

The North Central Region Center for FSMA Training,  
Extension, and Technical Assistance

# NCR FSMA 2024 Evaluation Report

Center impact and recommendations for improvement

March 2025

## Executive Summary

The North Central Region Center for FSMA Training, Extension, and Technical Assistance (NCR FSMA) formed in 2016 with funding from the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA). The purpose of the center is to equip produce safety educators, professionals, and regulators from 12 midwestern states to help small- and mid-scale produce farmers and processors understand and comply with the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA).

After three years with funding from the FDA (NCR FSMA 1.0), the NCR FSMA was funded since September 2018 by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) by three consecutive three-year grants. In 2024 NCR FSMA 3.0 concluded on August 31, and NCR FSMA 4.0 began on September 1.

The Center was evaluated in 2024 using five evaluation methods. The following are highlights of the evaluation results, organized by three questions:

### 1. What is going well with the NCR FSMA 3.0?

- As in all past evaluations, networking and collaboration are strong aspects of the NCR FSMA.
  - When asked what they intend to do differently in their work as a result of the annual meeting, six (of 15) respondents indicated they intend to continue networking or collaborating with other NCR FSMA partners, making this the most common theme.
  - All respondents to the annual conference survey agreed or strongly agreed they feel closer to other NCR FSMA partners because of attending the annual meeting.
  - For the fall professional development, 81.3% (13 of 16) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed they strengthened relationships with other professionals during the event and 75% (12 of 16) agreed or strongly agreed the relationships they had built during the event would improve their work.
- The NCR FSMA brings produce safety educators and regulators together. During NCR FSMA 3.0, 270 people participated in an NCR FSMA-supported event, meeting, or webinar. Of these, 143 (53 percent) were produce safety educators and 100 (37 percent) were regulators (which includes inspectors, CAP program managers, and farm inventory managers).
- The NCR FSMA has kept underserved audiences front of mind. Following the annual meeting, four (of 15) respondents indicated they intend to work more closely with underserved audiences.
- The NCR FSMA is equipping food safety professionals to work with growers and processors. 75 percent of respondents to the fall professional development survey indicated they learned information at the event that they can directly apply to their work.

**Commented [EJ1]:** Since the 3.0 center ended, should this be a past tense question?

## 2. What impacts has the NCR FSMA had?

- The NCR FSMA, in collaboration with CAP program managers, has improved the CAP program manager survey process to focus more on what has been documented and less on inspector perceptions or opinions.
- In 2024, NCR FSMA partners have become better equipped to communicate about the water rule and help growers assess pre-harvest water on their farms.
  - Following the annual meeting, two respondents indicated they would make a change related to agricultural water. One intended to make a change in how they present information about agricultural water and another intended to follow up on information they had learned at the conference regarding water.
  - When asked what the most important thing the respondents had learned during the professional development training, nearly all respondents (12 of 14 who answered the question) shared something related to the water rule.
- The NCR FSMA has supported the creation of resources that are being used. In total, resources created with NCR FSMA financial support have had 5186 views on the Food Safety Resource Clearinghouse since their creation, with an average of 144 views.

## 3. What more could the NCR FSMA do?

Recommendations based on evaluation findings include:

- Increase quality of annual meetings.
  - While the 2024 meeting certainly had some positive impacts, attendees indicated via open-ended comments that time could have been spent better had more time been given to fewer topics, allowing time for questions and reflection.
  - Ratings of the usefulness of sessions held at the 2024 annual meeting varied greatly, from a low of 3.20 to a high of 4.57 on a scale of 1 to 5, where one equals not useful and 5 equals extremely useful.
- Evaluate how meetings for regulators impact participants.

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**Commented [EJ2]:** Should the 2021 grant be listed as well? Since a lot of this evaluation was funded by that grant?

**Commented [EJ3R2]:** grant no. 2021-70020-35732

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## Introduction

The North Central Region Center for FSMA Training, Extension, and Technical Assistance (NCR FSMA) formed in 2016 with funding from the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA). The purpose of the center is to equip produce safety educators, professionals, and regulators from 12 midwestern states to help small- and mid-scale produce farmers and processors understand and comply with the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA).

