

**NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF  
TESTING AUTHORITIES, AUSTRALIA**

# **WORKING WITH NATA ACCREDITED FOOD TESTING LABORATORIES**

**INDUSTRY USER GUIDE NO.1**



# WHY USE A NATA ACCREDITED LABORATORY?

NATA Accreditation is about confidence – yours and that of your customers – in the data and information on which you must make informed decisions.

NATA Accreditation covers activities that produce this technical/scientific data and information; testing, measurement, examinations and inspections.

In NATA's vocabulary, accreditation has a very specific meaning.

A procedure by which an **authoritative body** gives formal recognition that a body is **competent** to carry out **specific tasks**.

Hence, NATA Accreditation is a high level process of recognising collective, specific and demonstrated competencies. The core of NATA Accreditation is the third party, objective, peer assessment process at a scientific and technical level that provides assurance of the facility's capability to produce reliable data from particular analyses or inspections. The NATA Accreditation Criteria include the international standard ISO/IEC 17025 *General requirements for the competence of testing and calibration laboratories* which is used globally for accreditation.

In addition to confidence, NATA Accreditation provides you with:

- an ability to outsource to an independent, objective authority the monitoring of laboratory and inspection body performance;
- international arrangements providing for the mutual recognition of data produced by laboratories and inspection bodies accredited by NATA and equivalent accreditation bodies globally;
- a resource to resolve disputes relating to accredited services.

## WHAT FOOD TESTING ACTIVITIES ARE ACCREDITED BY NATA?

NATA accredits testing facilities that undertake chemical and microbiological analysis of virtually all types of food.

In addition to human health aspects of food safety and nutrition, NATA also accredits for the detection of contaminants and biosecurity hazards associated with food – both for import and export purposes.

# IS THE FACILITY ACCREDITED FOR WHAT I NEED?

A laboratory's NATA Accreditation may not cover every service that it provides so it is important to ask the correct question when seeking to have your samples tested.

***“Do you hold NATA Accreditation for [the specified analysis] of [the specific type of food]?”***

NATA Accredited facilities are able to add the NATA endorsement to reports covering accredited activities. The endorsement is not allowed to be applied to unaccredited tests. As such, a more concise specification is to state that

***“I require all results reported to be NATA-endorsed”.***

The tests for which a facility has successfully demonstrated practical competence and capability at a NATA assessment are detailed within its Scope of Accreditation. The scope of accreditation contains important information such as analytes, techniques and applicable standards and codes. There may, however, be additional checks that you will need to make.

Scopes of accreditation are publicly available documents and hence the primary source of information for anyone wanting to have testing performed. They are accessible from the NATA website at [www.nata.com.au](http://www.nata.com.au)

## Limited Scopes of Accreditation

A laboratory may not have every test, measurement and examination described in a particular standard, code or specification included in its scope of accreditation. For example, some laboratories may only have a limited capability with regard to the list of tests specified in a standard. Where one or more tests can be performed validly in isolation – that is, they are not contingent on the product sample already having undergone another test(s) – NATA may accredit them for a subset of the standard, code or specification.

As such, when checking a laboratory's scope of accreditation, it is important to clarify any limitation on the capability.

It should be noted that an accredited laboratory is permitted to include the results of tests not covered by its scope of accreditation on a NATA-endorsed test report provided any such results are appropriately identified as not being covered by the endorsement. If you need all tests to be performed under the laboratory's scope of accreditation make this clear at the start.

That is why it is so important to specify that “all test results reported must be NATA-endorsed”.



# NATA-ENDORSEMENT – WHAT'S THE SIGNIFICANCE?

The NATA endorsement consists of the NATA logo, the laboratory's accreditation number and the International Standard with which the facility complies. This will be presented similarly to the following.



**Accredited for compliance with ISO/IEC 17025**  
**Accreditation number xxxxx**

In addition, the following statements may be added:

***NATA is a signatory to the ILAC mutual recognition arrangement for the mutual recognition of the equivalence of testing, calibration and inspection reports*** [for those who may need international recognition of the reported results]

## **NATA endorsed vs unendorsed reports – cost / benefit?**

NATA requires that all activities described in the scope of accreditation are performed using exactly the same processes and to the same level of confidence whether reported on a NATA-endorsed report or not.

