

Certification boosts confidence

Despite initial controversy, MCERTS for water monitoring equipment are edging towards industry standard status. Analytical Technology invited a panel of experts to join general manager Michael Strahand in sharing their experience of the certification process and advice on getting the best out of the scheme

Emily Jarvis, environmental project manager at Sira opened the dialogue, explaining the role of Sira in managing the MCERTS product certification scheme on behalf of the Environment Agency (EA). A certification committee is assigned to each project, comprising independent technical experts.

"This committee provides guidance and technical judgement, helping to review the information that has been submitted to make sure that the equipment meets the performance standards," she explained.

"Next, the manufacturer arranges directly with a third-party test house for laboratory testing to take place where existing evidence is not available. This is used to determine performance characteristics, where such testing requires a highly controlled environment. A field trial is initiated at the same time, carried out on processes representative of the intended industrial sectors and applications.

"Alongside the testing processes, Sira conducts an audit at the manufacturing site to confirm reproducibility and that the manufacturer can control any design changes. This ensures performance is not degraded below the MCERTS standard. The manufacturing systems and final product checks are all tested and ongoing surveillance audits take place on an annual basis.

"The final stage of the certification process involves reviewing all data that have been generated from the laboratory testing, field trials and manufacturing site audit. Once all of this evidence is assessed, the final evaluation is submitted to the certification committee for final review and approval."

Jarvis explained that following approval, the certificates are issued and posted on Sira's website in an accessible format. Two sets of costs from Sira are incurred: certification cost of approximately £5,000 and the audit cost (£995).

Michael Strahand, general manager of Analytical Technology and Graham Hartry, environment manager of the blank processing department at the Royal Mint explained how



they became involved with MCERTS. Hartry said that the Royal Mint was first informed about MCERTS for water monitoring equipment in 2006 when it received a pollution, prevention and control (PPC) permit that stated that its flow monitoring instruments should be MCERTS-certified.

"We had been using the pH monitor from Analytical Technology on our sewage discharge system for 18 months and were already experiencing significant benefits, including improved discharge control, reliability and confidence in our results. At the time of the notice, there were very few pH flow meters in the market that conformed to the MCERTS standard."

ATI approached the Royal Mint and the company agreed to participate in a field trial for MCERTS certification of its pH meter.

Strahand said: "We became aware of MCERTS around the same time as the Royal Mint and we decided to investigate whether it was worthwhile. Part of our motivation to pursue the MCERTS certification was that other countries have implemented similar schemes and these often preclude UK manufacturers from exporting water monitoring equipment.

"We also liked the fact that the scheme involved field testing rather than being solely laboratory-based. The water monitoring standard was at an early phase and we felt that being one of the few companies to obtain the certification would give us a competitive edge."

Strahand is enthusiastic about the marketing advantage of the MCERTS logo and the way it increases customer confidence. "The certification also boosts our confidence," he added. "We always believed that we produced instruments of the highest quality, but it is encouraging when we have third-party recognition."

Paul Wiggins, MCERTS project manager for the Environment Agency, shared his belief in the scheme. He said: "MCERTS provides sound, independent evidence that products are first-class. Through the comprehensive process of laboratory testing, field trials and manufacturing site audits, the certification ensures that

equipment serves its pre-stated purpose. MCERTS provides independent validation of the claims made by manufacturers, while also achieving the aim of the EA to protect the environment by reliably controlling effluents."

Speaking for the customer, Hartry said: "MCERTS brings standardisation to water treatment control and provides us with the confidence that the instrument will do what the manufacturer claims it does."

MCERTS has come under fire for the time and financial investment required from the manufacturer, but Strahand believes there are ways to minimise costs: "We are used to constantly be evaluating our products, so there is only a small financial investment for the MCERTS certification. Without the assistance of the Royal Mint for the field trial, an extra financial cost would have been incurred while generating the field testing data.

"Appointing a service provider to conduct a field trial of a product over a three month period can cost 15K. By working with an installed base, this cost is eliminated.

"Laboratory testing can cost about the same amount as the field trial, meaning that the whole certification could cost up to £30K. Going through this process has encouraged us to collect field data in a rigorous way in case we decide to go through MCERTS certification for another product as it could reduce the costs significantly."

Wiggins confirmed that the EA's certification committee evaluates existing laboratory and field data and decides whether such data can be accepted or if further testing is required.

"Once MCERTS certification has been achieved on one product range, very little extra testing should be necessary should similar products be passed through the certification," he explained.

"Our advice to manufacturers is to keep track of data during product installations to save both time and money."

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