

# NCR FSMA State Lead Interviews

A REPORT ON NETWORK MATURATION AFTER THREE YEARS

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## Executive Summary

The North Central Region Center for FSMA Training, Extension, and Technical Assistance (NCR FSMA) formed in March 2016 with three years of funding from the US Food and Drug Administration. The purpose of the NCR FSMA is to equip food safety educators from 12 Midwest states (Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin), to prepare produce growers, handlers, and processors for compliance with the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA). The NCR FSMA is hosted by Iowa State University, which works with one state lead from each state who acts as a liaison between the center and other food safety professionals in their state.

At the end of each year, the NCR FSMA evaluator has conducted interviews with state leads to measure impacts of the center, as well as learn how the center can improve its work. In year 3, this evaluator interviewed 10 of 12 state leads (an 83 percent response rate).

The year 3 interviews showed that the center has been responsive to state leads' past suggestions. As a result, the network has grown to be a true support to its members. Here are highlights of year 3 interviews:

The peer network of NCR FSMA partners is by far the greatest benefit of the center. Through the network, members are more aware of resources, are able to discuss ideas and solve problems with others doing similar work, and feel supported. The network has grown greatly in trust and familiarity since year 1, when interviewees expressed they had met (through electronic communication), but did not truly know one another.

NCR FSMA partners have requested opportunities to meet face to face since year 1. While the NCR FSMA had no budget to host an annual conference, partners reported for the first time in year 3 creating their own opportunities for face-to-face collaboration. (The NCR FSMA will host its first annual conference in 2019, with new center funding from the USDA.)

Satisfaction with NCR FSMA communications has improved greatly since year 1. In year 3, interviewees expressed satisfaction with communications, especially the newsletter. In Year 1 their primary complaints were difficulty accessing or navigating Box (a file sharing system used by the NCR FSMA) and technical difficulties during calls.

Interviewees shared suggestions of how to improve the center. The most common suggestions were:

Continue to offer opportunities for state leads to work together in small groups (shared by three interviewees).

Create time for all attendees on a call to share updates (two interviewees).

Replace some listening sessions with webinars on predetermined topics so participants can join based on their interest in the topic, but also include time for open discussion (two interviewees).

Unique suggestions (shared by one interviewee each) for improving the center included: Nurture the state leads between phone calls by checking in to see if they need help with common challenges; provide more original content in NCR FSMA communications; periodically remind partners of the "big picture" for the center; encourage the FDA to be less equivocal in their responses; and provide opportunities for state regulators to communicate with educators.

## Introduction

The North Central Region Center for FSMA Training, Extension, and Technical Assistance (NCR FSMA) formed in March 2016, when it received three years of funding from the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA). The center is housed at Iowa State University. The purpose of the center is to organize food safety educators from 12 Midwest states (Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, and Wisconsin), so they can prepare produce growers, handlers, and processors for compliance with the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA). The NCR FSMA is structured with a “state lead” in each state, who acts as a liaison between the NCR FSMA and food safety educators in their state. In addition, two “extension partners” from each state fill a role of connecting the NCR FSMA to important grower and processor groups in each state.

During these three years, the NCR FSMA focused on conducting a needs assessment with fruit and vegetable growers and processors to better understand how to help them prepare to comply with FSMA. After the needs assessment, the NCR FSMA organized subgroups to create additional educational materials and resources focused on specific produce safety topics, internally called “add-ons.” These resources were created using the educational formats which were identified as most preferred during the needs assessment.

Starting in September 2018, the NCR FSMA received an additional three years of funding, this time from the US Department of Agriculture, to continue its work.

The NCR FSMA evaluator has conducted annual interviews with state leads at the end of each calendar year since 2016 to determine impacts of the center and learn how the center can improve its work. This report summarizes the results of the year 3 (2018) interviews.

## Methods

Twelve NCR FSMA state leads were invited to participate in interviews in November 2018. Ten accepted the request, for an 83 percent response rate.

Arlene Enderton, the NCR FSMA evaluator, interviewed respondents over the phone using a common interview template and a semi-structured interview style. She coded the data for themes using NVivo 12™ software.