Some laboratories do, however, apply a surcharge to issue an endorsed report for commercial or marketing reasons.

For you as the customer, the NATA-endorsement is there to provide prima facie evidence that the test results within the report have been issued under the laboratory's NATA Accreditation. Hence, you can have the confidence that the tests have been undertaken by competent staff using sound science/engineering as verified by NATA's peer assessment processes.

Similarly, your own customers and auditors (if your business is subject to some form of external oversight) may share this confidence.



# WHAT DO I NEED TO SPECIFY?

This may be stating the obvious but simply dropping off a product sample at a laboratory and saying “I want it tested” is not the best approach – yet it happens. NATA accredited laboratories will happily assist you with defining your needs but they do need some specific information first.

Once you have ascertained that the laboratory is appropriately accredited, the next step is to ensure clarity around:

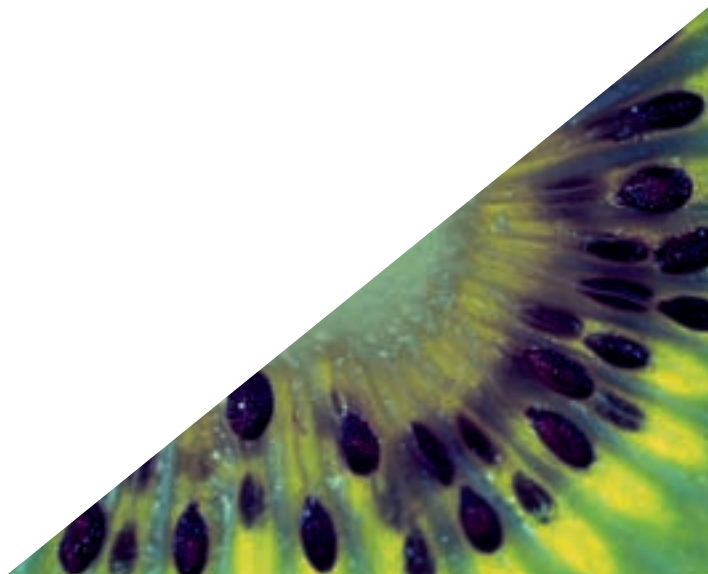
- Why you need their services – e.g. one-off investigation regulatory compliance, or on-going routine production testing;
- Any specifics for sampling - your own or those relating to a standard/specification;
- What analyses you wish to have performed;
- Where appropriate, the standard, code or specification that is applicable;
- The test method to be used (if the standard, code or specification allows for options);
- If compositing of samples is allowed by the standard, code or specification, whether you want this to happen. (see below for more information)
- Whether it is for export purposes – as this may impact on the selection of test criteria.

This gives the accredited laboratory a starting point for determining its ability and availability to undertake the work and, of course, the cost.

## What do I do if my testing requirements change?

Where there is a standing arrangement or contract for samples to be routinely tested, the laboratory would not be expected to contact the customer on receipt of each batch of samples, even if the number of samples received might vary. Laboratories will, however, contact the customer if the sample type changes or the integrity of the sample is in doubt.

If you require a change to some aspect of a routine arrangement such as the test method or an analyte, it is your responsibility to notify the laboratory. Any material change to such a standing arrangement needs to be done in writing and confirmed by the laboratory.





# WHAT IS IMPORTANT WITH SAMPLES TO BE TESTED?

## Sample integrity

The best quality testing service available is effectively useless if samples are compromised by:

- poor sampling plan and/or technique;
- inappropriate storage and transport (e.g. temperature, type of container, sealing, timeliness); and/or
- incorrect or inadequate labelling.

It is stating the obvious but samples supplied to a laboratory must be representative of the material being sampled. Compromising the integrity of the samples will waste everyone's time and your money.

## Supplying the correct amount/number of samples

Codes such as the Food Standards Code are specific around the number and size of samples that need to be analysed. Ensuring that you supply the correct amount of material and/or correct number of samples will save angst with the laboratory and minimise the cost. If a standard or code does not mandate or provide guidance on sample size and/or the number, have the conversation with your laboratory.

## Compositing of samples

As mentioned in the section on specifying what you want, compositing of samples is sometimes allowed for by standards, codes and specifications (e.g. Australia New Zealand Food Standards Code section 6 of Standard 1.4.1).

