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Re-Evaluation of National Accreditation Underway

By Steve Arms, Advocacy Committee Chair

Led by the efforts of the Advocacy Committee, TNI is currently in the process of re-evaluating its approach to maintaining and growing the national accreditation program. As we "take stock," TNI is examining what is working as well as what is not working for states, EPA, laboratories and various other stakeholders. To begin gathering the information needed to chart a new course, TNI staff has interviewed representatives from twenty-one (21) Non-NELAP states and received a broad range of ideas, some new and some not-so-new. Using this information as a starting point, TNI will host a webinar on July 17 to continue soliciting input from the stakeholder community. This process will culminate in a workshop on Friday of the Environmental Measurement Symposium in Washington, D.C., where breakout groups will brainstorm solutions to the issues identified. The following is a preliminary agenda for the workshop:

- Re-cap of purpose and background of the project
- Summary of issues identified by non-NELAP states
- Summary of issues identified by other stakeholders
- Identification of key issues/barriers to national accreditation
- Breakout sessions to brainstorm solutions to key issues/barriers
- Reports back to full group on breakout discussions

On November 2, 2012, the Environmental Laboratory Advisory Board (ELAB) sent a letter to EPA's Forum on Environmental Measurements (FEM) with a recommendation stating that EPA should create a vehicle that enables the Agency to team with state programs that have limited resources to develop rules that establish NELAP as the laboratory accreditation standard in their states. In their response to ELAB, the FEM stated that the FEM has provided funding through a cooperative agreement for the development of standards, guidance, training, and tools to benefit state, tribal, and local agencies in addition to the public and private sectors for several years. This vehicle is currently under award to The NELAC Institute (TNI). We will convey the additional need for state, tribal, and local agency support to set up regulatory programs for accreditation or certification programs within their purview; however, it is ultimately TNI's decision on how to prioritize and address this request based on the resources they have available from the Agency. The FEM's response clearly indicates that they are looking to TNI to review this issue and if appropriate, make a recommendation to re-prioritize cooperative agreement funds to address this concern.

Over the course of the twenty years since the national accreditation program was conceived, the state and federal regulatory landscape has shifted dramatically. The first group of NELAP accreditation bodies (ABs) received recognition in 1999. Since that time, only three additional ABs have applied for and been recognized as NELAP ABs. While many other states utilize all or part of the NELAC or TNI standards in their accreditation programs, attempts to expand the program by recognizing additional ABs have not been widely successful.

TNI's vision is a true national accreditation program, whereby all entities involved in the generation of environmental measurement data within the United States are accredited to one uniform, rigorous, and robust program that has been implemented consistently nationwide and focuses on the technical competence of the entity pursuing accreditation. It is time for TNI to re-evaluate its approach to making this vision a reality.