

The DoD Qualification Program

By Tim Koczanski



The Cataloging and Standardization Act of 1952 was established to provide for an economical, efficient, and effective supply management organization within DoD through the establishment of a single supply cataloging system, the standardization of supplies, and the more efficient use of supply testing, inspection, packaging, and acceptance facilities and services. DSP continues to carry out that mission enacted so many years ago. Today, one of the cornerstones of DSP is the DoD qualification program. The qualification program helps DoD meet its needs by improving the availability of products, and it assists with shortening the procurement process by completing long, or highly complex, evaluations and tests of manufacturers or products before a contract is awarded. By eliminating repetitive surveillance audits and tests, the DoD qualification program has been successful at helping to reduce costs.

What Is Qualification?

Qualification is a process performed in advance of, and independent of, an acquisition. Its purpose is either to establish, by testing, that specific products conform to the requirements in military specifications or to certify, usually by audit, a manufacturer's capability to produce qualified products. Products approved by testing are listed on a qualified products list (QPL). Products approved by the audit process are listed on a qualified manufacturers list (QML). Increasingly, these records are stored electronically in the qualified products database (QPD). The QPD can be accessed by logging onto the ASSIST database at <https://assist.dla.mil/>.

Qualified Products Lists vs. Qualified Manufacturers Lists

A QPL contains qualifying products or families of products and the sources from which the products can be procured. A QPL is normally used for items with a stable design or composition that will be continually available for an extended period of time, thereby making it practical to qualify individual products without incurring prohibitive testing costs. A product that meets the established qualification requirements is listed on an electronic QPL.

In contrast, a QML focuses on qualifying an envelope of a manufacturer's processes and materials rather than individual products. A QML is especially useful for items that experience very rapid technological advances or that have myriad variations or custom designs that would make individual product qualification impractical or excessively expensive. A QML applies to products that

- do not have recognized industry part numbers;
- are procured to a specification that covers a wide range of technologies, such as hybrid microcircuits; and

■ are part of a family of products with similar characteristics, such as printed wiring boards.

With QMLs, representative worst-case test vehicles or representative samples that contain all potential combinations of materials and processes used during production are carefully examined to determine acceptability limits. As evidence that a manufacturer's envelope of processes and materials meets the established qualification requirements, all the acceptable processes and materials are listed on the electronic QML in the QPD.

The intent of the DoD qualification program is to allow manufacturers to provide, and purchasers to obtain, satisfactory precontractual evidence that a product, or a family of products, has been tested and has met the requirements of the governing specification. By prequalifying products and sources, qualification reduces acquisition lead-times. Qualification also reduces the cost of testing by eliminating the need for redundant first-article testing, which is especially important when tests are very expensive or take a long time to conduct.

In summary, qualification optimizes the relationship between engineering risk and quality assurance costs, improves readiness through continuous availability of reliable products from viable suppliers, establishes and standardizes the requirements for evidence of manufacturers' capabilities in advance of acquisition, and establishes long-term relationships with suppliers to ensure continuous conformance to requirements and continuous product quality improvements.

What the DoD qualification program does not do is relieve suppliers of their contractual obligations to deliver items meeting all specification requirements. The program does not guarantee acceptability under a contract, nor does it waive any requirements for inspections or for maintaining quality control measures satisfactory to the government. In addition, the DoD qualification program does not relieve the original equipment manufacturer of the contractual obligation to ensure that delivered items (including the qualified items used in the equipment) comply with all specification requirements.

Paperless Initiative

Formerly, QPLs and QMLs were published as printed documents. Whenever a list changed, a revised publication (QPL or QML) was issued to update the products or sources. In addition to the technical requirements for qualification outlined in each governing specification, each qualifying activity develops its own administrative procedures to manage the initial qualification of products and sources, as well as the retention of previously qualified products and sources on a QPL or QML.

