

Final Notice on Deprecation of the U.S. Survey Foot Issued

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On October 5, 2020, it is planned that the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) will publish a final notice titled “Deprecation of the United States (U.S.) Survey Foot” in the Federal Register. In the notice, NIST and the National Geodetic Survey (NGS), National Ocean Service (NOS), National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), will announce they have taken collaborative action to deprecate the U.S. survey foot and require that its use for all applications in the United States, including surveying, mapping, and engineering, be discontinued after December 31, 2022. The goal of this action is to provide national uniformity of length measurement in an orderly fashion with minimum disruption, correcting a measurement dilemma that has persisted for over 60 years.

Beginning January 1, 2023, any measurement data derived from or published as a result of surveying, mapping, or any other activity within the U.S. that is expressed in terms of feet should only be based on the definition of one foot being equal to 0.3048 meter (exactly). This definition was named the “international foot” in a 1959 Federal Register Notice (24 FR 5348) that officially changed the foot definition for the U.S. In the 1959 notice, a second definition of the foot was named the “U.S. survey foot,” with a mandate that it be used only for geodetic surveying, and that it would ultimately be replaced by the international foot definition.

With this final notice, the mandate to replace the U.S. survey foot with the international foot definition for all applications has been achieved, and after December 31, 2022, there will be one legal definition of the foot in the United States. The preferred term will be the “foot,” which is the name currently used in everyday measurements of length or distance. Because there are significant differences between traditional measurement systems (e.g., “Imperial” or “British” systems), NIST recommends use of the term “U.S. customary system of measurement” to describe the collection of non-SI measurement units currently used in the U.S. International foot definitions for traditional linear units, such as the cable’s length, chain, link, rod, and acre will also be announced in the notice. These changes will be reflected in the next editions of NIST Special Publication (SP) 811, “Guide for the Use of the International System of Units (SI),” and Handbooks under the sections on units and systems of measurement and conversion tables.

NIST and NOAA encourage states and other government agencies, businesses, private and public organizations, and others potentially impacted by this change to take immediate steps for planning for the transition. Early action is important, since some changes can be time intensive, such as enacting state legislation and updating software, training materials, and relevant procedures. Recommended actions are published in the Federal Register Notice. The final Federal Register Notice will be available at this URL after October 5, 2020: www.nist.gov/pml/us-surveyfoot/frn-citations. For more on the history of the U.S. survey foot to learn how the change will impact land surveys and mapping see NIST’s Frequently Asked Questions at www.nist.gov/pml/us-surveyfoot/frequently-asked-questions-faqs. For more information contact Elizabeth Benham, NIST Metric Coordinator, at 301-975-3690 or at TheSI@nist.gov.