

Introduction

Method 1631 (the "Method") supports water quality monitoring programs authorized under the Clean Water Act (CWA; the "Act"). CWA Section 304(a) requires EPA to publish water quality criteria that reflect the latest scientific knowledge concerning the physical fate (e.g., concentration and dispersal) of pollutants, the effects of pollutants on ecological and human health, and the effect of pollutants on biological community diversity, productivity, and stability.

CWA Section 303 requires each State to set a water quality standard for each body of water within its boundaries. A State water quality standard consists of a designated use or uses of a waterbody or a segment of a waterbody, the water quality criteria that are necessary to protect the designated use or uses, and an antidegradation policy. These water quality standards serve two purposes: (1) they establish the water quality goals for a specific waterbody, and (2) they are the basis for establishing water quality-based treatment controls and strategies beyond the technology-based controls required by CWA Sections 301(b) and 306.

In defining water quality standards, a State may use narrative criteria, numeric criteria, or both. However, the 1987 amendments to CWA required States to adopt numeric criteria for toxic pollutants (designated in Section 307(a) of the Act) based on EPA Section 304(a) criteria or other scientific data, when the discharge or presence of those toxic pollutants could reasonably be expected to interfere with designated uses.

In some cases, ambient water quality criteria (WQC) are as much as 280 times lower than levels measurable using approved EPA methods available in the mid-1990s and required to support technology-based permits. EPA developed new sampling and analysis methods to specifically address State needs for measuring toxic metals at WQC levels, when such measurements are necessary to protect designated uses in State water quality standards. The latest criteria published by EPA are those listed in the National Toxics Rule (58 FR 60848) and the Stay of Federal Water Quality Criteria for Metals (60 FR 22228). These rules include water quality criteria for 13 metals, and it is these criteria that the new sampling and analysis methods address. Method 1631 was specifically developed to provide reliable measurements of mercury at EPA WQC levels.

In developing methods for determination of trace metals, EPA found that one of the greatest difficulties was precluding sample contamination during collection, transport, and analysis. The degree of difficulty, however, is highly dependent on the metal and site-specific conditions. Method 1631 is designed to preclude contamination in nearly all situations. It also contains procedures necessary to produce reliable results at the lowest WQC levels published by EPA. In recognition of the variety of situations to which this Method may be applied, and in recognition of continuing technological advances, Method 1631 is performance based. Alternative procedures may be used so long as those procedures are demonstrated to yield reliable results.

Requests for additional copies of this Method should be directed to:

U.S. EPA NCEPI
11209 Kenwood Road
Cincinnati, OH 45242
513/489-8190