After three years with funding from the FDA, the NCR FSMA was funded for three more times by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). The most current funding cycle, referred to as NCR FSMA 4.0 began September 1, 2024, and will end August 31, 2027.

Objectives of the NCR FSMA 3.0 included:

- Objective 1: Expand the produce safety network within the NCR to include underserved produce industry partners, more diverse producers, processors, and educators
- Objective 2: Collaborate with and support the NCR produce safety network
- Objective 3: Create, modify, and validate produce safety training materials based on a needs assessment, focusing on underserved and diverse production and processing environments and new educators
- Objective 4: Professional development and technical assistance of NCR produce safety educators, growers, and processors

Objectives of the NCR FSMA 4.0 include:

- Objective 1: Continue to facilitate communication between educators, regulators, outreach staff and other stakeholders to develop and maintain an active and effective food safety growing and processing network.
- Objective 2: Continue to facilitate coordination between those working with under-served audiences to advance the knowledge of industry, academia, and regulatory personnel.
- Objective 3: Offer specific education/outreach for those who work with produce growers.
- Objective 4: Offer specific education/outreach for those who work with processors and cottage food operators.
- Objective 5: Implement actionable assessment and evaluation protocols for the Center and stakeholders.

Throughout the life of the NCR FSMA, evaluation has been used to measure its impact and receive continuous feedback to improve its work. This report shares highlights of evaluation results of the NCR FSMA in 2024, which spanned the end of NCR FSMA 3.0 and the start of NCR FSMA 4.0. It aims to answer three questions:

1. What is going well with the NCR FSMA?

2. What impacts has the NCR FSMA had?
3. What more could the NCR FSMA do?

## Methods

In 2024, five evaluation methods were conducted, listed in chronological order.

### 1. Annual conference evaluation survey, April 2024

The 2024 NCR FSMA annual meeting was held in Burr Ridge, Illinois, on April 3 and 4, 2024. Forty-six people attended, including presenters and organizers. Attendees were asked to complete an evaluation survey, and 25 of them did so. Therefore, the response rate was 54 percent. This response rate appears to be low for this type of survey yet is nearly the same as the survey conducted after the 2023 annual meeting (53 percent). Data was analyzed using Excel™ using descriptive statistics.

### 2. CAP Program Manager survey and report, April and November 2024

CAP program managers from the eight states in the North Central region that conduct their own inspections were invited to share their Produce Inspection Aggregate Data Workbook from the previous fiscal year (July 1 through June 30) and complete a survey regarding undocumented observations. This process was initiated for the first time in April 2024, sharing data from July 1, 2022 through June 30, 2023. The process was repeated in November 2024, sharing data from July 1, 2023, through June 30, 2024.

Four states participated in the process each time, although it was not the same states each time.

Data from the produce inspection aggregate data workbook of each participating state was aggregated by a state partner, while results to the survey about undocumented observations were compiled by the NCR FSMA evaluator.

Following each data collection, a meeting was held with participating CAP program managers and inspectors from their states to view and discuss the results. The first meeting was held on May 10, 2024. The second meeting was held on December 18, 2024. At each meeting, a document of takeaways to be shared with produce safety educators was created. *The takeaways from the December 2024 meeting will be presented at the 2025 annual meeting. Therefore, this report will include results only from the April 2024 CAP program managers survey and data.*

### 3. Fall Professional Development evaluation survey, October 2024

In total, 29 people attended the training. The training was evaluated using a brief survey. This report shares results from the evaluation.

Organizers invited participants to complete a brief online survey at the end of the event. The survey was conducted using Qualtrics™. No incentive to complete the survey was offered.

Sixteen people completed the survey. Therefore, the response rate was 55 percent. Data was analyzed using SPSS.

#### 4. Participant observation, continual

The evaluator participated in monthly listening sessions and took extensive notes during the sessions, noting the level of participant engagement. She also received the monthly newsletters and participated in team lead, buyers' guide, and FDA quarterly meetings.

#### 5. Output tracking

The NCR FSMA PI and evaluator record outputs, including participation in NCR FSMA events, number of educational materials created or modified, number of events sponsored, etc.

