

editorial

A metric America at last?

Secretary of Commerce Stans' recent recommendation to Congress that the US commit itself to change over to the metric system during a 10-year period comes as welcome news. Finally, following 150 years of vacillation after John Quincy Adams first suggested that the US seriously consider the metric system, an Administration has taken a firm position in favor of this needed reform.

Amazingly, approval by Congress can not yet be taken for granted despite the overwhelming case for systematic conversion that emerged from the three-year study of the question carried out by the National Bureau of Standards. The summary argument of the Bureau report is that the pressure from world trade and other international relations will sooner or later force the US to adopt the metric system and the transition will cost us much less if we do it sooner rather than later.

With no deliberate conversion program the change would occur piecemeal taking perhaps the rest of the century. By comparison, doing it "sooner" through a systematic 10-year program can be expected to save billions of dollars in the long run.

Just how late we already are is dramatically pointed up in the Bureau report by a map of the world that shows only 11 countries remain uncommitted to the metric standard. The other nations that share this distinction with the US are Barbados, Burma, Gambia, Liberia, Muscat and Oman, Nauru, Sierra Leone, Southern Yemen, Tonga and Trinidad.

Physicists, of course, will be among those least affected by a metric changeover. (Even so we can look forward to some fringe benefits like no longer running the risk of coming face to face with monstrosities such as $\text{Btu/ft}^2/\text{hour}$.)

On the other hand there will be an opportunity for the physics community to perform an important public service in the nationwide discussion of the metric system that must take place before any meaningful decision by Congress will be possible. A survey shows that most of our population (58%) knows "little or nothing" about the metric system and "doesn't

like it" (73% of the 58%). The more hopeful finding of this same survey is that the more people know about the metric system the more they favor it. (Of the 12% who said they know a great deal about the system 74% said they like it.) Lewis Branscomb, Director of NBS, suggests that physicists could help interest local communities in organizing discussions about the metric standard and could be especially valuable in providing the adult public and school children with an intuitive—as opposed to a rote—understanding of the new units of measurement. (The NBS report, "A Metric America," is available from GPO, Catalog No. C 13.10-345; \$2.25) And whenever physicists have the opportunity to explain to people what meters and kilograms are all about hopefully the people will also come away with a better idea of what physics and physicists are all about.

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