## Results

The following themes emerged from the qualitative data analysis:

### **The peer network is by far the most valued benefit of the NCR FSMA.**

All 10 interviewees mentioned at some point in the interview the value of being part of the network of peers working in on-farm food safety, which arose through the formation of the NCR FSMA. This theme has risen to the top during interviews in all three years. In year 1, interviewees agreed they had met new people through the NCR FSMA, but did not know each other deeply. They shared suggestions for deepening relationships. In year 2, relationships did deepen, because NCR FSMA partners had the opportunity to get to know one another better through subgroup work to create educational “add-on” materials. (Creating subgroups or committees was one of the suggestions shared in year 1 and implemented in year 2.)

In year 3, interviewees described reaping the benefits of being a part of the NCR FSMA team. As one interviewee said, “I have a new coworker in every state—at least one person. There is a lot to gain from the conversations [we have], but as we move forward having that network is the most important thing I’ll walk away with.” They benefit from the network in several ways:

First, interactions between NCR FSMA partners inform state leads of resources that are available to them, such as publications, grant opportunities, and conferences.

Second, state leads are able to tap into the group to learn from one another’s experiences and expertise and have conversations on how to solve common problems.

Third, for some state leads this network is their only support in their on-farm food safety role. Two mentioned that they are the only person working in this arena in their state, and the NCR FSMA provides them with a working group they wouldn’t otherwise have. For example, one said, “I don’t feel like I’m flying blind. I’m the only one in my state; it’s me and the Department of Agriculture. If I didn’t have the NCR FSMA and the [Produce Safety Alliance] to turn to I’d be a mess.”

### NCR FSMA partners are shifting from remote to live interactions.

When the NCR FSMA started, all interactions between partners were remote, except for chance meetings at train-the-trainer events or conferences that partners were already planning to attend. For the first time our annual interviews in year 3 showed that partners are intentionally traveling to collaborate with one another. Six state leads said they have traveled to other states to help NCR FSMA partners offer classes or conferences, or have received help from someone who traveled from another state. They shared these five examples:

Joe Hannan (Iowa State University) traveled to the Indiana Horticulture Congress to offer a farm food safety plan writing workshop and GAPs training.

Trainers from Wisconsin and Iowa have traveled to Minnesota to teach Produce Safety Alliance Grower Trainings.

Joe Hannan (ISU), Phil Tocco (Michigan State University) and Don Stoekel (Produce Safety Alliance) partnered to host an event in Detroit called News and Brews, which several partners traveled to attend.

Angela Shaw (ISU) traveled to South Dakota to attend their local foods conference.

Sarah Browning (University of Nebraska), Joe Hannan (ISU), Londa Nwadike (Kansas State University and University of Missouri), and Connie Fisk (Produce Safety Alliance) developed a food safety course to offer at the Great Plains Growers Conference.

### State leads would like regular opportunities to meet face to face.

Related to this, three interviewees suggested the NCR FSMA provide more face-to-face opportunities for networking and learning among NCR FSMA partners, which is included in the center’s plans under new funding through the USDA. As an example of the value of face-to-face meetings, two interviewees explained that they found great value in traveling for the News and Brews event in Detroit, believing one assimilates more when meeting face to face. One said, “I think it was more helpful to me that it was a

different format and a full day set aside to go in depth and focus on presentations and topics that we don't do on phone conferences.”

Another interviewee saw face-to-face gatherings as a way to build relationships, especially between groups that might not otherwise choose to communicate, such as extension staff and state regulators.

### The NCR FSMA has also helped state leads become and stay informed about FSMA.

Four interviewees said that being a part of the NCR FSMA has helped them to learn about FSMA and keep their knowledge current. As a result, they are better able and feel more confident to serve their clients.

### Interviewees are mostly satisfied with NCR FSMA communications.

One goal of the new NCR FSMA center, funded by the USDA, is to gather feedback on NCR FSMA communications and to revamp some communications platforms, such as the website and newsletter. While the NCR FSMA will conduct a formal survey to gather feedback on communications starting in January 2019, interviewees were also asked how satisfied they are with NCR FSMA communications and how they can be improved as a way to gather qualitative information on the subject.

