

Is Your Laboratory EPA Certified?

This is one of the most common questions labs hear. There are many forms of certification based upon the type of laboratory, for example wastewater laboratories are certified to meet the Clean Water Act requirements, whereas drinking water laboratories are certified to meet the Safe Drinking Water Act (SDWA). In most cases, the EPA does not directly certify laboratories. They have assigned this responsibility to states that have primacy. The only territories that do not have primacy are Wyoming and the District of Columbia, so they are regulated directly by the EPA. Another exception for the EPA directly approving laboratories includes certification under the Information Collection Requirements, because the EPA directly implements this rule.

There are a couple of options for obtaining certification: direct certification, reciprocal and NELAP (National Environmental Laboratory Accreditation Program). Direct certification typically requires the laboratory to submit an application, directly to the state agency overseeing the certification program. It would include the following: Legal name of the laboratory, location, personnel educational qualification and experience, analytes and methodology of which they are seeking certification, and quality assurance plans.

Laboratories must submit Performance Evaluation (PE) studies for the applicable analytes. The PE Samples, which the laboratory must purchase from a state approved vendor, have a known concentration of the analyte. The laboratory must analyze and report the results to the state agency. The state has specified ranges for each analyte or method in which the laboratory's reported results must fall in order to pass. Depending on the state's requirements, the lab must pass one or more of these PE Studies. Many states require an on-site audit of the laboratory, where their auditors inspect and verify that the laboratory is following all applicable procedures. The state will determine how often the laboratory must be audited in order to maintain their accreditation.

Lastly the laboratory must pay all the applicable fees, which may include travel expenses for the on-site audits. Reciprocal certification is not always an option, but certain states will accept another's states certification in lieu of directly certifying the laboratory. Reciprocal certification has its advantages and disadvantages. A big advantage is the costs savings of additional on-site audits as the state offering reciprocity will rely in the original state's audit. A disadvantage is the secondary state will certify based solely on the primary states analyst list. This presents a problem when the primary doesn't offer certification for as many analytes as the secondary state, so the laboratory may end up with missing certification in the secondary state.

Worldwide Drilling Resource

September 2005

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