) 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.



## 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. Lastly, the dedicated time and discussion of observation data 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 research findings and translating those findings into practice. There is also a desire to engage more preventive controls regulatory personal at the Annual Meeting, a trend that is slowly occurring. Lastly, attendees would like to see continued interactive learning opportunities at the Annual Meeting.