

Considerations for selecting and using a contract laboratory

The following is list of things to consider when choosing and using a laboratory. Not all of the items in the following table need to be considered for all projects; it depends on your purpose and anticipated data uses.

Laboratory considerations

Bottles and preservatives	Ask if they will provide appropriate bottle types with preservatives.
Cost	Consider cost not only of the sample analyses, but also of shipping. Tell them the number of samples you anticipate. You may be able to get a better price for large orders.
Certification	You may want to require that the laboratory be certified with the Minnesota Department of Health. See www.health.state.mn.us/divs/phl/cert.html for a list of certified laboratories, or you may want to ask for a copy of their certificate.
Chain of custody	If chain of custody is important for your monitoring purpose, ask for a description of their chain of custody procedures and copies of their chain of custody forms.
Consistency	If you have a long-term project, consider a laboratory you know will be around for the length of the project. Staying with the same laboratory for the duration of the project will help minimize variability between laboratories/analysts.
Delivery and shipping	Ask if they have a delivery service and whether or not this cost is included in the cost per sample analysis. Some labs allow sample drop-off to satellite locations, which avoids shipping costs.
Detection limits	Make sure that the laboratory can achieve the detection limits you need for your project. Ask if they have the necessary equipment to achieve these limits.
Hours of operation	Make sure the laboratory will be able to receive samples at the times you anticipate collecting and be able to complete analyses within specified holding times.
Methods	Specify the methods you want used. Ask if the laboratory has experience with these methods and if they have Standard Operating Procedures already prepared for these methods. If so, you may want to ask for copies.
QA/QC	Ask for a copy of the laboratory's Quality Assurance/Quality Control Manual. Check to make sure that the laboratory's data quality objectives are consistent with your project objectives and needs.
Reporting	Tell them in what format you want the results reported (i.e., paper report, electronic). Ask them to include results of laboratory QA/QC efforts for precision and accuracy and to note if data quality objectives were met in the reports.