Most interviewees expressed they were satisfied with the level and style of communications, which is a big improvement since the start of the center, when year 1 interviews revealed that state leads were confused by Box, the file sharing system; poor-quality calls was another common complaint.

Although interviewees expressed satisfaction with communications, most also had suggestions for improvement.

NCR FSMA partners for whom FSMA education is a small part of their work prefer succinct communications, whereas those who work full-time on FSMA are more likely to prefer to hear from everyone on the call.

Interviewees tended to fall into one of two groups: those for whom FSMA education is a small part of their job and others for whom FSMA education is one of their primary responsibilities. These two groups tended to have different desires for communication.

Three interviewees described their need for succinct communications, because the time they can dedicate to this project is limited. These interviewees prefer the required partner calls be as short as possible, sharing only the most pertinent information, because on-farm food safety is just one of many responsibilities. One said, “I do [our state’s produce safety education], plus teach, plus other Extension things. Sometimes the calls could be 10 minutes and I could get all the info I need and it would be great.” Similarly, another said, “This is added onto our already full plate. [Make communications] concise, succinct and just what we need to know.”

Several state leads also mentioned that they have colleagues or other staff whose job is solely focused on on-farm food safety, which allows them to give more time to meetings and reviewing food safety resources. They believed that keeping communications succinct might be less important for these people. One interviewee, for whom FSMA is a large part of his/her paid work, was willing to have longer meetings in order to hear from everyone: “It would be great to hear from everybody and I don’t. That is a helpful part of the calls. I want to hear from everyone so I don’t have to reach out individually.”

### Interviewees had a lot of good things to say about the newsletter.

Six interviewees mentioned the NCR FSMA newsletter and all of them like it, because it is succinct. Interviewees like that the newsletter allows them to find the information they need, as opposed to a phone call that may include some information that is not of interest to them. They had only a few suggestions to improve the newsletters: one would prefer the content be in an email, rather than an attachment, using a program such as MailChimp or ConstantContact. Another suggested it have more original content in it.

### The monthly listening sessions and bimonthly partner meetings received mixed reviews.

Six interviewees discussed the pros and cons of the NCR FSMA calls, which include an optional monthly listening session and a required bimonthly partner meeting.

Some liked the bimonthly partner calls; others did not. Those who do not like the calls were concerned that the bimonthly partner calls overlap with information already being shared through other avenues—again wanting to keep the calls short and succinct. Another interviewee didn't like the partner calls for the opposite reason. This person perceived that most participants want the call to be brief, and felt like questions were not welcome during these calls, because the questions would delay the end of the call.

The same interviewees who indicated they need communications to be succinct tended not to participate in the optional listening sessions, because they did not know if they'd learn anything helpful. One said, "Listening sessions sometimes I miss, but when I'm there it's not always something I need." On the other hand, one interviewee particularly liked the listening sessions, because it gives opportunity to interact and ask questions. This person described the listening sessions in this way: "Having the regular phone calls to interact with both NCR staff and PSA and FDA, knowing Teresa Klamann and Don Stoekel will be on the call is really nice. I think the quick call-ins are more useful than the required ones[...] Having calls where I can ask questions is super helpful. Knowing I have a place to ask nitty gritty questions is helpful."

Hence, the format of the listening session is great for those who want an open time for discussion and questions and have time to give to that, but hard for those who will only join if they know topics of interest to them will be discussed. One suggestion, shared by two interviewees, to resolve this difficulty is to offer webinars on predetermined topics so participants can join based on their level of interest in the topic, but also include time for questions and open discussion after the webinar for those who want to stay on the call.

### Only two interviewees mentioned the website; both agreed it is visually unappealing and difficult to navigate.

Most interviewees did not even mention the NCR FSMA website, which may indicate they don't use this resource very often. The two interviewees who did mention it said they found it visually unappealing, too wordy, and hard to navigate. One interviewee thought the website appeared to be branded with Iowa State University colors, because it primarily uses the color red, which this person thought was inappropriate for a collaboration of 12 states.

