



A Eurofins Perspective on “Optimising Test Plans”

Background / Context

With cost pressures from energy and supply chain biting, some food businesses feel forced to look for savings in their testing budget. It's a risky business. While any reduction in testing will have an effect on the amount or quality of analysis results available, some approaches are smarter than others.

Consider

Thinning out trending data points

Where some test results demand an immediate reaction, there are other tests which produce results to be monitored for trends. Actions are taken only if a trend is established. Consider how many data points you need; what would be the impact of a 10% reduction, or 50%, even 75%? A small cost reduction on a proportion of your samples, e.g. by removing a TVC from the test suite, can provide a less risky option than reducing the number of samples overall.

Reviewing your environmental monitoring swabbing plan

Additional swabbing points are often planned as part of an investigation, but not reviewed for usefulness after the issue has been resolved. You may be testing swabs that you simply don't need any more, or could get better information from sampling in other locations.

Make full use of the information you already have available

Many businesses send samples for testing which they already knew would fail to meet specification. At times this is done intentionally, for reasons such as collecting evidence to make a case. On other occasions, it may just be part of the routine and no-one has made the time to step in and use the evidence already available, e.g. from the supplier, from other tests, temperature measurement, sensory. To take a simple example, if that equipment was unhygienic last week and it hasn't been cleaned since, do you need microbiological testing to tell you that it's still dirty? The saved cost of testing could be worth making the time to intervene.

Risk assess your testing plan

The most efficient and effective food safety and quality testing plans are designed with an understanding of why each test is being done, what requirements are in place, and what sort of action any possible result should trigger. In this context, different results will have different values, and the risk which comes from missing out on this information can be assessed. Any cuts that are necessary should be made from the testing which produces results with lower value and lowest risk. Eurofins can provide help and expert advice if you are unsure of undertaking this alone.

Ask your laboratory service provider for advice

Certain analyses may be carried out using alternative methodology, or with a different turnaround time, at a lower cost. Your laboratory will be able to advise what is available that might suit your needs.

Avoid

Ditching tests without doing a risk assessment

Some results are more crucial for managing food safety and quality than others. If something has to go, proposed changes to testing plans should be assessed for impact on the overall Food Safety Management System. Testing of Finished Product provides important verification evidence.

Cutting out pathogen testing, to rely on indicator results alone

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Pooling or compositing of final product samples

Remember that not only does this reduce the stringency of the test (and compositing reduces your confidence that e.g. any *Listeria monocytogenes* present will be detected), but an adverse result might have been caused by any of the individual samples. The food business could find itself having to recall multiple batches or products instead of just one.

Contact

To learn more about how Eurofins can help with optimising your testing plan, please contact risk@eurofins.co.uk