



Press Release - The East African Community Proficiency Testing Scheme

Background

To determine the laboratory testing performance and improve capacity within the East African region, the East African Community technical subcommittee on testing agreed to initiate a Proficiency Testing Scheme suitable to the regional environment in 2006.

Proficiency Testing (PT) is a process whereby laboratories determine their laboratory testing performance by means of inter-laboratory comparisons and monitoring of test results for known samples over time which informs corrective action where necessary. As a result a laboratory can demonstrate competence to third parties within the industry and monitor performance over time.



Why it is important for labs to participate in the PT Scheme

The Proficiency Testing Scheme will help participating laboratories to develop quality assurance tools in laboratories by comparing performance and taking the necessary remedial action where necessary to facilitate improvements in testing capabilities.

The scheme focuses on improving laboratory testing capabilities with an aim of producing accurate and reliable results.

Therefore the PT Scheme is motivational for laboratories and participation should assist analytical confidence building for laboratory staff and to maintain or improve the quality and accuracy of results, which supports those in need of accreditation and certification to quality management systems.

This helps to uncover errors within a laboratory under routine working conditions that could not have been found with internal quality control tools and these results can be used by customers, assessors and authorities or any other third party when selecting qualified laboratories.

Comparison with peer performance assists in the identification of measurement problems, a valuable method for quality control especially where suitable reference materials are not available.

Participation in the scheme also helps in the training of staff, marketing of testing services, savings in time and costs by reducing the need for repeat measurements and guards against the loss of reputation due to poor performance.

However proficiency testing addresses only the analytic process, not the pre- or post-analytic activities of the laboratory. Therefore it is not appropriate to use proficiency testing as the sole means for evaluating the quality of a laboratory.

How does the EAC Proficiency Testing Scheme operate?

Proficiency Testing (PT) schemes generally, operate by providing participating laboratories with similar but blind samples for concurrent testing. The laboratory analyses the samples, preferably as part of its normal routine, and reports the results to the PT providers. The PT provider analyses the results, and each of the laboratories is then provided with a report showing how closely its results agree with the accepted values. All participating laboratories are coded for confidentiality purposes. Participation into the PT is open to all countries of Africa.

The current EAC Proficiency Testing Scheme that started six years ago is run once a year covering three different products (wheat flour, edible vegetable oil, and edible salt). Three standards bureaus are currently the PT providers running the PT scheme, with Kenya Bureau of Standards being responsible for the wheat flour, Uganda National Bureau of Standards for the edible vegetable oil, and Tanzania Bureau of Standards for edible salt. Products are chosen for the PT after careful consideration of the relevance of the product to the regional trade and consumer safety.

Each PT round is followed by an evaluation workshop convened by the PT providers in any of the EAC countries, and attended by the participating laboratories, the PT coordinators in the respective bureaus of standards and a technical consultant, to evaluate the participants' performance, identify areas for improvement, and plan for the subsequent PT round. A training component is also part of the workshop. The next evaluation workshop will take place in Nairobi, Kenya, in the week 13th – 16th February 2012.

Currently, each participating laboratory is required to pay a nominal contribution of US\$150 per round, while the technical support and the bulk of the financial support are coming from PTB (Physikalisch-Technische Bundesanstalt) of Germany and the respective standards bureaus (Kenya Bureau of Standards Uganda National Bureau of Standards, and Tanzania Bureau of Standards).

Future outlook and sustainability

Funding by Physikalisch-Technische Bundesanstalt is expected to come to an end in 2012. The challenge is to obtain another financier/donor so as to continue with the scheme, as the current fees generated is not enough to make the PT scheme self sustaining. Increasing the number of participants, increasing the matrices and the rounds per year and the participation fees paid by each participant are also some of the matters being considered so as to make this vital scheme continue and also be self sustaining.

Participating institutions/laboratories

6th Round, 2011 participants are:

From Kenya – Analabs Ltd, Intertek Oil, KEBS Lake Region, KEBS Mombasa Region, KEBS Nairobi Region, SGS Kenya Ltd, Polucon Services Kenya Ltd, Kenya Industrial Research Development Institute (KIRDI), ABS TCM Ltd, Agri-Quest Ltd, National Public Health Laboratory Services, and Karlsmarts Laboratory Services.

From Tanzania - Government Chemist Analytical Laboratory Agency (GCLA), TBS Chemistry Lab and Food Lab, Tanzania Food & Drugs Authority (TFDA), Tanzania Industrial Research Development Organization (TIRDO), Southern and Eastern Africa Mineral Centre (SEAMIC), University of Dar es Salaam Dept. of Chemistry, and Geological Survey of Tanzania (GST)-Dodoma

From Uganda- Chemiphar (U) Ltd, Uganda Directorate of Government Analytical Laboratory, BIDCO Uganda Limited, Uganda National Bureau of Standards, Uganda Industrial Research Institute, and Makerere University Dept of Food Technology & Nutrition.

From Rwanda- Rwanda Bureau of Standards

From Burundi – Lab Chimie Agricole, ISABU, Burundi

From Zambia – Zambia Bureau of Standards

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More information can also be found on the East African Community website: <http://www.eac-quality.net>

Look out for the call for the next (7th) PT round in 2012 on the above websites or by contacting the coordinators in the respective countries.