## Results

The results section is organized with answers to three questions:

1. What is going well with the NCR FSMA?
2. What impacts has the NCR had?
3. What more could the NCR FSMA do?

### 1. What is going well with the NCR FSMA?

**As in all past evaluations, networking and collaboration are strong aspects of the NCR FSMA.**

The NCR FSMA annual meeting and the 2024 fall professional development evaluation surveys highlighted how the events encouraged networking and collaboration.

When asked what they intend to do differently in their work as a result of the annual meeting, six (of 15) respondents indicated they intend to continue networking or collaborating with other NCR FSMA partners, making this the most common theme. For example, one respondent wrote, "I connected with one of the speakers about an FSOP Technical Assistance Grant. Our team will connect virtually to discuss our projects and how not to duplicate work." *All respondents to the annual conference survey agreed or strongly agreed they feel closer to other NCR FSMA partners because of attending the annual meeting.*

For the fall professional development, 81.3% (13 of 16) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed they strengthened relationships with other professionals during the event and 75% (12 of 16) agreed or strongly agreed the relationships they had built during the event would improve their work.

**The NCR FSMA brings produce safety educators and regulators together.**

A review of attendance lists from the NCR FSMA 3.0 showed 270 unique individuals participated in a meeting or event facilitated by the NCR FSMA. Of these, 100 (37 percent) worked for state agencies as CAP program managers, inspectors, and/or inventory managers and 143 (53 percent) attendees were produce safety educators.



**The NCR FSMA has kept underserved audiences front of mind.**

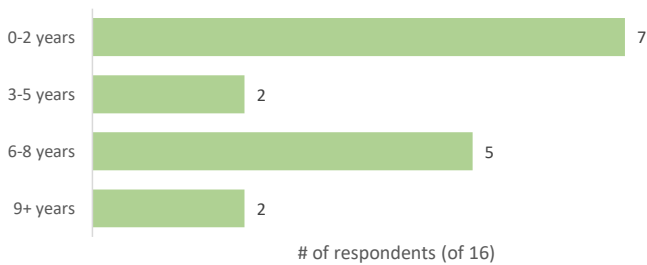
Following the annual meeting, four respondents indicated they intend to work more closely with underserved audiences. Some indicated this was a direct response to a breakout session led by Dr. Shannon Coleman. Respondents also indicated this was a topic they would like to continue learning more about at future events.

**The NCR FSMA is equipping food safety professionals to work with growers and processors.**

The fall professional development, geared toward those who work with growers, has consistently brought together participants for in-person learning for several years. Participation has remained high, with 29 participants in 2024 and 2023. In 2024, like 2023, participants were commonly new to working in the arena of Product Safety. Figure 1 shows that of of respondents to the fall professional development, nearly half had been working in produce safety for two years or less. This indicates that people who are relatively new to working in this area are looking to the NCR FSMA for their professional development.

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**Figure 1: Many participants in the fall professional development were relatively new to working in produce safety.**



75 percent of respondents to the fall professional development survey indicated they learned information at the event that they can directly apply to their work.

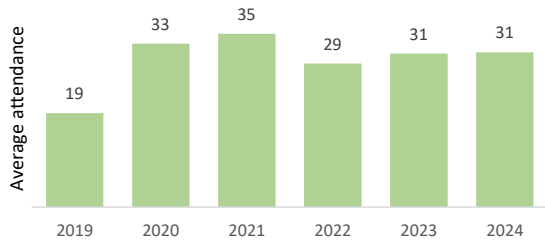
**Attendance at NCR FSMA webinars remains high.**

Figure 2 shows average attendance at NCR FSMA monthly webinars. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, average attendance at these webinars was 19. It increased dramatically in 2020 to 33 and even further to 35 in 2021. Starting in March 2020 when the COVID-19 caused many businesses and schools to close and professionals to work from home and continuing into 2021, attendance at NCR FSMA webinars was very high. Attendance decreased, on average, to 29 in 2022, a year during which COVID-19 restrictions eased. Attendance at monthly webinars has leveled off to an average of 31 in 2023 and 2024.

Maintained attendance is likely due to a combination of factors, including the Center responding to participant feedback requesting monthly sessions focus more on webinar-style

presentations and less on open-format networking and a general increase in the number of NCR FSMA participants.

