

ACCREDITED SEED SAMPLING PROGRAM

USDA Items of Interest in Seed, October 2007

In cooperation with the Audit, Review, and Compliance (ARC) Branch of the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS), Livestock and Seed Program, the Seed Regulatory and Testing Branch (SRTB) administers three ISO-based quality management programs—the Accredited Field Inspection Program, the Accredited Seed Sampling Program, and the Accredited Seed Laboratory Program—for providing accreditation to field inspectors, seed samplers, and seed testing laboratories. Of these, the Accredited Seed Sampling Program (ASSP) provides accreditation to seed samplers under the Process Verified Program (PVP) of AMS.

ASSP and other programs under the PVP provide agricultural suppliers with the ability to assure customers that they are capable of consistently providing quality products or services. A process verified system is audit-based in order to provide assurance that participants have created and implemented a quality management system (QMS) that complies with the program requirements.

Value of the ASSP

Becoming an accredited seed sampler or sampling entity under the ASSP can be of considerable value:

1. The establishment of a quality management system in conformity with a PVP enables customers to place greater dependence on the quality and consistency of sampling.
2. Accredited entities may have the potential to sample for the Accredited Seed Grader Program, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) Seed Schemes, Accredited Seed Laboratories, the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, and USDA Seed Analysis Certificates.
3. If desired, the participant can use the USDA PVP logo and shield with ARC Branch approval.
4. The participant may also be listed as an approved sampler on the USDA Web site of sampling programs.

Characteristics of the ASSP

The program is funded by user-fees and is completely voluntary in that samplers or sampling entities are under no obligation to seek accreditation. Once accredited under the program, they may choose to leave it at any time.

USDA requires accreditation audits of the program every three years and the submission of an annual internal audit report prior to the anniversary date of the program approval. In these instances, the only costs to the participant are for the yearly desk review of the internal audit and for audits by AMS to determine whether the applicant has met or continues to meet the specified requirements. Also, since the typical participant will only be subject to an onsite audit every three years, the major costs to the participant will also occur on a three-year basis.

The basic objective of the ASSP—to improve the quality of sampling and consequently the quality of the sample—is attained in two ways. The ASSP encourages uniform procedures and methodology for sampling seed and tries to improve sampling operations by promoting quality management principles. Consequently, seed customers are provided with an additional assurance of consistent sampling quality which may lead to improvements in seed trade both domestically and globally.

The Process

How does the **process for becoming an accredited sampler under the ASSP** work?

1. The first step is to have in place, or create, a quality management system (QMS) which meets the requirements of the Accredited Seed Sampling Program and of the Process Verified Program as stated in the standard for that program, ARC 1001. If there is already a QMS in place, certified under the ISO 9001 standards, the process is slightly different than for an organization creating one from scratch. AMS, in effect, recognizes that a QMS under a valid ISO 9001 certificate satisfies many of the requirements of ARC 1001. In turn, this will have an effect on the length and breadth of the audit which AMS performs. While ISO 9001 meets many of the requirements of the Process Verified Program, it does not meet all of them. ARC 1001 has two additional areas not included in ISO 9001..

Where AASCO Sampler Trainer Accreditation fits in.

The first of these involves the need for additional written procedures. ARC 1001 requires **procedures for training**, identification and traceability, receipt of product, and, if applicable, control of promotional material, specifically the USDA PVP logo and shield. If the organization does not intend to use the logo and shield, a simple statement to that effect negates the requirement for this procedure.

A second major difference between ARC 1001 and ISO 9001 is the requirement of the former for delineation of process verified points. Process verified points are specific requirements achieved through the implementation of a quality management system. They are, in effect, actions which add value to the product. One example might be a **specific training procedure, perhaps unique to the organization, or at least of such value that it makes an improvement to some aspect of the stem that results in a more consistently representative sample.**

2. Once an approved QMS is in place, the sampler or sampling entity submits LS Form-313 *Application for Service* to AMS (available on the ARC Web site, <http://www.ams.usda.gov/lsg/arc/reqasl.htm>). At the same time, a cover letter requesting accreditation under the specified program should be included. Finally, documentation of the QMS should also be provided.

3. ARC will first assess the process verified points to determine if they meet certain criteria, such as auditability and feasibility and are factual, value-adding, and within the scope of the program.

4. Once the process verified points have been accepted an auditor is assigned to perform a desk audit of the applicant's documentation.

5. **An internal audit must also be supplied to the auditor prior to the on-site audit.**

6. The last step is the on-site audit, during which applicants will be audited for compliance with the PVP and ASSP and for evidence of fulfilling the requirements of their QMS.

Responsibilities of the Program Participant

There are several responsibilities which are incumbent upon the accredited sampler or sampling entity.

1. The approved QMS must be maintained, and any significant changes to it must be relayed to AMS immediately.
2. Samplers must comply with all provisions of the ASSP and applicable elements of ARC Procedures 1001 and, consequently, should be familiar with the provisions of these documents.
3. Samplers are also accountable for sampling seed in accordance with the Association of American Seed Control Officials Handbook on Seed Sampling, OECD Authorization Guidelines, or the Federal Seed Act.
4. Sampling records must be maintained for a minimum of 5 years.
5. Internal audits must be conducted annually and the results supplied to AMS prior to the anniversary date of the accredited party's participation in the ASSP.
6. Samplers or sampling entities must participate in check-sampling of seed lots entered for official certification for OECD Seed Schemes (this is not applicable to seed lots sampled by approved automatic samplers).

Summary

In summary, the Accredited Seed Sampling Program involves a commitment of resources by the interested party. In the beginning, that commitment includes developing and implementing a quality management system that complies with the Process Verified Program. Upon accreditation, the participant commits to fulfilling the responsibilities that accompany acceptance into the program. **However, the benefits of the ASSP can be of considerable value to the accredited entity.** The potential opportunity to sample for various programs and laboratories can provide new avenues for sampling activity. The adoption of a QMS in compliance with the PVP may add further value by improving the sampling quality and the consistency of that quality.

For information regarding this article, contact Seed Marketing Specialist Gene Wilson at (704) 810-8888; gene.wilson@usda.gov.