

Evidence essay · Observation and data

The calibration record behind a trusted number

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ABSTRACT

A calibration certificate characterises response under stated conditions, not the fitness of every later field value. This essay draws on NIST's traceability policy to distinguish documented reference chains from reassuring equipment labels, and calibration from adjustment. Hypothetical deployment examples show how exposure, depth, and installation can undermine representativeness even when a sensor responds correctly. Field checks, post-deployment changes, and shared biases require explicit limits rather than assumed histories of gradual drift. NOAA's observing-network assessment supplies context for transitions between instruments and the value of comparable overlap. The practical recommendation is to preserve raw values, reference details, conditions, uncertainty contributions, correction parameters, and method versions. A trusted number is one whose measurement and correction history a future researcher can reconstruct for its intended use.

Keywords: calibration · metrological traceability · measurement uncertainty · sensor drift · instrument replacement

Adapted from the Still North field journal. Original article. A source-based editorial text, not a report of original Still North research. Examples and imagery are illustrative.

A calibration certificate can tell a researcher how an instrument responded to a reference under stated conditions. It cannot, by itself, establish that every later field result is fit for purpose. Between the reference and the published number sit the sensor, its settings, its surroundings, the processing, and a chain of decisions. A trustworthy calibration record keeps that chain inspectable.

The distinction matters when the expected environmental change is small. A sensor offset that is harmless for a broad screening task may be consequential in a long trend. Buying an instrument with more decimal places does not solve this: resolution, uncertainty, and stability are not interchangeable. The question is whether the whole measurement process can distinguish the change that matters.

Trace the result, not the badge

NIST's policy on metrological traceability describes a measurement result related to a reference through a documented, unbroken chain of calibrations, each contributing to uncertainty. It also states that traceability alone does not guarantee fitness for purpose. A claim of traceability therefore needs evidence for the particular result, not a reassuring logo applied to the equipment cupboard.

Keep the instrument's identifier, the calibration date, the reference used, the conditions and range tested, the response found, and the associated uncertainty. Record the configuration when it affects response. Link these details to the deployments and data products that rely on them. A certificate for a different probe of the same model cannot quietly stand in for the one that produced a dataset.

Also distinguish calibration from adjustment. Characterising an offset and changing an instrument to reduce

it are different actions. If adjustment occurred, retain the evidence before and after it. A later analyst may need to know whether the published readings already incorporate the correction. Applying it twice is no better than forgetting it.

The field can introduce a different problem

Imagine a hypothetical air-temperature sensor that agrees closely with a reference in controlled conditions. Mounted beside a sun-warmed surface, it may still produce an unrepresentative air-temperature record. A water sensor may respond correctly while sitting at the wrong depth. These are not failures that a certificate can automatically rule out. Installation notes, exposure, handling, and maintenance belong in the account of measurement quality.

A field check can help detect a problem without constituting a full calibration. Name what was checked and what was not. A comparison at one temperature does not characterise response across the entire operating range. Two instruments agreeing is useful evidence, but they may share a bias. Independent references and stated limitations matter more than the comfort of matching displays.

When a post-deployment check finds a change, do not assume the drift grew smoothly from the previous check. A sudden impact, fouling, or moisture ingress could have changed response at an unknown time. Preserve the discovery, examine supporting records, and explain any correction model. Where the timing cannot be recovered, flag the affected interval and report the resulting limit rather than inventing a precise history.

Instrument replacement is an experiment

A long record may outlive several generations of hardware. Where feasible, an overlap period lets old and new systems observe comparable conditions. Examine differences across the conditions that matter, not only the average difference over a convenient week. A relationship established in calm, cold conditions may not describe a transition into melt, different surface conditions, or a wider measurement range.

This is a real network concern, not only a laboratory nicety. The [NOAA Arctic observing-network assessment](#) identifies the work needed to reconcile satellite transitions, including staff expertise, recalibration, and field measurements. A newer system may be excellent and still introduce a discontinuity. Protecting a trend means understanding the transition rather than pretending nothing changed.

Make the correction reversible

Keep raw values, correction parameters, the reason for applying them, and the version of the method. State whether uncertainty includes only the calibration contribution or also other identified sources. Do not report a laboratory uncertainty as if it automatically covers deployment, sampling, and representativeness. The final result needs an uncertainty account appropriate to its use.

Our [glacier measurement explainer](#) considers how repeated observations contribute to a wider record. [Open observations](#) describes the context that should travel with them. The practical test is whether a future researcher can reconstruct which instrument, reference, and correction produced a published value. If they can, calibration has become durable evidence rather than paperwork completed once and filed out of sight.

References

1. NIST's policy on metrological traceability ([nist.gov](https://www.nist.gov))
2. NOAA Arctic observing-network assessment (arctic.noaa.gov)