

editorial

Opportunity for public service

In 1975, when Congress passed the Metric Conversion Act, physicists hailed this event as a long-overdue reform that would facilitate world trade for the US and prove to be a more efficient system of units for everyday use at home. Sometime before the passage of the Metric Conversion Act we observed on this page that there was "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." Clearly the opportunity, or we might say obligation, for this public service on the part of physicists has become even more important.

Since the Metric Conversion Act became law, US industries have made substantial strides in metrication, and the US Metric Board, created by the act, is launching a campaign to educate the general public about the metric system. Recently, out of the blue, the General Accounting Office has published a report essentially opposing conversion to metric. The authors of the Executive Summary of the GAO report (CED-78-128A, 20 October 1978) claim that despite passage of the Metric Conversion Act, "it is *not* the policy of the US to convert to the metric system." Based on a GAO survey of US companies, they also assert that the costs of conversion in the US could far outweigh the benefits. It is easily demonstrated that these two statements represent serious distortions of facts, forcing one to conclude that the GAO report is a highly biased document that could impede the US metric conversion program. (The press, unfortunately, has already carried news reports based on the GAO's claims.)

Concerning the question raised about US policy on conversion, the GAO admits that President Ford stated in 1975, "The Metric Conversion Act of 1975, H.R. 8674, which I signed on December 23, sets a national policy of converting to the metric system . . ." The GAO report, however, attempts to argue that the President's statement is incorrect and that Congress did not intend to commit the country to metric conversion. This assertion has been firmly refuted by Congressman Olin Teague, who just before he retired as the chairman of the House Committee on Science and Technology, stated in a recent letter responding to the GAO report that in his view and that of his colleagues in the Congress the Metric Conversion Act sets forth "a clear policy for metric conversion in the United States."

The second claim by GAO that US industry questions the economic benefit of conversion is contradicted by GAO's own acknowledgement that leading corporations in major US industries, including the automotive, farm and construction equipment and computer manufacturers, are well along the road of conversion. The GAO explanation is that corporations such as General Motors decided to convert primarily

because they anticipated that the Conversion Act would mandate conversion within ten years. (The final act set no time limit.)

We contacted a GM spokesman by telephone who emphatically assured us that the only reason GM is converting to metric is that it will be cost beneficial for GM, mainly through facilitating international trade and international operations. He went on to say that the cost of conversion for GM has proved to be less than 3% of the original projection, refuting GAO's contention that conversion is too costly. GM feels that a basic weakness in the GAO survey was that it failed to inquire what the costs to US business would be of *not* converting. Thus, the GAO summary did not even mention the fact that the Common Market countries have agreed that imported products will no longer be accepted unless their specifications are in metric. The summary also did not mention that the only countries in the world not yet committed to the metric system are Brunei, Burma, Liberia and Yemen.

The recent GAO report, biased as it is, contains nevertheless a sobering statistic. An opinion poll of the public at large conducted for GAO by the Opinion Research Corporation finds that twice as many people still oppose metric conversion than support it. Acceptance of metrication by the general public is lagging far behind acceptance in industry. Previous polls have shown that the more people know about the metric system the more they favor it. As the custodians of the fundamental constants, physicists can rightly be looked upon in our society as the authorities on systems of physical units. We must redouble our efforts as physicists to participate at the community level in programs to acquaint adults and school children with the metric system and persuade them of its advantages. This also gives us a chance to show people how physics is intertwined with their daily lives. As we said in the earlier editorial, whenever people can listen to physicists explaining what meters and kilograms are all about, they will also come away with a better idea of what physics and physicists are all about.

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