

**United States Department of Agriculture  
Food Safety and Inspection Service  
Retail *Listeria monocytogenes* (*Lm*) Focus Group Findings**

**Background**

In 2019, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) conducted 13 focus groups on controlling *Listeria monocytogenes* (*Lm*) at retail. The purpose of the focus groups was to assess the effectiveness of the recommendations in the [FSIS Best Practices Guidance for Controlling \*Listeria monocytogenes\* \(\*Lm\*\) in Retail Delicatessens](#) (Retail *Lm* Guidelines). The focus groups were performed in response to recommendations from the National Advisory Committee for Meat and Poultry Inspection ([NACMPI](#)), and were announced in the [Federal Register Notice \(FRN\) 2018-0040](#). Specifically, NACMPI recommended that FSIS coordinate outreach and enhance communication on “retail best practices,” ensure that its outreach is practical, easily understandable, and available to all audiences, and collaborate on updates to the Food Code. Based on the focus group findings, FSIS plans to revise its guidance/outreach materials and coordinate with its public health partners and engage with industry associations and others to review/distribute the information. FSIS does not plan to recommend Food Code changes at this time because a high percentage of retailers follow FSIS recommendations.

**Methods**

FSIS conducted the focus groups in collaboration with the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The focus group questions were developed based on NACMPI guidance and input from roundtable discussions. Questions were grouped in the following topic areas: distribution/availability of communication materials; *Lm*-specific communication content, and FSIS-specific *Lm* communication tools. The education tools included the [Lm Brochure](#), the [Retail \*Lm\* Guidelines](#), and the [FSIS Self-Assessment Tool](#). Specific questions that were asked are included at the end of this summary.

Overall, there were 71 participants who took part in the 13 focus groups. The focus group sessions included nine from state/local public health and agriculture departments, three from retailers, and one from academia (cooperative extension specialists). The focus groups were conducted by webinar over 90-minute sessions, and each session was recorded. All participants granted their consent to use their response information prior to participating and collection of this data was approved by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB).

**Results**

Responses to the focus group questions varied depending on the type of participant. Below is a summary of responses in each of the three main topic areas.

**Distribution/Availability of Materials.** The state/local groups stated that they received information from federal agencies, state and local agencies, and federal and state food codes. The retail groups stated that they received information from federal, state/local agencies, industry associations public health/food associations, and academia. Both the state/local and the retail groups indicated that they preferred email distribution of food safety communication, followed

by web update notifications due to convenience and reliability. The academic group stated that they work with both the small and large retailers, implying that they could be a conduit to those groups.

***Lm*-Specific Communications Content.** The state/local groups indicated that the *Lm*-related information they had received was consistent, but the style of messaging was slightly different depending on the specific agency's emphasis. They also thought that there should be some information tailored to inspectors and other information tailored towards retailers. The retail groups indicated that FSIS's information was clear for corporate participants, but not for frontline deli operators. Overall, retailers recommended that FSIS work through trade associations (e.g., the Food Marketing Institute (FMI)) to distribute outreach materials. The academic group recommended speaking with deli employees and independent grocers to first establish a "foundation of minimum sanitation requirements of the Food Code" and go from there to address *Lm*.

**FSIS *Lm* Communication Tools.** Both the state/local and retail participants were not aware of the *Lm* Brochure. The state/local groups mentioned the need to have materials that are simple to understand that they can verbally communicate to retailers. The retail groups recommended that FSIS build relationships and communication channels in collaboration with state/local regulators. The academic group indicated that the *Lm* Brochure and FSIS Self-Assessment Tool could be improved by simplifying the format and adding more visuals.

### **Limitations and Challenges**

There were several limitations and challenges with the focus group study results. The initial design of the study assumed a high participation rate representing a wide variety of individuals and geographic locations. However, lower-than-expected participation resulted in constraints on the study that did not allow for additional distinctions within retail and state/local subcategories. There were no participants from small or independent delis. Most participants were in a corporate position, as opposed to employees of retail delis.

### **Next Steps**

In response to the focus group findings, FSIS plans to update the Retail *Lm* Guideline to improve consistency, clarity, and overall content. FSIS also plans to update the [Retail Guidance Webpage](#) with additional outreach materials and is considering developing business cards with *Lm*-related information. In addition, FSIS plans to coordinate with CDC and FDA to harmonize its outreach materials with content that has been developed by other groups and agencies. FSIS plans to work with groups such as FMI, the Association of Food and Drug Officials (AFDO), and cooperative extension specialists to review and distribute its outreach materials. By making changes in outreach materials, FSIS can help ensure that its guidelines are more useful to retailers, and drive adoption of food safety practices to control *Lm* at retail and help protect public health.

## Focus Group Questions

### Topic 1: Distribution/Availability of Communications

- FSIS asked about how and through what format participants receive food safety information, if they have used FSIS' help desks (Ask Karen, Ask FSIS, Small and Very Small Plant Help Desk), and how they would prefer federal organizations deliver communication to them.
  - FSIS also asked state/local officials if additional training opportunities on *Lm* would be of interest to them.
- These questions linked to the NACMPI recommendation that FSIS “ensure guidance on control of *Lm* at retail is...available to all audiences.”

### Topic 2: *Lm*-Specific Communications Content

- FSIS asked participants about the type, clarity, quality, usefulness, and consistency of the food safety information they had received.
  - FSIS also asked retailers whether they had implemented any of the *Lm*-specific recommendations into their operations, and if state/local officials use the information in their work with retailers.
- These questions linked to NACMPI's recommendation that FSIS “ensure guidance on control of *Lm* at retail is clear/understandable [and] practical...to all audiences.”

### Topic 3: FSIS *Lm* Communications Tools

- FSIS asked whether participants had ever seen FSIS' *Lm*-specific documents (the Brochure, Best Practice Guidelines, and Self-Assessment), and from what source.
  - FSIS asked for their opinions and suggestions on the clarity and usefulness of these communication tools.
- These questions supported NACMPI's recommendation that FSIS “have stakeholders evaluate FSIS's *Lm* Compliance self-assessment tool (and related private sector or other tools) and make them available.”