

How Good Is Your Lab?

By CRAIG PASKVAN

When you submit samples to your lab, how good are the results? Do you know if the samples you are submitting are going to be accurate? Can you count on making recommendations based on the results? What guidelines are there out there that you as a superintendent can use to assure yourself that you are dealing with a quality lab?

The feeling I get from talking to different superintendents is that all labs are just about the same. Certainly in this day and age of automated equipment and robotic pH systems it makes repeated testing very easy to do. But the fact of the matter is that it takes good quality technicians and a strict quality control to produce accurate data on a routine basis. There are factory labs out there that have the best in modern equipment, perform high volumes of soil tests, yet fail to produce accurate results. All at a very low price. So can we assume that these labs are sacrificing speed for accuracy?? After all what is their goal? To provide the cheapest test possible, or produce the most accurate tests, ones on which you can depend?

One of the ways to determine if the lab you are using is a good quality lab is to determine if your lab belongs to the North American Proficiency Testing Program. There are about 152 plus labs that participate in this program each year. Samples are submitted to the labs for analysis which is done quarterly. Samples are flagged when the median average deviations become too high. Last year 13%, or 20 out of 152 labs, fell into the 90% passing category for accuracy. In other words, 20 out of 152 plus labs produced data that had 90% of the results not flagged. These labs are doing a very good job. The next level had 84 labs, or 55% of the 152 labs, fall into the 80 to 90% passed criteria. These are okay, but have considerable problems they need to address. And then you have the bottom 32% of the labs, or 49 labs, that fall below 70% passing. These labs have numerous concerns concerning their accuracy. It is surprising that state and government labs fall into this category, not just the private labs. These same problems are found in other labs around the world.

So what should you do if you are submitting samples to a lab which you make fertility recommendations on? Call the lab and verify that #1, they are a member of the North American Proficiency Testing program, and #2, find out where they rank.

If they are in the upper 90%, you know you are dealing with a very good lab. If they are not, shop around and locate one that is a member of that group. Ask fellow superintendents where they have their work done. After all, how much is riding on those results?

(Editor's Note: Craig Paskvan is an independent soil consultant.)

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