

US Government backpeddles on metric conversion proposal

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Efforts by the U.S. government's National Institute of Standards and Technology ([NIST](#)) to introduce compulsory metric conversion for packaged food and goods in the USA (euphemistically described as "voluntary metric-only labelling" have been prevented. It was intended that a metric bill would be put before Congress this year but NIST has accepted that this will not happen this year or in the foreseeable future.

NIST's failure is due in no small part to opposition by the [Food Marketing Institute](#), representing 26,000 food retail stores, and [Kroger](#), America's largest supermarket chain. FMI pointed out that metric conversion would entail huge costs for the food retail industry, affecting value-comparisons, packaging, label inventories, shipping cases and much more.

The history and details of the NIST proposal are as follows (issue summary at foot of page):

[The Legal Dispute - is NIST contravening US law?](#)

[American consumers beware - The Great Metric Rip-Off](#)

[The story of the English metric martyr traders](#)

[The full wording of the NIST proposal](#)

External links and related materials

[NIST Metric Group](#)

[The NIST Proposal](#) (Microsoft Word)

[Metric Conversion Act 1975](#)

[Fair Packaging and Labeling Act 1966](#)

Issue summary

Under US government policy, transition to the metric system is *voluntary* in the USA. The law requires labeling for most packaged goods to show both US and metric systems so that consumers and retailers can choose.

However, the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST), an agency within the US Department of Commerce, is to propose a bill to Congress that will end the use of inch-pound units. Hints of NIST's intention appeared in November 2002 when it held a forum to:

"...identify areas of work needed to ensure the effective voluntary transition to the use of metric units in all commercial transactions".

To "ensure" something that is "voluntary" is a contradiction in terms. The NIST proposal is now available on the internet. How does NIST get round US government policy that metric is voluntary? It has developed a form of words that describes its proposal as "permissible metric-only labeling", and which appears to offer a choice for business:

A. Metric and US customary; or

B. Metric

IT'S A TRICK!

The two labeling obligations proposed by NIST cannot lawfully co-exist. It is impossible for the law to require *both* systems to be displayed while also stating that *only* metric need be shown.

Accordingly, the only requirement under the NIST proposal is that packaged goods show metric. Producers may print lb/oz/pint equivalents, but such information is surplus to the legal requirement. Decoded, the phrase "permissible metric-only labeling" means compulsory metric labeling, since the word "permissible" actually refers to inch-pound.

The NIST proposal, if implemented, will mean the end of US measures as trading units for most packaged goods. It will be legal to sell a can as "454g" - but ILLEGAL as "1 lb". The upheaval and costs to business will be huge, since systems and processes will have to change to accommodate metric.

BRITAIN'S DISASTEROUS EXPERIENCE OF METRIC

Britain knows all about compulsory metric conversion. Since 2000, metric measures have been made compulsory by the European Commission. In 2001, trader Steven Thoburn was dubbed the "Metric Martyr" after being convicted and fined for selling bananas in pounds and ounces. Packaged goods are meanwhile "downsized" on conversion from English to metric quantities - with no decrease in price. Surveys show 85% of British people prefer feet and inches, pounds and ounces.

The archetype kilogram is stored in a vault near Paris. Thomas Jefferson said: "If other nations adopt this unit, they must take the word of the French mathematicians for its length...So there is an end to it!"

If Americans want to defend fair play in the marketplace and freedom to use customary measures then they must wake up to moves now developing to force them to use metric.