**Figure 2: Average attendance at NCR FSMA monthly webinars has remained high after peaking during the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.**



Similarly, *the NCR FSMA has maintained subscribers to its newsletter list*. As of March 2025, there are 243 subscribers to the newsletter. This is a slight increase from NCR FSMA 2.0, when this number was regularly reported: 193 subscribers in 2019, 176 subscribers in 2020 (a decrease due to cleaning the list and removing partners who were no longer involved), and 211 subscribers in 2021.

## 2. What impacts has the NCR FSMA had?

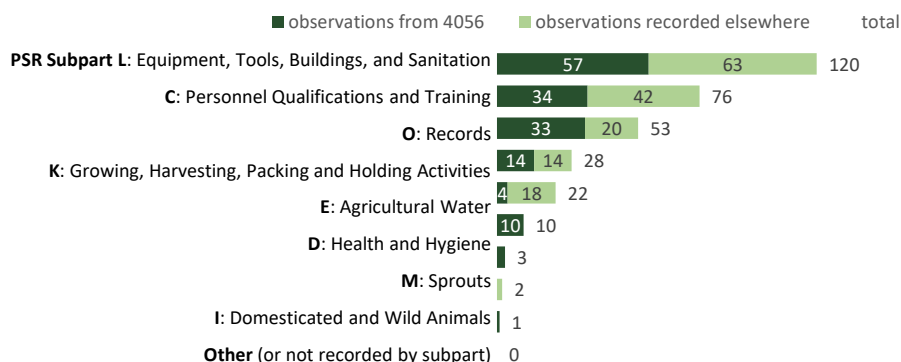
**The NCR FSMA, in collaboration with CAP program managers, has improved the CAP program manager survey process to focus more on what has been documented and less on inspector perceptions or opinions.**

The first iteration of this survey was conducted in the North Central Region in 2023 and asked inspectors to answer three open-ended questions regarding inspections in 2022 and three questions in which they rated their agreement with various statements using a Likert scale. While this was a good start to understanding what inspectors had observed on farms, it had an obvious weakness of lacking objectivity.

After inviting the Northeast Center for Food Safety director and a CAP program manager from that region to meet with CAP program managers in the North Central Region, NCR program managers were inspired to implement a more objective process like the one being used in the northeast, with help from the NCR FSMA.

The first round of this survey, conducted in March and April 2024, allowed inspectors to discuss what they had seen on farms, based on the quantification of observations recorded on the 4056. It showed a total of *156 observations were made and recorded on the 4056 in the four participating states. An additional 159 observations were made but recorded elsewhere*. Figure 3 shows the number of observations recorded on the 4056 and the number recorded elsewhere, by Produce Safety Rule subpart.

**Figure 3: Observations recorded on the 4056 and recorded elsewhere were most commonly related to Subpart L, equipment, tools, buildings, and sanitation.**



Reviewing the inspection data and survey results led to fruitful discussion regarding observations being recorded elsewhere (most often on the farm summary report). Through this discussion inspectors agreed they would move toward recording observations exclusively on the 4056, to *increase consistency across states*.

They were also able to share aggregated numbers of observations with produce safety educators as well as examples of what was seen on farms related to those observations. For example, a common observation was regarding L: 112.130 (What requirements apply for hand washing facilities?), with 21 observations on the 4056 across the four states. Inspectors were able to share with educators that they commonly observed hand sinks that were too far away from fields.

**In 2024, NCR FSMA partners have become better equipped to communicate about the water rule and help growers assess pre-harvest water on their farms.**

Following the annual meeting, two respondents indicated they would make a change related to agricultural water. One intended to make a change in how they present information about agricultural water and another intended to follow up on information they had learned at the conference regarding water.

The fall professional development especially focused on the pre-harvest water rule. When asked what the most important thing the respondents had learned during the professional development training, nearly all respondents (12 of 14 who answered the question) shared something related to the water rule. In particular:

- Three specifically mentioned being surprised by **water test** results shared during the training or mentioned the value of water tests, despite them no longer being required.
- Three respondents indicated they learned more about **pre-harvest water**.

- Other topics mentioned related to water included, Don's explanation of sample variance, or lack thereof, between groundwater and surface water sample results; that drip irrigation can sometimes qualify as agricultural water; risk assessment of agricultural water; and how subpart E is interpreted by people according to their roles.