## Most state leads are using at least one “add-on” educational material created by NCR FSMA partners.

All but two state leads said they have shared at least one “add-on” educational material created by NCR FSMA partners with growers or other food safety professionals. Three interviewees specifically said they are distributing the record-keeping envelope to qualified exempt growers, finding this to be a very relevant resource.

Of the two interviewees who have not used the add-ons, one said he/she expects to use them soon when this person’s state offers PSA Grower Trainings. The other person said the resources he/she has looked at are too “general and wordy” and “not what I’m looking for.”

## Interviewees shared a variety of suggestions to enhance the collaborative work of the NCR FSMA.

Three suggested the NCR FSMA continue to offer opportunities for partners to work together in small groups.

Starting in year 2, NCR FSMA partners worked together in subgroups to create educational “add-on” materials; some of those groups continued their work into year 3. Three interviewees said they were able to get to know others better in the small group setting than through large group calls. They also agreed that these groups were able to accomplish more. One interviewee said, “The combination of the whole team [meeting] over Zoom and sub-teams working on projects was a good way to do it. Projects go smoother in smaller groups, so I’d suggest continuing sub-teams or breaking projects into pieces.”

## Create space for everyone to share about their work during Zoom meetings.

Two interviewees said they would like to hear from everyone during partner meetings and listening sessions to help everyone better understand each others’ work. One suggested this would require the facilitator to call on people who haven’t shared, whereas another suggested asking each participant to introduce him/herself and share a brief update or briefly answer a common question.

## Five interviewees shared unique suggestions.

The following suggestions were shared by one interviewee each. Although these suggestions do not have consensus behind them, they may be important to consider, because they may be novel ideas that others would support but have not thought of previously.

Nurture the state leads between phone calls by checking in to see if they need any help with common challenges, such as conducting On-Farm Readiness Reviews or offering Produce Safety Alliance Grower Trainings.

Provide more original content in NCR FSMA communications.

Periodically remind partners of the “big picture” for the center, such as “where we started, where we are, where we are going.” Perhaps create a visual to illustrate the big picture.

While the center may not be able to bring about this change, one interviewee suggested encouraging the FDA to be less equivocal in their responses.

Provide opportunities for state regulators to communicate with educators. “It might be hard at first, but putting them in the same room might help. Create a place where they can start to build trust.”

## Conclusions and recommendations.

The third set of annual interview with NCR FSMA state leads has shown much growth since year 1. The following positive changes were themes of the interviews:

In year 1, interviewees said they had met new people through the NCR FSMA, but needed opportunities to get to know one another better. By year 3, interviewees described members of the network as their “coworkers,” “colleagues,” “partners,” and “working group”—all of which are terms describing actual relationships. A few interviewees expressed that they could not do their work without the NCR FSMA peer network, or that they would feel alone without it.

Interviewees requested opportunities to meet one another face to face in year 1, so they could get to know one another better. The North Central Region never hosted an annual conference during its first three years, because a face-to-face gathering was not included in the NCR FSMA budget. However during year 3, NCR FSMA partners worked together to plan and host News and Brews in Detroit, during which partners shared resources for improving PSA Grower Trainings. During year 3 interviews, several state leads said for the first time that they had traveled to other states to collaborate with other NCR FSMA partners or had hosted a partner from another state. This demonstrates that even without an annual conference, partners have grown in relationship to the point of developing their own opportunities for face-to-face collaboration.

Interviewees’ top complaints in year 1 were difficulty accessing or navigating Box, the NCR FSMA’s file sharing system, and technical problems during NCR FSMA online calls, both of which were important communication avenues used by the NCR FSMA at the time. By year 3, nearly all interviewees expressed satisfaction with NCR FSMA communications, especially the newsletter.

Overall, these results show the NCR FSMA has been responsive to suggestions from its members and has grown to be a true collaboration of food safety professionals working together to deliver FSMA education and services.