NASA's Freedom Not to Use Metric Units

I note with dismay that NASA officials have decided to stick with the English measurement system for the design of the Space Station Freedom, rather than use metric units. According to their newsletter *Station Break* it would cost too much money (estimated at $221 million) for their contractors to convert to a metric standard! Perhaps they are not aware of the Omnibus Trade and Competitiveness Act of 1988, which mandates that every Federal agency make its purchases in metric units, starting 30 September 1992.

Twenty years ago, we might have smiled at the perennial, abortive attempts to go metric. After all, we scientists were already "bilingual," weren't we? It is a more serious matter today, when we expect the space station to incorporate components and systems manufactured (to metric standards) in Europe and Japan. In fact, $221 million may be a small price to pay to avert a disaster in space. I submit that English units remain one aspect of American technology that doesn't need protection from our overseas competitors!

ROBERT J. SCHNEIDER
Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution
3/90 *Woods Hole, Massachusetts*

Radon, Reactors and Relative Risk

Henry Hurwitz Jr (September 1989, page 13) compares the potential added exposure to radon as a result of sealing up houses for energy conservation with the radiological exposure at which operators of US nuclear power plants are required to recommend mass public evacuation, and concludes that the nation is misallocating its resources by spending far more on mitigating the risks from meltdowns and nuclear waste than on reducing the risks from radon.

From the tone of Hurwitz's letter one might be forgiven for believing that he advocates forgoing domestic energy conservation in favor of an expansion in nuclear electricity generation. Surely, risk analysis in this context is irrelevant: A program of active ventilation for houses using proven heat-exchanger technology would be a cost-effective way of lowering occupants' exposure to radon, improving their quality of life, lowering their heating bills and removing the need for an increase in nuclear-generated electricity. While the situation in the UK (with whose statistics