

Summary Evaluation Report

A Report from the Northeast Center to Advance Food Safety (NECAFS) Regarding Evaluation Conducted at the 2019 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 existing educational efforts. This new knowledge led attendees to feel more prepared and informed as trainers and/or researchers and because of this comfort in, answering questions and passing along knowledge, they will be more effective educators. In a post-event survey, conference attendees—regardless of their role in the produce safety community—ranked their most notable topic of new knowledge as “learning about existing educational efforts.” However, second- and third-most notable topics of new knowledge varied depending on the individual attendee’s role (educator or regulator). This alignment of learning by role matches the structure of the 2019 NECAFS Annual Conference and Meeting and the sessions attended by individual registrant. This is noteworthy since NECAFS developed programming based directly on need articulated by attendees ahead the meeting, resulting in learning that was specific and contextual. Additionally, all attendees stated that they met someone new at the Annual Conference and Meeting and reported that this new relationship will allow for enhanced networking and improved communication. The opportunity to network with partners across the region was often cited as one of greatest benefits of attending the Annual Conference and Meeting. Attendees reported that there are food safety challenges in our region with the leading concern being a need for communication, research, education, and qualified personnel. The challenge arises because there is, generally, a need to get the audiences engaged in the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) ready to be in compliance when inspections begin.

Respondents reported that NECAFS has helped them improve their food safety training, education and/or outreach (95%) through facilitation of regional networking and communication and the sharing of resources. Again, the specifics of how NECAFS has helped respondents aligned by role. Importantly, this confirms the approach used to establish NECAFS foundational framework; a model informed by initial stakeholder feedback and designed to facilitate tailored programming built to address the detailed needs of the network. When asked about specific NECAFS activities, (where 5 = excellent), 83% rated regional communication as 4 (37%) or 5 (46%), 97% rated building regional capacity, competence, and collaboration as 4 (43%) or 5 (54%), and 91% rated developing and delivering educational programs as 4 (36%) or 5 (55%). Respondents articulated a need for enhanced communication to those outside the NECAFS network to raise awareness of NECAFS and its programming. Responses to the question of how NECAFS has helped them varied depending on the respondent’s role (educator or regulator) with educators citing networking leading to collaborative work as first and regulators citing general networking and communication that informs decision making as their first answer.

Discussion and Results

The Northeast Center to Advance Food Safety (NECAFS) held the 3rd Annual Conference and Meeting in Albany, NY February 5 – 6, 2019. Tuesday, February 5th started with a welcome and plenary session where the highlights of NECAFS and a condensed presentation of state updates[[1]](#footnote-1) were presented and 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 6th featured updates from federal partners (FDA and USDA) with the remainder of the day focused on workgroup meetings dedicated to the topics of Buyers and Educational Approaches to Training Delivery.

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 120 people attended the event and 67 (55.8%) 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 12 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 39% and 38% respectively among those who responded to the evaluation.

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| **Role in Regional Food Safety** | **Number** (also selected education) | **Percent** |
| Education | 31 | 39% |
| Government/Regulation | 30 | 38% |
| Research | 12 (9) | 15% |
| Industry (Producer or Processor) | 4 (2) | 5% |
| Consultant | 2 (1) | 3% |
| **Total** | 79 | 100% |

**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 2019 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

*Development of 2019 Annual Conference and Meeting*

The style of the 2019 NECAFS Annual Conference and Meeting was different from the 2018 Annual Conference and Meeting where, in 2018, the first day focused on workgroup meetings dedicated to Produce Safety and Preventive Controls for Human Food in two parallel tracks. The second day in 2018 featured a joint conference session that included a keynote address from STOP Foodborne Illness, presentations from representatives of each Northeast state providing regulatory, research and extension updates, and three panel sessions that highlighted producers, processors and buyers.

