

# Metric system? Americans have dug in their feet

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SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER

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Gerald Iannelli stands about 1.7526 meters and weighs about 79.3786 kilograms — not tall (5-foot-10) and not heavy (175 pounds) as crusaders go.

But Iannelli is director of the metric program for the U.S. Department of Commerce's National Institute of Standards and Technology. It's his job, quixotic though it may be, to convince hardheaded Americans to think in terms of hectares, joules, grams and meters.

Iannelli visited Seattle for a "metric dialogue," one of four regional meetings to discuss how industry, government and educators can work together to accelerate the use of the metric system in the United States.

By now, Iannelli has heard all the jokes about his efforts inching along. He smiles patiently at witty references to .4535-kilogram cakes and 2.54-centimeter worms.

These are among the occupational hazards for anyone trying to convince U.S. citizens to come into the 20th century, preferably before it ends. As it is, the United States now stands with Libya and Burma as the only remaining large nations holding out against the metric system. Though the U.S. government often has urged adoption of the metric system, it never has required it, Iannelli said. There is no timetable and no date for conversion.

Advocates of the metric system — and there are now about 5 billion of them worldwide — love the ease of calculation, the reduced likelihood of errors and the simplicity of conversions between measurement units — a simple matter of moving a decimal point to the right or the left.

By contrast, the English system Americans inherited is a complicated jumble with Babylonian, Egyptian, Roman, Anglo-Saxon and French origins.

"Digits," "palms," "spans" and "cubits" evolved in historically murky ways to become inches, feet and yards. The Romans contributed to the confusion by using the number 12 as a base (12 inches in a foot). England's King Henry I decreed the yard to be the distance from the tip of his nose to the end of his thumb. Tudor rulers later established the length of a furlow (furlong) as 220 yards; Queen Elizabeth I then changed the Roman mile of 5,000 feet to one of 5,280 feet, making it exactly eight furlongs.

To Americans, that may make perfect sense, but to the rest of the world, it's confusing. And to business people, it's expensive.

Companies that continue using nonmetric measurements increase their costs, the metric program's Iannelli said. They limit themselves to nonmetric suppliers and risk paying more for parts and equipment.

"By manufacturing products according to metric specifications, the United States can increase its ability to trade in global markets, which in turn will stimulate our economy and increase American jobs," Iannelli said.

Among the speakers in Seattle was George Sudikatus, metric coordinator for the ICF Kaiser Hanford Co., headquartered in the Tri-Cities in Eastern Washington state. Sudikatus has heard every imaginable excuse for avoiding the metric system.

"One person told me, 'We won World War II with our nonmetric bombs,'" Sudikatus said. "Well, folks, we can't bomb people into using our system anymore."

Sudikatus talked of a soft-sell approach, of using advertising techniques to educate the American public. One of his listeners contributed a poem to help those intimidated by the Celsius scale of temperature measurement: "Thirty is hot, 20 is pleasing, 10 is not, and zero is freezing."