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Updating U.S. Packaging and Labeling Laws

By: Jim McCracken, NIST Metric Program

The convergence of several factors offer an opportunity to speed up America's voluntary transition to a more predominate use of the metric system in "every day" consumer transactions, in particular, on package labels. This opportunity for accelerating the Nation's transition to the metric system will be driven by the economic interests of U.S. businesses.

One factor that will impact U.S. metrication is the European Union (EU) Directive that will require all consumer packages marketed in the EU, after January 1, 2010, be labeled in only metric units. A second factor is the increasing importance of trade agreements among the countries of the Americas, all of whom are predominately metric in their markets. U.S. companies that adopt simplified label conventions, coupled with selecting common package sizes that can be used in multiple markets stand to gain market advantages over having different labeling requirements and package sizes in different markets.

The transition to the metric system in the United States is voluntary. Industry decides when it is most convenient and advantageous to make the change. Since 1992, the FPLA has required consumer package labels to list both metric and inch-pound units. Either measurement unit may appear first on the label. Metric-only labeling is already permitted on non-consumer packages (those packages marked for wholesale and industrial trade). Since January 1, 2000, the Uniform Packaging and Labeling Regulation (UPLR), as adopted by the National Conference on Weights and Measures (NCWM), has allowed the option of metric-only quantity declarations on consumer packages. A key to American companies choosing to adopt simplified labels based on only metric measures is to remove regulatory barriers to the increased use of the metric system. That is the objective of the Office of Weights and Measures' pending proposal to update the U.S. Fair Packaging and Labeling Act.

Companies involved in international marketing have an economic incentive to market products in a minimum number of sizes/formats that can satisfy the requirements of multiple markets. We believe that the economic motivation for U.S. businesses to introduce more metric labels and packages will be reinforced through a coordinated effort to increase the American consumer's ability to understand and willingness to accept only metric quantity statement on consumer products in their "market basket." At the same time, this influx of new labels/packages can give consumers metric "reference points" that will increase the public's understanding of the metric system. This will serve an educational function since much "real world" learning is based on experience. This gradual "learning by using" process should produce greater acceptance for using the metric system in the United States.

It is imperative that consumers be able to make value comparisons among products labeled in dual units and those labeled only in metric units. OWM anticipates that with the support of state weights and measures official and consumer groups, that an organized effort will be undertaken with retailers to explore ways to help the customer make value comparisons while the market is undergoing this transition. A key objective will be to work with packagers and retailers to identify efforts that can facilitate value comparisons and promote uniform and correct labeling.