In addition, three respondents were especially impacted by the brief discussion, initiated by Kristin Krokowski, on taking a **holistic approach** to assessing agricultural water.

As a result of the fall professional development, respondents most often indicated they planned to share information they had learned at the training with growers. Ten respondents answered the question regarding what they will do differently in their work as a result of attending the training. The following summarizes their responses:

- Five respondents indicated they will share information they learned at the training with growers. One of these indicated they intend to verify they're using the correct wording regarding the new rules.
- Other ways attendees intend to implement what they learned include, adding pictures when they present module 5.1 of the Produce Safety Alliance Grower Training, being more mindful to ask questions during inspections to be practical and holistic, encouraging growers to conduct more water testing, and gaining confidence when talking about water.

**The NCR FSMA has supported the creation of resources that are being used.**

The NCR FSMA has financially supported the creation of 36 resources which are posted to the Food Safety Resource Clearinghouse, listed in Table 2, Appendix A. In total, these resources have had 5,186 views on the Food Safety Resource Clearinghouse since their creation, with an average of 144 views and median of 79. As of August 1, 2024, they had received 1,572 views in the previous 12 months, with an average of 44 views.

By far, the most commonly viewed resource was a six-page resource called Federal and State Regulations on Selling Frozen and Dehydrated Foods, which was created during NCR FSMA 1.0 and has continued to be updated, with the most recent update in September 2024. This resource alone has had 1,289 views since its creation, with 713 in the 12 months before August 2024.

Table 2 is ordered from greatest to least according to the number of views in the previous 12 months. Two resources stand out as being among those with the greatest number of views in the last 12 months and whose total views since submission is the same number. That means these two resources were created in the last 12 months and have already begun to rise to the top among resources created with support of the center. These two resources are Infographics for Growers and Produce Safety Contacts in the North Central Region (by Bordering State).

To help frame the data on Clearinghouse views, the average views in the 12-month period preceding March 21, 2025, as well as total views since submission were provided by a

Clearinghouse administrator (A. Fitzgerald, personal communication, March 21, 2025), shown in Table 1. During that 12-month period, all resources had an average of 37 views, with a lifetime average number of 134 views and lifetime median of 58 views. While the comparison is imperfect, NCR FSMA-supported resources have received more views on average (or “on median”) than all resources. The reason this is an imperfect comparison is that it is not known how the length of time that NCR FSMA resources have been on the Clearinghouse compares with that of all resources; the longer a resource has been on the Clearinghouse the more opportunities it has had to be viewed. Hence, *one can conservatively conclude that resources supported by the NCR FSMA have received similar interest as other resources.*

Table 1: NCR FSMA resources have received more views on the Food Safety Resource Clearinghouse than average.

	NCR FSMA-supported resources	All Resources on the Food Safety Resource Clearinghouse
Average views since submission	144	134
Median views since submission	79	58
Average views in 12 months	44	37

3. What more could the NCR FSMA do?

**Increase quality of annual meetings.**

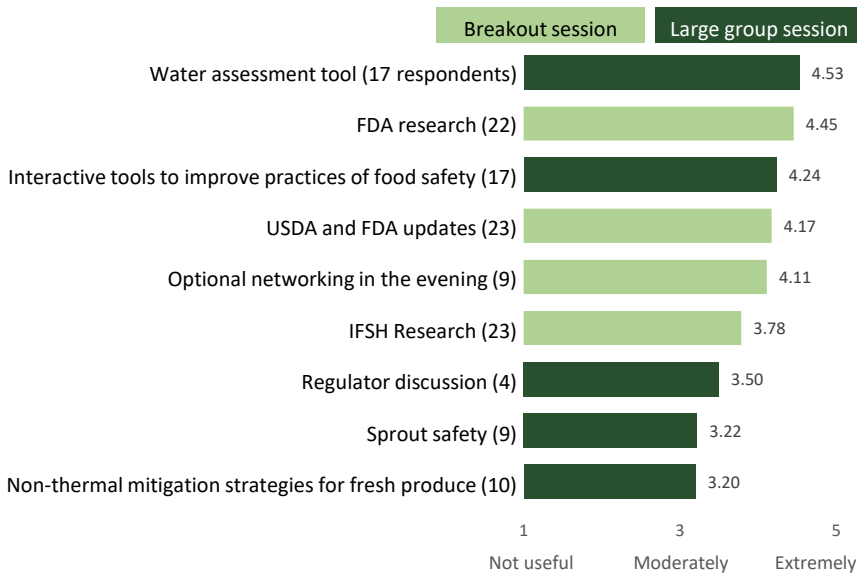
The NCR FSMA could improve the quality of its annual meeting. While the 2024 meeting certainly had some positive impacts, attendees indicated time could have been spent better had more time been given to fewer topics, allowing time for questions and reflection. Using open-ended comments, several attendees mentioned that sessions were rushed. Respondents seemed to prefer giving people more time, as opposed to forcing people into a short timeslot, and scheduling a longer conference. One comment summed up this sentiment, “Please allow more time for speakers. Everything beyond John Shutske seemed rushed. We need time to think, ask questions and take our time for thoughtful conversation and learning. Each break out was so rushed we had no time for questions... Two full days or 1.5 days total would not be excessive.”

