



## USDA-CSREES 2006 National Water Quality Conference

### Enhancing Credibility in Volunteer Monitoring Programs

The ultimate goal of most volunteer monitoring programs is to ensure that well-trained volunteers collect high quality data and that the data are used. Despite decades of demonstrating that volunteers can and do collect representative data, government agencies, scientists and often the general public are sometimes reluctant to use data not collected by “experts”. Therefore volunteer water quality monitoring programs must work especially hard to build and maintain credibility – some have even said, “twice as hard for half the recognition.” This session provides an overview of quality assurance and quality control issues and provides examples of methods used by many programs to substantiate the credibility of their data. Water quality monitoring data are typically gathered to support decision-making, whether it is for encouraging waterfront residents to convert lawns into vegetated buffers, for enacting local ordinances to strengthen wetlands protection or storm water management, or for regulatory action. In order to be useful, monitoring data must provide relevant information, *and* the data must be credible, which usually means that it is documented and defensible. Data of unknown quality are essentially useless, and useless data can potentially corrupt the decision-making process. Generating reliable data requires adherence to an overall quality system, but what exactly makes up that system? The Quality System can most easily be thought of in terms of what you need to do *Before, During* and *After* your monitoring effort. The three elements of quality assurance, control and assessment combine to form the Quality System and should be focused on how you intend for the data to be used. This system should be incorporated into every aspect of your monitoring program - the bedrock upon which your program is based!

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