Because of limitations in engineering support, some qualifying activities may consider adding new products or sources only during a regularly scheduled review. For most QPLs, this review occurs every 24 months, as established by policy in DoD 4120.24-M, “DoD Standardization Program (DSP) Procedures.” DoD policy requires that the qualifying activities manage QPLs to ensure that previously qualified sources are still viable. Sometimes all that is required is for a management official at a manufacturing plant to certify that the products on the list are still produced and that the manufacturer has not altered the manufacturing processes or materials. If the manufacturer has made some changes, then the qualifying activity may request that the manufacturer submit new test data in order to be retained on the QPL. For certain more dynamic technologies, such as those covered by QMLs, the qualifying activity may make changes weekly. Yet, because of the administrative lead-time to publish a new paper QML, those changes were not accessible to the general user population for months.

Now, with the development of the QPD—a fully automated system—users have immediate access to all qualification data, including new and newly updated QPLs and QMLs, and DoD qualifying activities have the flexibility to publish changes as needed and to deliver those changes in near real time. Moreover, the QPD has transformed the processes for building and maintaining QPLs and QMLs by providing the qualifying activities with tools to relieve them of some of the important administrative tasks associated with managing QPLs. Among other things, the QPD does the following:

- Generates automatic alert notifications to the qualifying activity administrator when it is time for previously approved sources to certify for retention on a QPL.
- Provides validation checks to ensure that a QPL is properly prepared before it is published.
- Automatically tracks manufacturers’ addresses by pulling address information from the System for Award Management (SAM) database, and alerts the qualifying activity if a listed manufacturer’s address changes. This is important, because a manufacturer’s move to a new production facility could prompt the qualifying activity to reevaluate the manufacturer, which may involve requiring the manufacturer to provide new test data or to submit to an audit to be retained on a QPL or QML.
- Alerts qualifying activities if a Commercial and Government Entity (CAGE) code is no longer in an “Active” status in the SAM database. This could prompt the activity to investigate to ensure that the supplier has not been suspended or debarred.

The QPD has also significantly improved the management of DoD QPLs. Some reports were designed to provide some oversight and insight for management officials in the military departments, the Defense Logistics Agency, and DSPO. For example, it is

now very easy to generate a list of all QPLs with no approved sources or with only one approved source. This is important information for management, because one of the goals of the DoD qualification program is to promote competition, not to limit it. If a specification has had a qualification requirement for many years and there are still no approved sources, then perhaps the specification needs to be reviewed and modified, either to remove the qualification requirement and replace it with a requirement for first-article testing or perhaps to change the specification so that producers can meet the requirements.

In addition, several reports have been designed specifically to help suppliers meet their periodic certification requirements for retention on a QPL. For example, one report—“Manufacturers Parts by CAGE Code”—allows a manufacturer to enter its CAGE code and produce a list of all parts associated with that CAGE code on a QPL. The report also provides a drop-down list that identifies all of the QPLs containing a particular CAGE code. The report may then be exported, either in PDF or as a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. This is a particularly useful report when a manufacturer has an extremely large number of parts on a QPL. A manufacturer can annotate changes on this file and submit it to the qualifying activity along with its periodic certification. By automating certain tasks and by designing special reports, the QPD can help qualifying activities keep their assigned QPLs up to date.



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Accessing Qualification Data

Qualification data can be accessed through the ASSIST, Quick Search, and assistdocs.com databases, which allow users to pull up data related to a QPL or QML directly from the QPD. The data can be accessed from the Document Details page of either the QPL or QML, or from the associated governing specification, in any of those three databases.

Users who log on to ASSIST (<https://assist.dla.mil>) to access the QPD may use a variety of search options, such as searching by the government’s or manufacturer’s designa-

tion, specification number, Federal Supply Class, title, or name of the supplier. Users may also access some very useful reports. Besides “Manufacturers Designation by CAGE Code,” users looking for a national stock number (NSN) can view “Government Designation by NSN” to see if an NSN is associated with a qualified part. Many parts on a QPL are not assigned NSNs, because they may not be directly purchased by federal activities. However, if the NSN is associated with a government part on a QPL, then the user may select “Manufacturers by Government Designation” to generate a list of all qualified sources for a specific government part. Other reports provided by the QPD include “Published QPL,” “QPL to Manufacturer,” and “Suppliers by QPL Number,” just to name a few.

This fully automated system has revolutionized the DoD qualification program. To ensure that the QPD continues to meet the needs of the people who manage the qualification process and the users who rely on the information, we continually look to make improvements based on feedback from both the qualifying activities and users.

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About the Author

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