The 2019 agendas were developed based on several forms of direct feedback from both 2018 Conference attendees and general NECAFS network members ahead of the meeting. NECAFS Conference planners were guided by the fact that 2018 survey respondents articulated that growers and processors do not understand how the FSMA applies on an individual basis and that there are not sufficient educational resources available to help with implementation efforts. Secondly, the NECAFS network was surveyed seven months ahead of the 2019 meeting and indicated that they wanted to hear updates from the FDA, USDA, and state partners, as well as other project efforts *in a condensed fashion*, allowing information to be conveyed but not taking up a lot of presentation time. Also, respondents overwhelmingly (74%) said that they wanted parallel sessions focused on individual topics (produce safety, preventive controls, coordination with buyers) rather than a general session that covered all topics.

Six sessions were held at the 2019 NECAFS Annual Conference and Meeting (**Table 2**.) Based on above described feedback, individual session agendas were developed in order to ensure that topics covered were most relevant to the attendees and addressed remaining food safety challenges articulated within the 2018 Annual Conference and Meeting evaluations.

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| **Session Title** | **Overall goal of meeting** |
| Preventive Controls Workgroup Meeting | Provide national updates related to Preventive Controls and communicate and coordinate NECAFS workgroup activities. |
| Produce Safety Workgroup Meeting | Provide updates related to produce safety and on-farm readiness review and share information among state partners to enhance regional programming. |
| Produce Safety Educators Workgroup Meeting | Learn about resources in development and discuss niche needs for this educator group. |
| Produce Safety Regulators Workgroup Meeting | Discuss and coordinate current state implementation activities. |
| Buyer Workgroup Meeting | Discuss buyer expectations and how growers can more easily navigate and meet the requirements. |
| Educational Approaches to Training Delivery | Provide examples and facilitate discussion on creative solutions and approaches to connect with your training delivery target audience. |

**Table 2. List of sessions, and their goals, held at 2019 Annual Conference and Meeting.**

Attendees could choose which sessions they wanted to attend. Selection of the produce safety and preventive controls workgroup meetings directly aligned with role type, unsurprisingly, since the regulatory audience at the Annual Conference and Meeting are those directly involved in state CAP[[2]](#footnote-2) grants for implementation of produce safety. However, the distribution of attendance in the buyer workgroup and educational approaches to delivery was nearly even, with regulatory attendees favoring the buyer meeting and educators favoring the educational approaches meeting (**Table 3.**).

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| **Session Title** | **Educator** | **Regulator** |
| Preventive Controls Workgroup Meeting | 20 | 1 |
| Produce Safety Workgroup Meeting | 30 | 35 |
| Produce Safety Educators Workgroup Meeting | 30 | - |
| Produce Safety Regulators Workgroup Meeting | - | 35 |
| Buyer Workgroup Meeting | 9 | 15 |
| Educational Approaches to Training Delivery | 20 | 17 |

**Table 3. Registration for Session by Educator and Regulator Roles.**

*Did you learn something new?*

When asked, “Did you learn something new?” 66 (97%) respondents answered “Yes.” Answers to the follow-up evaluation question “If so, what did you learn?” resulted in broad themes among attendees, most notably: greater understanding of educational efforts. Other oft-cited themes included:

* variation between states in implementation of FSMA, and
* individual needs of growers, buyers and processors.

Significantly less common themes also emerged, including:

* a better understanding of FSMA,
* different views from stakeholder partners,
* the differences between audits versus inspections,
* different avenues to receive financial support, and
* similar challenges shared with colleagues.

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 of training delivery technics to achieve greater attendance, engagement, and learning of growers and processors. Additionally, many respondents described that they learned about expertise across the region and individual projects, such as Food Safety Outreach projects during the poster session, educational efforts described in the general session presentations and details outlined in updates from federal partners.

Second, responses explained that there is a range in understanding the variation in states’ implementation of FSMA. Some responses indicate that a few attendees were learning for the first time that each state’s approach is unique, while other responses indicate previous knowledge of this uniqueness and the respondent’s new knowledge was of specifics regarding state’s implementation plans.

