

## Progress Assessment and Final Recommendations by the Expert Review Panel for the State of California's Environmental Laboratory Accreditation Program

### *Year Two Final Report*

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### **EXECUTIVE REPORT**

An Expert Review Panel (the Panel) was convened in 2015 to conduct an external examination of the State of California's Environmental Laboratory Accreditation Program (ELAP). During its initial review, which was presented to the California State Water Resources Control Board (State Water Board) in November 2015, the Panel identified a number of fundamental weaknesses that hindered the program's ability to achieve its mission of ensuring the State has high-quality data for use in environmental decision-making. The Panel made a series of recommendations to help ELAP reestablish itself as a respected accreditation program. Over the course of a year, the Panel followed ELAP's progress during quarterly public webinars, then reconvened in January 2017 to conduct a second year review of the program to assess whether the program had successfully implemented those recommendations and improved as a result.

During the follow-up review, the Panel found that ELAP made significant progress in implementing the majority of the Panel's recommendations. The Panel believes ELAP is regaining credibility with clients and the laboratory community; is working toward an accreditation process with State and stakeholders support; and has created proficiency testing and enforcement units to help ensure the competency of laboratories producing environmental data. With the extensive programmatic improvements ELAP implemented in the last year, the Panel has confidence ELAP's leadership understands its organizational charge and is well-positioned to accomplish the final Panel recommendations outlined in this report. While the Panel applauds ELAP's progress during the past year, the program is still not meeting its programmatic goals. Specifically, the Panel notes that ELAP still lacks adequate staff to properly perform onsite assessments of applicant laboratories, which has resulted in a significant programmatic backlog, and an accreditation standard has not been adopted, which hinders the investments the State Water Board has made for staff training. The Panel has identified supplementary recommendations that should help resolve the remaining programmatic shortcomings:

- **Adopt an accreditation standard:** In its initial review, the Panel urged ELAP to immediately adopt an accreditation standard. The process took considerable time, but the Panel congratulates ELAP for working well with its stakeholder communities to vet options and reach a decision to adopt The NELAC Institute (TNI) 2016 Standard with 58 modifications proposed by the stakeholder community. The Panel recommends ELAP now move quickly to adopt that standard and develop an implementation process that facilitates laboratory participation. The Panel also recommends ELAP adopt the 58 modifications as

implementation guidance rather than as modifications to the underlying standard. Adopting a modified standard would isolate California from invaluable training resources available from the national program.

- **Expand resources:** During its initial review, the Panel found that ELAP was not able to carry out its mission because the program lacked the proper tools, as well as the broad expertise needed among its assessor staff, to conduct all required laboratory assessments.

The Panel recommended that ELAP consider using third-party, private-sector assessors to help clear a programmatic backlog. Instead, ELAP pursued expansion and reorganization of in-house capabilities and resources, and has yet to attract or fully retain the in-house staffing it needs. The Panel strongly urges ELAP to immediately begin accepting third-party assessments. The Panel also recommends that ELAP acquire software tools and external training resources to help meet workload demands and to ensure consistency when processing laboratory accreditation applications.

Support from the State Water Board is critical for ELAP to continue its journey to fully achieve its legislative mandates and regain credibility State- and nation-wide. The State Water Board should continue to provide resources and hold ELAP accountable by requiring the program to establish additional reporting metrics, by bringing in an independent consultant to perform a gap analysis, and by creating another expert panel to keep ELAP on track to meet its present and future demands.

**Full text:**

[http://ftp.sccwrp.org/pub/download/DOCUMENTS/TechnicalReports/977\\_ELAPReviewYear2.pdf](http://ftp.sccwrp.org/pub/download/DOCUMENTS/TechnicalReports/977_ELAPReviewYear2.pdf)