The obvious benefit of compositing is that multiple samples may be tested together which may reduce the cost of the test.

The downside is that if the analysis identifies the presence of a contaminant, it is not possible to identify in which sample or samples it was present. This may mean additional testing or possibly the need to quarantine batches that were actually free of contaminants.

If agreed that compositing is acceptable, it is important to provide clear instructions to the laboratory on how the samples are to be tested. Particular care should be paid to ensuring the sample volume or mass tested is in compliance with the requirements of the applicable standards, codes or specifications. If you are in doubt, this should be discussed with the laboratory or an independent technical expert. It is possible that some methods of compositing may lead to an insufficient volume of sample being tested if clear instruction is not given.

## “Samples tested as received”

This statement is usually applied to test reports when the laboratory has not been responsible for the collection of samples. Use of this statement does not, however, remove the responsibility of the laboratory to test samples that are in a satisfactory condition. Laboratories are required to have procedures covering the acceptance of samples for testing.

This is especially important for many food samples (including water) that are not shelf stable. If a laboratory receives a sample that does not meet acceptance criteria, the laboratory must contact the customer and ascertain what action to take. The best option is to provide another sample but this is not always possible. In such cases the testing may be undertaken but the test report must include comments regarding the nature of the problem(s) with the samples and, where applicable, that caution is required when interpreting the result(s).



# WHAT SHOULD I DO WITH MY TEST REPORTS?

ISO/IEC 17025 details what needs to be included in a test report. Additionally, some standards/standard methods describe how results are to be reported.

Nonetheless, customers should still check any report received to ensure that:

- it matches your request;
- it contains all of the information you need;
- the results are reported clearly and unambiguously; and
- the results are reported in the manner prescribed by the applicable standard, code or specification.

Unless the laboratory performing the tests has been involved in the sampling, the report may include a statement to the effect that “samples were tested as received”. This indicates that the customer has been responsible for providing the samples to the laboratory in an appropriate manner.

If the sampling has been performed by another accredited laboratory or an accredited inspection body, details of the sampling should have also been provided in a NATA-endorsed report.

## COMMUNICATION IS THE KEY

The key to successfully gaining reliable testing data is effective communication between the laboratory and client.

Mutual understanding doesn't just happen, it must be pursued. Two particular points to remember:

- Initial clarity surrounding the purpose of the testing will aid all subsequent discussions and greatly improve the likelihood of obtaining the appropriate services;
- Communication shouldn't be a once-off event – if you have questions having received the test report and something seems odd or doesn't make sense, ask.



## SUMMARY

<b>Why use a NATA Accredited facility?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• 3rd party verification of capability and competence</li><li>• Compliance with international standard for laboratories</li><li>• International recognition of results</li></ul>
<b>Is the facility accredited for the services I need?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Ask the right question regarding NATA Accreditation</li><li>• Check the Scope of Accreditation</li></ul>
<b>What do I need to specify?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>All results to be NATA-endorsed</b></li><li>• The purpose of the test</li><li>• Methods and/or limits of detection</li><li>• Applicable standard/specification</li><li>• When you need the results</li></ul>
<b>What is important with samples to be tested?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Collection – who, sample plan, amount and number</li><li>• Samples are representative of the food being sampled</li><li>• Identification, traceability and labelling</li><li>• Maintaining integrity during transport</li></ul>
<b>What should I do with my reports?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Check that report is clear and complete</li><li>• Make sure report is NATA endorsed</li><li>• Take note of any comments</li><li>• Use the results to benefit your business!</li></ul>

## HELP IS AVAILABLE

NATA also recognises that despite best intentions and a robust accreditation system, things may go wrong. If you are experiencing difficulties with any NATA accredited laboratory and have not been able to resolve them through direct discussions, it is recommended that you contact NATA to discuss the general nature of any concerns. You should then follow this up with a written account of the issues. NATA has a comprehensive complaints handling process and treats any issues raised very seriously.

In the food sector, please direct inquiries to:

The Sector Manager, Life Sciences  
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Ph (03) 9274 8200  
Email [neil.shepherd@nata.com.au](mailto:neil.shepherd@nata.com.au)