Ratings of the usefulness of sessions held at the 2024 annual meeting varied greatly. Some were found to be extremely useful, while others were found to be only moderately useful. For example, Figure 1 shows the average ratings of sessions held on day one. The highest rated session was a breakout session about the water assessment tool presented by Phil Tocco, Annalisa Hultberg, and Don Stoeckel, who created the tool. Participants could try out the Excel-based tool on laptops individually or with a partner. They were then able to give feedback to the creators of the tool.

The sessions on FDA research was also found to be very useful. This presentation was a part of the general session.

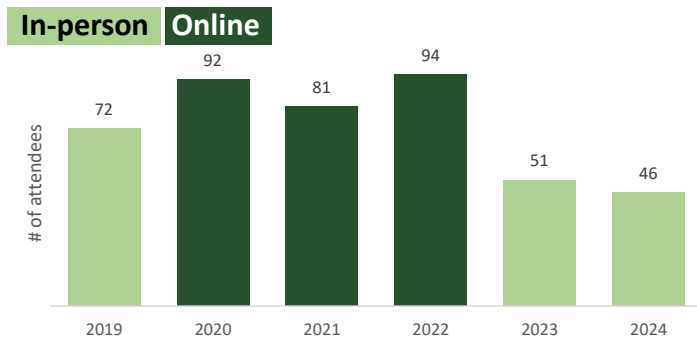
Three of the breakout groups were rated as less useful than other sessions. The regulator, sprout safety, and nonthermal mitigation strategies for fresh produce sessions were rated moderately useful. These sessions were rated by fewer people than the other sessions, which likely means fewer people attended the sessions.

**Figure 4: Most sessions on the first day were found to be very or extremely useful, with average ratings above 3.5.**



On the second day of the conference ratings ranged from a low of 3.67 to a high of 4.57, also showing a great difference in the usefulness of various sessions.

In addition, attendance at NCR FSMA annual meetings has decreased over time. It is not known if this is due to the quality of the meetings, or other factors such as cost of travel, meeting dates, or location. Certainly, the lack of travel boosted participation in the virtual meetings held in 2020, 2021, and 2022. However, ensuring the quality of the meeting may incentivize potential participants to prioritize using limited funds and time to attend this meeting.

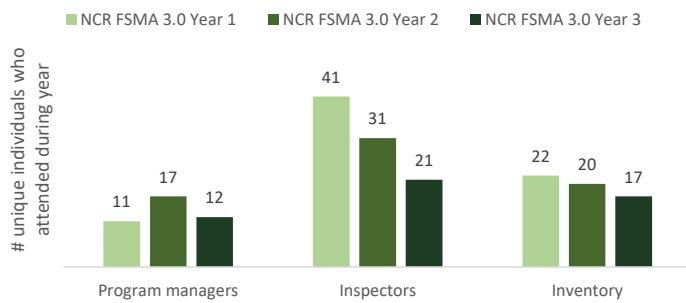


**Evaluate how meetings for regulators impact participants.**

The NCR FSMA has not specifically evaluated the meetings that it holds for regulators. Although regulators have participated in annual interviews in the past and have also participated in surveys for general NCR FSMA audiences, the only data available specifically related to the monthly meetings facilitated by the NCR FSMA for program managers, inspectors, and inventory managers is attendance.

