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Milestone Legislation for a Metric United States

The President's signing the Metric Conversion Act of 1975 is a milestone in the history of the U.S. measurement policy. The United States is now committed to providing a national program that will make the International Metric System the predominant but not exclusive system of measurement throughout the country. Metric conversion remains a voluntary activity for the next ten years.

The use of the metric system has been legal in the United States for more than a century, but only in the last few years has actual usage become widespread and increasingly visible. Since 1971 when the Secretary of Commerce issued the report "A Metric America," which strongly favored a coordinated program of conversion, metrication has taken place in industry, government, and education. Many corporations, including four of the nation's ten largest firms, have announced conversion policies. In government agencies the use of metric units appears in an increasing number of reports, studies, and public announcements. At the Office of Education of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, \$2 million was appropriated in 1975 to establish a metric education program to support model projects for improving metric education throughout the country.

Various metric education programs are under way in all 50 states. In many schools steps have been taken to incorporate the metric system, especially through the new science and mathematics curriculums of the past decade. Professional associations have also been concerned with metric education. A recent questionnaire to 100 scientific societies affiliated with the AAAS showed that science and mathematics education associations have been producing metric education materials.

Public awareness of the metric system has increased steadily, according to Gallup polls conducted in 1965, 1971, and 1973. More than half of the adults polled in 1973 were aware of the metric system, nearly twice as many as in 1965. However, only about 30 percent of the sample gave an accurate description and, of this group, 60 percent favored adoption of the metric system.

Until now metrication in the United States has been voluntary and uncoordinated. The Metric Conversion Act of 1975 is the congressional response to this absence of coordination and direction. The new law establishes a U.S. Metric Board to coordinate voluntary conversion to the metric system within the next ten years.

The composition and method of selection of the members of the board is a recognition of the importance of metric conversion and its diffuse impacts upon American society. The chairperson and 16 members of the board are to be appointed by the President with the advice and consent of the Senate. Twelve members are to be chosen from lists of individuals submitted by organizations and groups with the following interests: engineering, science and technology, manufacturing (including retailing and commerce), labor, state and local governments, small business, building construction, standards making, and education. Four members are to be selected at large to represent consumers and other concerned groups.

The board will have three functions: to prepare and implement a comprehensive program of planning and coordinating metric conversion; to carry out a program of public information and education at all levels of society; and to conduct related research and submit recommendations to Congress and the President.

The great barrier to the public acceptance of metric measurement appears to be anxiety—the fear of the unknown, the dread that learning to use metric will be difficult. Scientists and science educators can help smooth the transition to metric by (i) continued participation in the discussions and planning of metric conversion, (ii) initiating and assisting in formal and informal public education activities, (iii) contributing to research on any unresolved problems or questions associated with metric conversion, and (iv) by scrupulously using the metric system themselves.—MINA REES, *Chairperson, AAAS Metric Education Committee*, and ARTHUR H. LIVERMORE, *AAAS Office of Science Education*