*‘Did you learn something new?’ looking at identified role*

These described themes illustrate a summation of all responses *without* taking into consideration the role (looking directly at education or regulation) of the individual respondent in the food safety community. However, when you sort the responses by role, it is important to see that the themes tend to align by an individual’s identified role in the produce safety community and are not distributed evenly throughout the group at large (**Table 4.**). The first-ranked theme remained the same while looking at responses based on role, but the second- and third-ranked themes shift and align by role. It is predominately those in the government/regulator role who learned about “state variation in the implementation of FSMA” at 36% and it is the educators who learned about “individual needs for growers, buyers and processors,” at 18%.

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| **2019 Themes: “What did you learn?”** | **Total Attendee (N)** | **Educator (N)** | **Regulator (N)** |
| Greater understanding of educational efforts | (30) 48% | (13) 46% | (12) 43% |
| State variation in implementation of FSMA | (14) 22% | (3) 11% | (10) 36% |
| Individual needs for growers, buyers and processors | (6) 10% | (5) 18% | (1) 4% |
| Different avenues to receive financial support | (4) 6% | (2) 7% | (2) 7% |
| Greater understanding of FSMA and the individual rules | (4) 6% | (2) 7% | (1) 4% |
| Different views from stakeholder partners | (2) 3% | (2) 7% | - |
| Share similar challenges with colleagues across the region | (2) 3% | (1) 4% | (1) 4% |
| Perception of audits versus inspection | (1) 2% | - | (1) 4% |
| ***Table 4. Respondent Themes to “What did you learn?” by Role in Produce Safety Community. 2019 NECAFS Annual Conference and Meeting.*** |  |  |  |
| **Key** | 1st ranking | 1st ranking |
|  | 2nd ranking | 2nd ranking |
|  |  | 3rd ranking | 3rd ranking |

When looking at the data from the 2018 NECAFS Annual Conference and Meeting summary evaluation responses, there is not the same alignment of themes by role. Instead, the responses are more evenly distributed across both the entire group and within the sub-grouping by role (**Table 5.**).

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| **2018 Themes: “What did you learn?”** | **Total Attendee (N)** | **Educator (N)** | **Regulator (N)** |
| Greater understanding of educational efforts (ex. OFRR, Add on and supplemental material development, NECAFS clearinghouse) | (14) 25% | (5) 26% | (2) 17% |
| Individual needs for growers, buyers and processors | (11) 19% | (1) 5% | (2) 17% |
| State variation in implementation of FSMA | (10) 18% | (5) 26% | (1) 8% |
| Greater understanding of FSMA and the individual PCHF and PSR rules | (8) 14% | (5) 26% | (2) 17% |
| Different views from stakeholder partners | (6) 11% | (2) 11% | (3) 25% |
| Perception of audits versus inspection | (4) 7% | - | (1) 8% |
| Different avenues to receive financial support | (3) 5% | - | (1) 8% |
| Share similar challenges with colleagues across the region | (1) 2% | (1) 5% | - |
| ***Table 5. Respondent Themes to “What did you learn?” by Role in Produce Safety Community. 2018 NECAFS Annual Conference and Meeting.*** |  |  |  |
| **Key** | 1st ranking | 1st ranking |
|  | 2nd ranking | 2nd ranking |

This shift in theme alignment by role from 2018 to 2019 is noteworthy since the style of the NECAFS Annual Conference and Meeting changed. In 2018, all attendees participated in the general session which was designed to cover all topics, resulting in responses articulating varied themes of learning. However, when attendees selected which session based on topic they wanted to attend, learning became specific by theme and role. Delivery of the NECAFS Annual Conference and Meeting was changed in response to the needs of the attendees, resulting in specific and contextual learning.

