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Guide to use of NATA's MRA network

1. How to ensure test, calibration or inspection reports, and reference material certificates are accepted by both importing and exporting economies

NATA is recognised by the Australian government as the national authority for accreditation of laboratories and suppliers of certified reference materials, and a peak authority for the accreditation of inspection bodies and proficiency testing scheme providers through a Memorandum of Understanding signed by both parties. Formal agreements also exist between NATA and the accreditation bodies of many other economies throughout the world. Under the Mutual Recognition Arrangements (MRAs) among accreditation bodies, each organisation recognises the equivalence of accreditations granted by its overseas counterparts, and promotes the equivalence of such accreditations covered by the scope of recognition, within its own economy. This reduces the need for re-testing, re-calibration or re-inspection of products, or re-certification of reference materials in an importing economy and saves time and money for exporters. Before entering into such arrangements, accreditation bodies have the responsibility to thoroughly evaluate each other's systems of accreditation for compliance with the international standard ISO/IEC 17011. These arrangements also include mechanisms to ensure that test, calibration and inspection reports, and reference material certificates covered by the arrangement carry the same degree of credibility on an ongoing basis.

Each NATA-accredited organisation is recognised for its technical competence to perform specific tests, measurements or inspections, or to certify specific reference materials. For those activities for which it is accredited, the organisation is entitled to place the appropriate NATA endorsement on its reports and certificates, details of which are listed in the Second Schedule of NATA's Rules. (Copies can be obtained from the NATA website: www.nata.asn.au). Each NATA-endorsed report or certificate must be signed by a person recognised by NATA as an approved signatory or delegate acceptable under NATA's Rules.

Accreditation is granted only after detailed assessment of the technical competence of the organisation and its staff against technical and management system criteria set out in ISO/IEC 17025 for testing and calibration laboratories, ISO/IEC 17020 for inspection bodies, and ISO Guide 34 in conjunction with ISO/IEC 17025 for reference material producers. Regular reassessments are conducted to ensure continuing compliance with accreditation requirements.

Full contact details of NATA's Asia Pacific Laboratory Accreditation Cooperation (APLAC) and International Laboratory Accreditation Cooperation (ILAC) MRA partners are available in the NATA MRA Network listing available via the Publications page of NATA's website, under International Documents. Further enquiries can then be made as each accreditation body has a publicly available listing of accredited organisations and of their scopes of accreditation. Most accreditation bodies have directories on the internet that are usually available in English.

- **Recognition in Australia of reports and certificates generated overseas**

For recognition of reports and certificates issued by organisations accredited by NATA's overseas MRA partners, reports and certificates received from these organisations must bear the accreditation mark ('endorsement') of one of the accreditation bodies that is a signatory to the ILAC or APLAC MRA.

- **Recognition of NATA endorsed reports and certificates by overseas clients or regulators**

The mutual recognition arrangements also enable reports and certificates issued by NATA accredited organisations to be accepted overseas. The same set of requirements for claiming equivalence apply here. That is, a NATA-endorsed report or certificate issued in accordance with the client or regulator prescribed method can be claimed to be the equivalent of that issued by an organisation accredited by one of NATA's MRA partners.

- **Acceptance of reports and certificates under the MRA**

The claim of equivalence of reports and certificates is widely accepted by regulators in Australia and overseas, but ultimately it is the regulator or client that decides on acceptance of reports and certificates. NATA and its MRA partners cannot demand acceptance of the reports and certificates but all are willing to support claims of equivalence, where all the conditions for claiming that equivalence have clearly been met, and to further explain the MRA system to facilitate their acceptance.

- **Ensuring a thorough understanding of a regulator or client's needs**

To meet any Australian or overseas client-driven or regulatory requirements, organisations are urged to pay particular attention to the test, calibration or inspection procedure prescribed by the Australian or overseas regulator or client. Unless these are understood and the organisation is accredited for the specified activity, the full benefits of the MRA cannot be utilised.

- **Equivalence of test and measurement procedures**

The APLAC and ILAC MRAs relate to the equivalence of endorsed reports and certificates. The MRAs enable the recipient of an endorsed report or certificate to have equal confidence in the competence of the foreign accredited laboratory, inspection body or reference material producer.

The APLAC and ILAC MRAs do not relate to the equivalence of test and measurement procedures. Any decision on the acceptance of equivalence of test and measurement procedures is the responsibility of the client, regulator or other end-user of the reports or certificates. For this reason it is critical that it is clearly established exactly what procedure a client or other end-user requires.

2. The ILAC Laboratory Combined MRA Mark

To demonstrate accreditation by a signatory to the ILAC Arrangement (MRA), NATA members may wish to use the ILAC Laboratory Combined MRA Mark on reports and certificates.

A set of clear rules govern the use of the ILAC Laboratory Combined MRA Mark, for example it is not available for use by all NATA fields of testing, by inspection bodies or reference material producers, as these activities are not yet covered by the ILAC MRA, and it can only be applied to reports and certificates that meet the requirements for NATA endorsed reports and certificates.

If you wish to know the areas of NATA accreditation in which it can be applied, and the other conditions of use, please visit the member's section of NATA's website, www.nata.asn.au, to view the full ILAC Laboratory Combined MRA Mark Sub-License Agreement.

3. APLAC Membership and the APLAC MRA

Full APLAC members are national third party organisations in the Asia Pacific region engaged in the accreditation of testing and calibration laboratories, inspection bodies and reference materials producers, as designated by their governments or otherwise recognised as practitioners by APLAC.

APLAC full membership should not be confused with being a signatory of the APLAC MRA (sometimes incorrectly referred to as 'party to...', 'member of...' the APLAC MRA).

A full member of APLAC can become a signatory to the MRA by being subject to regular successful evaluations of its activities. The focus of the evaluation is to establish the APLAC member's ability to determine that the calibration laboratories, testing laboratories, inspection bodies and reference material producers it accredits are technically competent. Re-evaluations of MRA signatories are done regularly at least every 4 years.

Through these evaluations across the region, cross border confidence is established and maintained.

Similarly the International Laboratory Accreditation Cooperation (ILAC) has a distinction between the accreditation bodies that participate in the general activities of ILAC, called Associate Members, and the accreditation bodies that are signatories to the ILAC MRA and are designated as Full Members of ILAC.