

a golden anniversary

By Thomas Palkon



Gold Seal celebrates
50 years of product testing
and certification

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Although the Water Quality Association (WQA) as an organization did not exist until 1973, its laboratory and product certification program has been testing and certifying products since 1959. This year, WQA's Gold Seal certification anniversary will be a golden celebration.

The Water Conditioning Foundation (WCF) and Water Conditioning Assn. Intl., the two organizations that merged to form the WQA, understood that developing a product testing lab that independently tested and certified water treatment products' performance claims, structural integrity and material safety would be a proactive step for the industry. They also had the foresight to understand that the use of industry self-regulated performance standards to measure product performance is better for an industry than state or federal product registration programs.

WCF's first product testing laboratory opened in 1959 in Glenview, Ill. The lab was designed to test water softeners initially but expanded its capabilities to test point-of-use (POU) and point-of-entry (POE) water filters and residential reverse osmosis (RO) systems. It was the first independent lab established that conducted testing for the residential water treatment industry.

Standardized testing protocols needed to be established that could evaluate product performance. These standards also had to be recognized by the regulatory community so they could be used by manufacturers to demonstrate that household water conditioners truly improved water quality for consumers. The first WQA standard, Industry Standard for Household Water Softeners S-100, was published in 1959. It was developed by the industry to evaluate water softeners' structural integrity, performance and materials safety.

Now that a regulatory-approved standard was in place and a lab had been constructed to perform the testing, all WQA needed was for manufacturers to send in their water softeners for testing and evaluation. The industry responded to the testing request; during the lab's first year of operation it tested nearly 100 softeners to the newly developed standard.

Although water softeners were the backbone of the association at that time, additional standards for POU and POE water filters, RO systems and distillers needed to be established to cover other residential water treatment products. The following WQA standards were established:

- WQA S-200 POU and POE

Residential Water Treatment Filters (1966)

- WQA S-300 Residential Reverse Osmosis Systems (1980)
- WQA S-400 Residential Distillation Systems (1986)

Product Certification

Lab headquarters remained in Glenview until 1983. In 1982, WQA moved its headquarters to Lisle, Ill. The construction plans for the new building included space for the lab and certification departments to occupy double the size of the current testing lab. Construction of the lab in Lisle was complete in 1983.

Between 1997 and 2003, WQA's lab underwent renovations. The lab expanded its scope to include testing to the NSF/ANSI standards that the industry was using more to evaluate household water treatment equipment. At this time, the WQA standards were slowly being replaced by the ANSI-adopted standards that were developed through NSF's Joint Committee.

WQA's lab also began developing automated test benches to more efficiently evaluate POU filters and RO systems. The testing automation was established to keep testing costs at a minimum and prevented multiple work shifts for the technicians and analysts. WQA also enhanced its quality control procedures by revising the lab's Quality Assurance Plan to meet the requirements of ISO 17025. The Gold Seal program also revised its policies to comply with ISO Guide 65, which included the addition of annual plant inspections for all certified companies.

These actions led to the Gold Seal's accreditation by American National Standards Institute (ANSI) in 2003. This was a milestone for the program because it was now accredited as a third-party independent certification body by ANSI. Regulators throughout the U.S. relied on ANSI to ensure certification bodies developed a competent program that complied with all ISO Guide 65 requirements. This assured manufacturers that by using the program, product certifications would be accepted by plumbing codes and regulatory agencies throughout the U.S.

Shortly after receiving ANSI accreditation, the Gold Seal program received Standards Council of

Canada (SCC) accreditation so that its testing and certifications would be accepted throughout North America.

Times of Growth

Because of the rapid growth and limited space available, WQA established its Recognized Testing Laboratory (RTL) program in 2004 to ensure it had adequate capacity to handle all test requests from manufacturers. Today, WQA has a number of approved RTLs that assist the lab with testing requests.

Another factor that sparked rapid growth was the 2005 decision to begin testing and certifying plumbing products, components and additives. Until 2005, WQA focused its efforts on testing complete water treatment systems. But as demand increased for testing plumbing products, components and additives, it was decided to expand the testing and certification scope.

As the global market grew, it became clear that WQA needed to expand its certification efforts throughout the world. The Gold Seal program now participates in WQA's International Section meetings to remain current with international standards and regulations. The goal is to not only offer product testing and certification for international companies to enter the North American markets but to offer product testing and certification to all companies seeking entry into any country's market.

WQA's board of directors approved a lab expansion project that more than doubled testing capacity. The project required a significant amount of capital, and the board needed to decide if the core mission would not be affected by the additional attention the lab project required. The expansion was complete in January 2009. The number of test stations has more than doubled and staff has been increased to handle increased testing requests.

The industry's first testing lab and certification program has experienced numerous changes over the past 50 years, but its core principals have always remained the same. Where the Gold Seal program will be in the years to come, I'm not sure. But I am confident that WQA is committed to the success of the program and the benefits it provides the industry. *wqp*

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