*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 one overwhelming common theme cited by the majority of attendees: new knowledge made respondents feel more prepared and informed as trainers and/or researchers. Notably, respondents reported that the information learned will be used to enhance their grower trainings. Having new knowledge of tips and tricks in training delivery, as well as knowing what add-on and supplemental materials exist and where to find them, gave the attendees the ability to supplement and improve educational programs. One attendee described their appreciation for learning about add-on and supplemental material created by regional colleagues, explaining that it “enables [them] to carry out various [teaching] ideas and [educational] work…to improve [their] approach to FSMA and food safety.” Less common themes that also emerged in response to this question included:

* reports that respondents will look for existing resources to use in education and outreach,
* respondents gained clarity around FSMA,
* allowing them to shape meaningful engagement with partners and stakeholders; and
* respondents were more likely to try a new approach in education or evaluation.

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

When asked “Did you meet someone new?” 68 (100%) 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:

* change will occur through enhanced networking and
* improved communication and through opportunities created for collaboration.

Respondents described either broadly or specifically how these new relationship(s) will provide for enhanced networking, communication and collaboration. For example, some respondents explained planned intentions to collaborate to reach new audiences with training, explore more direct relationship with federal partners, and/or send questions to colleagues. Respondents cited that these new relationship(s) “are very important for successful and uniform program development,” and a “valuable resource moving forward with PSR implementation,” and that bringing together the entire produce safety community provides for “continued…collaboration to identify gaps in federal support and reduce redundancy across programs” and “increases interaction with and knowledge [of]” all partners working in food safety.

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

* sharing of resources,
* enhancement of current projects, and
* coordination that leads to enhanced project outputs.

*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 three equally ranking themes including:

* need for communication, research, education and qualified personnel,
* implementation of and compliance with FSMA, and
* engagement of hard to reach audiences.

Subthemes also emerged, including:

* lack of funding,
* audits and inspections, and
* inconsistency of implementation across the region. (Although only two respondents cited this challenge).

Respondents were particularly concerned with challenges surrounding the readiness of the stakeholders engaged in FSMA compliance. Specifically, attendees expressed difficulty in communication to the buying community and clarifying/rectifying compliance requirements with buyer expectations. Also, respondents explained that there are not enough educators who understand the regulation to support the number of farms that need to make changes or upgrades to meet FSMA requirements. Finally, attendees reported that messaging from educators and regulators to growers and processors is not always consistent (leading to confusion, reduced awareness and loss of trust).

Respondents reported challenges around implementation and compliance of FSMA for various reasons. Producers and processors need support in taking the “critical steps for compliance.” On-farm implementation needs are wide-ranging with respondents citing:

* pre- and post-harvest sanitation,
* inadequate worker training on health and hygiene,
* infrastructure,
* recognition of the differences between cleaning and sanitizing,
* pack house upgrades, and
* recordkeeping all as areas of challenge in the region.

Food safety implementation takes dedicated knowledge, time and funding. Resources need to be made available to all members of the food safety community, in order to address these challenges.

Respondents were particularly concerned with challenges surrounding engaging hard-to-reach audiences. Respondents reported that they struggle with reaching industry stakeholders who are impacted by FSMA, but who think that it does not apply to them or are unaware of it. Several respondents articulated the need to engage growers to inform and build state farm inventories in order to establish inspectional programs.

The challenges identified by the 2019 respondents changed since the 2018 NECAFS Annual Conference and Meeting, with a much greater concern over implementation and compliance with FSMA in 2019. Interestingly, 2018 attendees reported confusion around audits and inspections and inconsistency of implementation across the region as top challenges; in 2019, those themes were identified by fewer than five respondents.

NECAFS Ongoing Resources Impact Results

Some attendees who needed financial support to attend the 2019 Annual Conference and Meeting were offered travel reimbursements to make their attendance possible. These attendees were asked “how important was that support?” Of the 39 attendees who requested financial support, 20 (51%) indicated that the support was critical to making their attendance possible while the remaining reported that the support was helpful but that they would have attended the Annual Conference and Meeting without it.

