As 2012 draws to a close, I caught myself reflecting on the many fields of practice embodied within environmental health. I was contemplating this because the NEHA board of directors has asked an elite team of members to review the colloquial definition of “environmental health” and “environmental health professional” for modernization. During this thought process, it occurred to me that NEHA, with limited capacity but inexhaustible resourcefulness, not only touches the many fields of practice embodied within environmental health, but NEHA also chooses to lead outcomes beneficial to the profession in many fields of practice. Let me provide an example.

In the last five years and particularly the last 12 months, I have been witness to, and a participant in, epic change that is underway in our nation's food and feed safety system. NEHA leadership, with strategic prowess and acumen, deployed staff, board members, and membership with subject-matter expertise to all points of contact important to the success of the Food and Drug Administration's (FDA's) Partnership for Food Protection (PFP). The PFP initiative brings together federal, state, local, tribal, and territorial regulatory and public health stakeholders to work on projects that enhance food and feed safety in the U.S. including imported and exported products. Various staff, board members, and membership recognized the critical role local environmental health plays in the initiative and as a result exercised leadership options in many work groups in addition to facilitating “charges” resulting from PFP objectives. The greater mission remained facilitating a nationally Integrated Food Safety System (IFSS).

After two meetings of the PFP, one in St. Louis (2008) and the other in Denver (2010), and subsequent to President Obama signing the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) in January 2011, NEHA found itself more entrenched than ever in a national initiative intended to create prevention-oriented food and feed safety standards, to create capacity to respond quickly and effectively to foodborne incidents, and to “optimize all system resources.” Deliverables contained in FSMA were subsumed into PFP charges and the vision for IFSS became even more focused (Figure 1).

At the last PFP meeting, convened in Nashville in August, local environmental health led by NEHA asserted prominence as a critical stakeholder in the nation's food safety system. The PFP initiative had momentum fueled by FSMA and through natural selection and process evolution, the time for local environmental health to take the stage arrived (carpe diem!).

NEHA leadership, collaborating with other local environmental health nongovernmental organizations, communicated to high-level facilitators of PFP and FSMA within FDA, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Department of Homeland Security (DHS), U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (U.S. EPA), and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to reinforce and elaborate the role “local” plays in the larger food and feed safety scheme. The message resounded as speaker after speaker and work group after work group included “local” into vernacular formerly limited to “federal and state.” NEHA and NEHA participation also carried enough influence to garner a private meeting with FDA Deputy Commissioner for Foods Michael Taylor and his senior PFP/FSMA advisory and implementation staff. Also attending the meeting were senior U.S. EPA, DHS, USDA, and CDC officials and stakeholders. This was NEHA leadership and alignment at its best! The objective was engagement and involvement of local environmental health as stakeholders and partners in attaining PFP and FSMA deliverables within the IFSS vision!

Less than a month after the Nashville meeting, I was contacted by Jeff Farrar, FDA associate commissioner for food protection, and Joe Reardon, FDA senior advisor and former director of state and federal relations. As the local environmental health and NEHA lead, I was asked to provide feedback as to “next steps” and how “to understand and develop the process for locals.” On behalf of NEHA and local environmental health, a work group comprised of “locals” who participated at the PFP Nashville meeting was suggested. The plan is for “locals” to back map FSMA deliverables to PFP objectives creating the roadmap...
Leadership involves identifying need for change and successful change demands leadership! Keeping an ear to the ground and an eye on the broad view has positioned NEHA to lead. Finally, leadership is about attention to desired outcomes and empowering voices within the network! NEHA is about leadership and leadership is a choice! What a privilege! I’m jazzed—can you tell?

FIGURE 1
NEHA’s Involvement With the Food Safety Modernization Act, Partnership for Food Protection, and Integrated Food Safety System

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