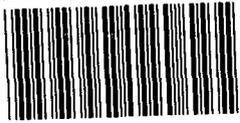


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UNITED STATES GENERAL ACCOUNTING OFFICE
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20548



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STATEMENT OF
ELMER B. STAATS
COMPTROLLER GENERAL OF THE UNITED STATES

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BEFORE THE
HOUSE SUBCOMMITTEE ON SCIENCE, RESEARCH AND TECHNOLOGY H 355 G
OF THE COMMITTEE ON SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY
ON

[OVERSIGHT OF THE UNITED STATES METRIC BOARD] D 86-

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

We are here at your invitation to discuss the role of the U.S. Metric Board in implementing the "Metric Conversion Act of 1975." As you are aware, we conducted a two-year study of metric conversion which culminated on October 20, 1978, when we issued a report entitled "Getting a Better Understanding of the Metric System--Implications if Adopted by the United States."

We mentioned in the report that many people and organizations believed a decision had already been made to adopt the metric system in the United States. Passage of the "Metric Conversion Act of 1975," with its major provision of establishing a U.S. Metric Board, was cited by many as representing an official national commitment to convert to the metric system. Indeed, to many the name of the Act itself seemed to connote a commitment to conversion. In fact, many

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think conversion is mandatory, especially small business and the general public. Responses to GAO's questionnaires showed that 42 percent of the small businesses and 30 percent of the building and construction associations, and 23 percent of the people contacted in a public opinion poll conducted for GAO by Opinion Research Corporation, believed conversion to the metric system to be mandatory.

Notwithstanding these impressions, we concluded that the purpose of the Metric Board is to carry out a broad program of planning, coordination, and public education, and to assist various sectors when and if they choose to convert. However, the Board was not expected to advocate conversion to the metric system. We recommended that the Board:

- Inform the American people that conversion is strictly voluntary and that our national policy does not favor the metric system over the customary system, or vice versa.
- Ensure that its policies and actions do not advocate or discourage the use of one system over the other.
- Ensure that if a voluntary metrication proposal is presented to the Board, all affected parties are adequately represented in the voluntary decision-making process.
- Hold public hearings on those conversion plans that affect the general public to obtain their comments which should be considered in finalizing such plans.

--Use the experience gained in the conversion of the wine and distilled spirits industries in reviewing plans for other sectors, especially those involving consumer products.

Other recommendations to the Board and recommendations to the Office of Management and Budget appear in our report. 27

We do not take the view that the national policy established by the Congress is one that urges adoption of the metric system or was intended to create a proponent of the conversion, which the Congress itself chose not to mandate. Certainly such a policy was proposed frequently to the Congress. For example, legislation that would have provided for a predominantly metric America within 10 years passed the Senate, but not the House, in 1972. Similar proposals in succeeding years were not enacted. Again in 1975, the year in which the Metric Conversion Act became law, a similar bill was introduced in the Senate. Like previous bills, it would have created a Metric Board to "encourage the substitution of metric measurement units for customary measurement units . . ." The bill introduced in and passed by the House did not contain such provision, but did "declare a national policy of converting to the metric system," and established a Metric Board to implement the policy set out in the Act.

The House bill subsequently was amended and passed by the Senate and later enacted into law. It did not reflect the earlier Senate bill's provisions for a Board to encourage conversion to a predominantly metric America, and as amended and passed, it no longer contained the earlier House bill's declaration of "a national policy of converting to the metric system." Instead, the Act declares that:

" * * * the policy of the United States shall be to coordinate and plan the increasing use of the metric system in the United States and to establish a United States Metric Board to coordinate the voluntary conversion to the metric system."

Congressional proposals that would have established the predominance of the metric system, and a Board to encourage that conversion, as well as the bill as originally passed by the House that would have declared a policy of converting to metric, all failed to be enacted. The bill the Congress did enact established the U. S. Metric Board "to coordinate the voluntary conversion to the metric system." The Senate Report on the House bill, as amended and enacted, stated:

"The Board is not expected to advocate metrication since, in some instances, members of an industry or economic sector may decide that the costs outweigh the benefits."

The position we take is based solely on what we believe is a fair reflection of congressional intent on whether the Metric Board is to urge and promote adoption of the metric system by the various sectors of our economy. We do not purport to declare what ought to be the national policy. We do believe, quite simply, that Congress decided that the Government would not advocate or discourage the use of one system over the other. Whether and when to convert to metric should be a voluntary decision made by those affected without pressure or exhortation from official quarters. However, when and if conversion accelerates, the Congress will be under increasing pressure to act upon conversion. Therefore, our report concluded that the Congress should decide whether to continue the present policy allowing for a dual system or whether the policy should be changed.

At the same time, we do not concur with the view that the Board must assume a passive or virtually inactive role. As I said in my recent letter to the Chairman of the Metric Board:

"The Board's role as we see it is to plan for and coordinate conversion, and to educate the public about metrification. The Board also may be able to facilitate the process of converting, as long as it does not advocate the conversion. It should give positive guidance to those who voluntarily choose to convert to metric."

The Metric Conversion Act contemplates that individual industries and economic sectors will not be subjected to pressure from the Government in deciding whether or not to convert. However, this does not diminish the importance of the Metric Board. As my General Counsel recently advised the Board:

"While the Metric Board is not to become an advocate of national conversion to the metric system, it may assist various sectors which choose to convert. In addition, as to a particular industry or economic sector, or a particular firm, the Board may objectively assess the advantages and disadvantages of converting and advise the concerned entities of the results of its analyses. The information furnished by the Board might assist such entities in deciding whether or not to convert, thus facilitating the process. Thus, we think the Board can be active and useful without advocating conversion."

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my statement. We will be glad to respond to any questions you have.