Figure 5 shows the number of unique individuals who participated in these meetings in each NCR FSMA 3.0 year. The number of individuals participating in CAP program manager meetings has remained steady from year 1 to year 3, whereas the number of individuals participating in the inspector and inventory meetings decreased. It is not known if the decrease is due to the value of the meetings, decreased turnover among those who held those jobs, or changes in duties of people holding those jobs. An evaluation of these meetings would put these numbers in context.

**Figure 5: The number of individuals participating in regulator meeting has dropped slightly over time.**



## Conclusion

As in past evaluations, networking and collaboration continue to be strong assets of the NCR FSMA. This includes bringing produce safety educators and regulators together for joint learning and helping regulators connect across states. The NCR FSMA has also equipped food safety professionals to work with growers and processors, while keeping underserved audiences front of mind, with a particular focus in 2024 on equipping professionals to educate on or enforce the pre-harvest water rule, which recently was finalized.

Recommendations based on evaluation findings include:

- Increase quality of annual meetings.
  - While the 2024 meeting certainly had some positive impacts, attendees indicated via open-ended comments that time could have been spent better had more time been given to fewer topics, allowing time for questions and reflection.
  - Ratings of the usefulness of sessions held at the 2024 annual meeting varied greatly, from a low of 3.20 to a high of 4.57 on a scale of 1 to 5, where one equals not useful and 5 equals extremely useful.
- Evaluate how meetings for regulators impact participants.



## Appendix A: Food Safety Resource Clearinghouse Views

**Table 2: As of August 1, 2024, resources created with NCR FSMA funding have had over 5,000 views on the Food Safety Resource Clearinghouse since their submission.**

Resource Name	Views Since Submission	Views 8/2/23-8/1/24
Federal and State Regulations on Selling Frozen and Dehydrated Foods	1289	713
Food Safety and Blessing Boxes	147	122
Federal and State Regulations on Selling Fermented Foods	379	75
Infographics For Growers	59	59
Farmstand And U Pick Produce Operations Safety Best Practices	377	57
Federal and State Regulations on Selling Jams and Jellies	135	50
Pre-Harvest Checklist	254	43
Produce Safety Contacts in The North Central Region (By Bordering State)	43	43
FSMA Produce Safety Rule: Dealing with Wildlife	247	41
Federal and State Regulations on Selling Pickled Vegetables	134	31
Worker Training Guides	128	31
Domesticated Animals Fact Sheet- F SMA Produce Safety Rule	214	25
North Central Food Safety Extension Network (NCFSEN)	72	25
Ensuring Food Safety: Wineries	108	24
FSMA Summary for Hops Growers	63	16
NCR FSMA-Iowa State University	121	15
Ensuring Food Safety in The Vineyard: Wine Grapes	74	15
Minnesota Value Added Products Quiz	53	15
FSMA Compliant On-Farm Thermophilic Composting: A Safe Way to Enrich the Soil	316	14
FSMA Produce Rule Summary for Midwest Orchards	129	12
GAP Training Videos in Hmong	97	12
Bodily Fluid Cleanup on The Farm	86	12
Ensuring Food Safety in The Vineyard: Table Grapes	66	12
Indiana Value Added Products Quiz	39	12
Iowa Value Added Products Quiz	35	12
North Dakota Value Added Products Quiz	35	11
Ohio Value Added Products Quiz	35	11
Record Keeping Envelope	108	9
Wisconsin Value Added Products Quiz	45	8
Illinois Value Added Products Quiz	44	8
Kansas Value Added Products Quiz	33	8
South Dakota Value Added Products Quiz	34	7
Nebraska Value Added Products Quiz	33	7

Michigan Value Added Products Quiz	30	7
Missouri Value Added Products Quiz	40	6
Scenario Discussion for Educators and Regulators	84	4
<b>Total Views</b>	<b>5186</b>	<b>1572</b>
<b>Total Resources</b>	<b>36</b>	
<b>Average Views</b>	<b>144</b>	<b>44</b>