NBS Urges 10-Year Metric Conversion Plan

The National Bureau of Standards (NBS) released a report on 29 July which urges that the nation adopt a plan that would make it "predominantly, though not exclusively, metric" in 10 years. Stylishly entitled *A Metric America: A Decision Whose Time Has Come*, the 11-volume study took 3 years and $1.3 million to complete, and contains the results of thousands of surveys and interviews with companies, organizations, and individuals, representing every sector of the economy.

The study, headed by Daniel V. De Simone, lawyer-engineer at NBS, recommends that a central board, either governmental or quasi-governmental, be set up to coordinate and supply technical assistance and advice during the 10-year changeover period. The costs of metrication should "lie where they fall"; that is, manufacturers and consumers would share the burden. The speed with which various parts of the economy adopt the metric system will vary, says the report, but conversion should begin immediately in two areas: education and international engineering standards.

America, the report notes, is the last major country in the world to avoid metrication. Great Britain is now in its sixth year of conversion, Australia has begun, and Canada, which put off the decision because of uncertainty as to what the United States, its major trading partner, would do, intends to go metric.

Thoughts of adopting the metric system have been kicking around for years, ever since Secretary of State John Q. Adams reported on its desirability in 1821. The country legalized the metric system in 1866, and it has been used as the official calibration standard for the "inch-pound" system since 1893. Thus, the United States has been inching (or centimetering) toward metrication for years. The pharmaceutical industry forswore grains for grams over 15 years ago; NASA officially announced it was going metric last year, and the metric system increasingly supplies the unit of measurement for commercial items such as film.

The choice, then, says the report, is either for the country to continue its present "casual drift" toward internationalizing its standards—a confusing and inefficient process that would take 50 years to complete—or to put into effect a deliberate, well-organized plan.

The report estimates it would cost the nation $10 to 40 billion to follow the latter course and that adoption of the metric system would increase export trade by $1 to 2 billion a year. Costs under the plan would be recouped in two or three decades, while under the "no-plan," eight or nine decades would be required to regain equilibrium.

The report emphasizes the advantages of metrication for the U.S. position in world trade. Lewis M. Branscomb, director of NBS, points out that it is important for the United States to decide soon so it won't be left out of any more international standards conferences. With a clear policy on metrication, says Branscomb, the United States will be able to exert considerable influence in future international standard-setting, with the result that it won't have to pay a disproportionate price to conform with world standards.

The Administration has not submitted a bill to go along with its metric message, and inquiries on Capitol Hill reveal that metrication is not regarded as a very high-priority item. Most congressmen have given little thought to the matter—which reflects the stance of the American public, 58 percent of whom, according to the report, have never heard of the meter.

Nonetheless, to get the ball rolling, Senator Claiborne Pell (D–R.I.), the Senate's most ardent advocate of the metric system, introduced a sample bill last week. The bill recommends a 10-year conversion program, requires that government procurement practices reflect the new policy, and designates the NBS as the coordinating body, whose first duty would be to map out a plan for conversion on a sector by sector basis.

On the House side, a staff member of the Science and Astronautics Committee, which would handle such legislation, says it is unlikely that any bills will be drawn up until members have better acquainted themselves with the subject, probably after hearings have been held in the fall.

Judging from the British experience, conversion may be far less difficult than imagined. The Department of Defense, for instance, has estimated that additional costs over the 10-year period would amount to $18 billion—yet the British Defence Department has indicated that it will be able to absorb the costs without any additional allocations of funds.

Nonetheless, a strong central coordinating board, representing all segments of society, will be necessary. Until the metric system becomes the law of the land (at the end of the 10-year period), much compliance will have to be voluntary. And it is the states, not the federal government, that are largely responsible for enforcing weights and measures and for assuring their uniformity.

Intangible obstacles will also have to be overcome. Americans are more accustomed to foisting their own language and ways on the rest of the world than to adjusting to the modes of others. And, too, going metric means discarding a part of our Anglo-Saxon heritage.

The English system of pounds, gallons, and acres is derived from familiar, but imprecise things—the inch, for example, is the length of three barleycorns laid end to end; the mile equals 2000 paces. By contrast, the metric system, born out of the French Revolution, represents a bid for extreme rationality. Liters, grams, and hectares all spring from one basic unit, the meter, which is based on a universal constant: one ten-millionth of the distance from the North Pole to the equator.

Lovers of the foot must wipe away useless tears, for the tide of metrication cannot be turned, according to the report. Commerce Secretary Maurice Stans assures us that the government is not bent on eradicating customary measurements—railroad tracks and football fields will not be torn up, for example. But while some terms will retreat to specialized vocabularies, others will recede even further, to take their places beside cubits, drams, and leagues, to exist only in proverb, song, and story.—CONSTANCE HOLDEN