

## Findings and Recommendations by the Expert Review Panel for the State of California's Environmental Laboratory Accreditation Program Year One Final Report

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### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

An Expert Review Panel was convened in 2015 to conduct an external examination of the State of California's Environmental Laboratory Accreditation Program (ELAP). The Panel identified a number of fundamental weaknesses in ELAP that hinder the program's ability to achieve its mission of ensuring the State has access to quality data for use in its environmental decisionmaking. More importantly, the Panel observed that these deficiencies have cost the program credibility among key constituencies – notably, the state agencies that rely on data generated by ELAP-accredited laboratories.

During three in-person meetings to assess ELAP and gather perspectives from stakeholders, the Panel identified five main programmatic deficiencies: (1) ELAP lacks a clear management system with established procedures to which staff are trained and held accountable; (2) ELAP does not have a relevant accreditation standard on which to base its laboratory inspections; (3) the list of analytical methods for which ELAP accredits laboratories is outdated; (4) ELAP has insufficient resources to accomplish its mission; and (5) ELAP's poor communication has caused a rift with its clients.

There is, however, hope. The recently installed ELAP management team recognizes these challenges and appears receptive to change. Some stakeholders also have embraced a fresh start, although for ELAP to be successful in the future, all parties must let go of the past. The Panel believes ELAP is well-positioned to reestablish itself as a respected accreditation program, and recommends moving forward with a series of immediate reforms. These reforms should be weighed and evaluated through the lens of a clear Mission Statement, which the Panel recommends as: "Implementation of a sustainable accreditation program to effectively evaluate the competency of organizations generating environmental and public health data of known and documented quality to meet stakeholder needs." The Panel's recommended reforms fall into five main themes:

- **Establish a management system:** ELAP should rapidly establish standards of operation for itself. At present, there are no procedures that define internal processes and job requirements for staff. ELAP should design a management system with performance criteria to which all staff and management can be held accountable.
- **Adopt laboratory accreditation standards:** The use of an appropriate accreditation standard by which laboratories are assessed is critical to ELAP's credibility, to the usability of the data generated, and to the general success of the program. The laboratory standards ELAP is using are

insufficient and out of date. The State should adopt an existing, external set of accreditation standards as an immediate remedy and, in the future, refine it to enhance alignment with State-specific needs. The accreditation standards chosen must include quality system and method-based requirements.

- **Ensure relevant analytical methods:** ELAP should update the list of analytical methods to which laboratories are accredited and assessed. The list of methods the program is using are incorporated into the California Code of Regulations, which have not been updated since 1994 and are seriously out of date. State regulations should be altered to remove references to specific methods, which will provide ELAP the flexibility to adopt current, relevant methods that laboratories and regulatory authorities need to adequately protect California's health and environment.
- **Expand resources:** ELAP should take several steps to expand the resources at its disposal: (1) Additional investment in staff development to increase productivity, including a management plan that defines employee expectations and establishes employee performance metrics; (2) a revised fee structure that eases ELAP's financial constraints and allows the program to fully recover its costs; and (3) incorporation of third-party, private-sector assessors and acceptance of qualifying laboratory accreditation programs as components of ELAP's accreditation process, to clear ELAP's immediate backlog and to provide long-term support as necessary. Maintaining staffing at the current level will only work if management sets requirements and holds staff accountable.
- **Enhance communication:** ELAP should develop a communications plan, have ELAP staff undergo communication training, and codify expectations into a management system that ensures staff are held accountable for proper responsiveness and communication etiquette. ELAP should also reinvigorate the Environmental Laboratory Technical Advisory Committee (ELTAC), which serves as a vital conduit by which the laboratory community can help improve ELAP's programmatic foundation.

Although ELAP is not presently achieving its mission, ELAP's new management team understands its charge to comprehensively overhaul the program. The State should support ELAP's efforts to implement these initial recommendations and hold ELAP accountable for their execution. The Panel will revisit ELAP's progress in late 2016 or early 2017 and prepare a second Panel report that codifies any mid-course corrections and additional recommendations. If ELAP is successful in implementing the recommended reforms, the Panel believes ELAP can regain credibility, achieve financial sustainability, operate an accreditation process that the State and stakeholders can support, and reliably ensure that environmental and public health data being used in State decision-making are of known and documented quality.

**Full text:** [887\\_ELAPReviewYr1.pdf](#)