AAALAC Site Visit Overview

Background Information on AAALAC

- AAALAC International is a voluntary, non-profit organization that was founded April 8, 1965.
- The AAALAC International Mission: to promote high standards of animal care, use, and well-being and enhance life sciences, research, and education through the accreditation process.
- The Board of Trustees is the guiding body of AAALAC. There were 14 original member organizations on the Board of Trustees, and included the American Dental Association, American Heart Association, American Hospital Association, AMA, AVMA, Animal Care Panel (which later became AAALAS), AAMC, FASEB, and others. There are now over 65 Member Organizations. Each Member Organization appoints a representative to serve on the AAALAC International Board of Trustees.
- There are more than 800 Accredited Units worldwide. These include academic institutions, commercial organizations, government agencies, hospitals, and nonprofit organizations. Countries with accredited organizations include South Africa, China, many European countries, Korea, Russia, India, Indonesia, Peru, and Japan, to name a few.
- The AAALAC International headquarters office resides in Frederick, Maryland, and is ready to provide assistance at all times. The European office is located in Spain and the Southeast Asia office is located in Thailand. Additional Regional Offices are planned for the Pacific Rim.
- Accreditation is a peer-review, confidential process.
- The Council on Accreditation, which makes the ultimate decision on a unit’s accreditation status, is composed of laboratory animal veterinary specialists, research administrators, IACUC members/leadership, and research scientists. There are 5 Council Sections – a European, a Pacific Rim, and 3 North American (with rotating membership). The Council is assisted by numerous Ad hoc Consultants and Specialists lending their expertise and assisting Council members in program evaluation.
- The Site Visit is an assessment designed to be helpful for the unit, and is not an inspection.

Conduct of the Site Visit

1. Initial Briefing. Site visitors meet with institutional officials and key personnel in the animal care and use program shortly after arrival to discuss the specific components of the site visit and clarify its purpose.
2. Program Description Review. The site visitors will review the documentation submitted in preparation for the Site Visit with key personnel in the animal care and use program to assure that all available information is complete and clearly understood.
3. Facilities Tour. The site visitors will tour all animal holding and support facilities and selected laboratories where animals are used. Please note that casual discussions with and personal remarks by the site visitors should not be construed as official AAALAC communication.
4. Meeting with IACUC/OB. The visitors will meet with the IACUC/OB to discuss the AAALAC process and points of interest to the IACUC/OB and the site visitors.
5. Documentation Review and Executive Session. A paperwork review will be performed during the visit. The documentation typically includes (as applicable) IACUC/OB protocols, policies, minutes, and semiannual Reports; OLAW Assurance and Annual Reports; USDA Inspection and Annual Reports; emergency preparedness, animal exercise, and environmental enrichment plans or policies; and Occupational Health and Safety risk assessment and medical evaluation forms. This is often conducted concurrently with an Executive Session for the site visitors to collate their thoughts and prepare preliminary findings.
6. Exit Briefing. This is an optional opportunity for the unit to receive the site visitors’ preliminary findings for Council consideration and an opportunity to correct errors in the factual information presented.
- Attendees are at the discretion of the institution; key program personnel such as institutional official(s) and public affairs personnel are encouraged to attend.
- Information presented in the Exit Briefing is the collective opinions of the site visit team. Suggestions are based on what visitors interpret as inconsistencies with the Guide, Ag Guide, and European Convention (ETS 123) and/or Reference Resources. Recommendations for addressing these concerns are not offered, for it is the prerogative of the institution to determine how to best locally apply standards and guidelines to the program.
The Council on Accreditation will fully evaluate a report of the Site Visit in rendering the final decision on accreditation status.

After the Site Visit

- Depending on the nature of the suggestions, the site visitors may encourage the unit to provide additional information and/or initiate corrective action for issues amenable to immediate response within ten (10) business days.
- Communication of these corrective actions should be made in writing and in English to the AAALAC Office and site visitors, and is called the Post Site Visit Communication (PSVC).
- The tight schedule is necessary because visitors must prepare and submit a summary Site Visit Report prior to the subsequent Council meeting. This report reflects the importance of gathering extensive information about the unit - the site visitors become the unit’s advocate to the Council. This report is reviewed by a minimum of 4 Council members during sub-section and/or full Council meetings.
- At its next meeting (January, May, and September), the Council on Accreditation reviews the Report and votes for the result of the evaluation. Official notification letters usually require 4-8 weeks. Possible outcomes include:
  - For New Applicants:
    - Award Full Accreditation – with or without Suggestions for Improvement.
    - Conditional Award Full Accreditation – retains at least one mandatory item to be reported during next annual report or at another time at Council’s discretion.
    - Provisional Status – one or more Mandatory issues; response deadline depends on the severity and complexity of the issues. A maximum of 24 months is allowed for the correction(s). The institution is not accredited.
    - Withhold Accreditation.

  - For Re-accreditation Site Visits:
    - Continued Full Accreditation – with or without Suggestions for Improvement.
    - Conditional Accreditation – retains at least one Mandatory item to be reported during the next annual report or at another time at Council’s discretion.
    - Deferred Accreditation – one or more mandatory items with a 2-month deadline for response, with or without additional Suggestions for Improvement. If unsuccessful, Probation will consequentially occur.
    - Probation – one or more Mandatory issues; response deadline depends on the severity and complexity of the issues. If unsuccessfully addressed after a total of 12 probationary months, then Revoke.
    - Revoke (an appeal process is in place).
    - Letters usually take 4-8 weeks following Council on Accreditation meetings. Council encourages dissemination of the final Council letter to at least all participants in the Exit Briefing to ensure that all participants understand the final recommendations. The AAALAC International Office may forward a “*.PDF” version of this letter to the AAALAC Contact Correspondent upon request.

Important Notes

- Confidentiality is highly respected. AAALAC is not subject to the Freedom of Information Act; even the unit’s listing on the AAALAC web site is at their discretion. All documents are held in strict confidence. Units are considered “accredited” until accreditation is revoked or withdrawn.
- Mandatory items are issues that, in the Council’s opinion, are in direct conflict with the Guide and/or have significant potential to impact animal or human health and well-being. These are concerns that must be addressed to maintain accreditation.
- Suggestions for Improvement are just that – suggestions. They are recommendations that, if implemented, Council believes will significantly improve a program. AAALAC encourages their consideration, but they are not mandatory items that must be addressed or adopted. They are one means of promoting a high quality animal care and use program.