When asked “Has NECAFS helped you improve your food safety training, education and/or outreach?” 63 (95%) 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 networking “with others that have experience with training [and] bringing this information back…[is] invaluable.” Respondents reported that funding from NECAFS to support trainer development has led to “improved…food safety training program[s] by providing financial support to get more trainers through train-the-trainer classes.”

These described themes illustrate a summation of all responses *without* taking into consideration the role (looking directly at education or government/regulatory) of the individual respondent in the food safety community. However, when you sort the responses by role, it is important to see that educators and regulators benefit from NECAFS differently. While NECAFS helps educators improve food safety outreach, training, and education through networking leading to collaborative work, it helps regulators through general networking and communication leading to information sharing that informs decision making. This articulation is not surprising to see since educators’ primary focus is outreach and education of FSMA across the region and while regulators focus primarily on enforcement in regards to their state-specific produce safety program. NECAFS has engaged actively with both educators and regulators since the beginning of the Center’s programming and this engagement has intentionally served to facilitate communication, coordination and collaboration between and among these two groups. The framework built to establish NECAFS resulted from preliminary evaluation and inferred need among initial stakeholder groups. The results summarized in **Table 6** confirm this early and anecdotal observation of need.

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| **Themes: “How has NECAFS helped you improve your food safety outreach, training and education?”** | **Total Attendee** | **Educator Role** | **Gov/Reg Role** |
| Sharing of resources | (15) 27% | (7) 26% | (5) 22% |
| Networking that led to training delivery, grant proposals, and other collaborative work | (14) 25% | (10) 37% | (4) 17% |
| Networking and communication with other stakeholders | (12) 21% | (5) 29% | (6) 26% |
| Information sharing that provided insight and led to more new and informed decision making | (12) 21% | (4) 15% | (6) 26% |
| Funding to become trainers and to deliver trainings | (2) 4% | (1) 4% | (1) 4% |
| Made training possible that provided networking opportunity with stakeholder | (1) 2% | - | (1) 4% |
| ***Table 5. Respondent themes to “How has NECAFS helped you improve your food safety outreach, training and education?” by role in produce safety community.*** |  |  |  |
| **Key** | 1st ranking | 1st ranking |
|  | 2nd ranking | 2nd ranking |
|  |  | 3rd ranking | 3rd ranking |

*Regional Communication*

Attendees were asked how they would rate NECAFS in the area of regional communication about food safety topics. NECAFS enewsletters 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, the majority of respondents (n=29, 46%) rated NECAFS regional communication as excellent with a ranking of 5. At 37% (n=23), respondents rated NECAFS regional communication as a 4. Finally, 17% (n=11) of respondents rated this activity as a 3.

Communication ranked highly among attendees, although several respondents noted in the additional comments section of the survey that communication could be stronger, specifically in outreach to those unaware of NECAFS and the resources it provides. One attendee articulated that “although the communication is excellent from the perspective of someone who knows and appreciates NECAFS, outreach to new folks should be a priority.”

*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 54% (n=34) choosing rating 5 and 43% (n=27) choosing rating 4. Finally, 3% (n=2), respondents rated NECAFS in this area as a 3.

*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, special projects grants, the annual meeting, and the clearinghouse site. **Figure 3** shows that on a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 is poor and 5 is excellent, the majority of respondents (55%, n=35) rated NECAFS regional communication as excellent with a ranking of 5. At 36% (n=23), respondents rated NECAFS regional communication as a 4. Finally, 9% (n=6) of respondents rated this capacity as a 3.

1. Connecticut, Delaware, Maine, Massachusetts, Maryland, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont, and West Virginia [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. State Produce Implementation Cooperative Agreement Program, funding to support states in planning, establishing, and/or enhancing state produce safety programs. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)