



Benefits of National Accreditation

The NELAC Institute (TNI) believes that all entities generating environmental data in the United States should be recognized as competent for the activities they undertake. To that end, TNI has established two national accreditation programs, one for laboratories, and one for field sampling and measurement organizations. TNI's accreditation programs are designed to ensure the competency of organizations for conducting environmental measurements and provides assurance that data users can make decisions based on data of known and documented quality.

TNI, through its National Environmental Laboratory Accreditation Program (NELAP), accredits over 2000 laboratories in 47 states and four foreign countries. As compared to many other accreditation programs, NELAP accreditation provides an independent, third party evaluation of a laboratory's quality system and technical competence, resulting in a formal recognition by a recognized authority, called an Accreditation Body. NELAP accreditation is unique among accreditation programs because:

- it is based on an internationally recognized standard that has been expanded to focus on unique aspects of environmental testing,
- it is performed with respect to a specific scope of accreditation conducted by qualified assessors, and
- it involves review of periodic proficiency testing results performed by the laboratory.

TNI has also initiated efforts to establish a National Environmental Field Activities Program (NEFAP) that has the goal of developing an accreditation program for organizations involved in field sampling and measurement activities. TNI is also pursuing the development of standards for assuring the competency of organizations involved in stationary source air emissions testing.

Accreditation provides an objective way of showing clients, the community and the government that an organization has the demonstrated capability to provide the services they conduct.

For the public, accreditation promotes confidence that environmental decisions are based on reliable, authentic data. Accreditation is a concept that the public recognizes in many other aspects of their lives. Various industries and institutions where the public needs a high degree of confidence in the service provided are accredited to ensure conformance to recognized standards. For example, hospitals, universities, and forensic laboratories are accredited to a national standard.

For data users, accreditation serves a consumer protection purpose. It provides assurance that the laboratory has been evaluated and has met accepted standards established by experts in the environmental laboratory profession. Using a technically competent organization minimizes the risk of producing unreliable data and minimizes the need for expensive re-testing. Regulators will have more confidence in data produced by an accredited organization.

For the profession, accreditation advances the field by promoting uniform accepted standards of practice and advocating rigorous adherence to these standards. For those individuals who are active practitioners in the environmental testing profession, accreditation advances the profession by providing a venue to share knowledge. It allows professional interaction in a consensus process and a forum for best practices improvement.

For government agencies, accreditation serves as a basis to ensure that environmental monitoring data are adequate for their intended purpose. Government bodies and regulators are constantly called upon to make decisions related to protecting the health and welfare of consumers and the public, and protecting the environment. In order to do this work, they must develop regulations and requirements, measure compliance with regulatory and legal requirements, and allocate resources, both technical and financial.

Government bodies and regulators must have confidence in the data generated by laboratories in order to make these decisions. Using an accredited laboratory can help establish and assure this confidence.

If an organization is accredited to TNI's standards, it means that the organization has demonstrated their competence to produce data that are accurate, traceable and reproducible - critical components in governmental decision-making.

Using an accredited organization benefits government and regulators by increasing confidence in data that are used to establish baselines for key analyses and decisions, and reducing uncertainties associated with decisions that affect the protection of human health and the environment. Using an accredited organization increases public confidence, because accreditation is a recognizable indication of competence, and it eliminates redundant reviews and improves the efficiency of the assessment process (which may reduce costs).

Using an accredited organization also increases confidence that decisions are based on comparable data. Costs associated with problems, such as re-testing, re-sampling, and lost time are minimized, and false positives and negatives, which can directly affect compliance with regulations, are minimized.

For the organization, accreditation promotes ongoing self-evaluation and continuous improvement, provides an effective system for accountability and enhances its reputation. Accreditation benefits organizations by allowing them to determine whether they are performing their work correctly and to appropriate standards, and provides them with a benchmark for maintaining that competence. Many organization operate in isolation to their peers, and rarely, if ever, receive any independent technical evaluation as a measure of their performance.

In order to become accredited, organizations demonstrate consistent acceptable performance on proficiency test samples, maintain a quality system consistent with the TNI standards, and undergo periodic rigorous onsite assessments to confirm that they meet all requirements specified in the standards.

A regular assessment by an accreditation body checks all aspects of a facility's operations related to consistently producing accurate and dependable data. Areas for improvement are identified and discussed, and a detailed report provided at the end of each visit. Where necessary, follow-up action is monitored by the accreditation body so the facility is confident that it has taken the appropriate corrective action.

Accreditation is an effective marketing tool, and provides an avenue to submit proposals to contractors that require independently verified organization. TNI's accreditation programs are highly regarded as a reliable indicator of technical competence. Many laboratory customers, including the Department of Defense, routinely specify laboratory accreditation for suppliers of testing services.

TNI is active in working with many stakeholders, including state and federal agencies as well as trade associations representing different types of laboratories. If you want to learn more about this effort, please contact TNI.

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