

When Will We Get There?

The United States' progress toward metrification has been disappointingly slow. Our country has intended to "go metric" for at least 140 years. The U.S. Congress first authorized using metrics in 1866, and even back then, lawmakers noted that the decimal-based system of weights and measure is simpler to use, faster, and less prone to mistakes. Unfortunately, Congress's good advice seems to have fallen on deaf ears.

In 1971, the U.S. was already metric in some ways and would soon need to join the metric world, according to a National Bureau of Standards study. In response, Congress passed the Metric Conversion Act of 1975. That act created a Metric Board to oversee a voluntary, orderly conversion to the metric system. Of course, that never happened, and in 1982, that board was dissolved. So much for progress.

Increased trade competition abroad prompted Congress to try again. The Omnibus Trade and Competitiveness Act of 1988 called the metric system the "preferred system of weights and measures." By that time, according to the advocacy group U.S. Metric Association, even Britain, the nation that gave us yards, miles, and pounds, had gone metric, and the United States, Liberia, and Myanmar (Burma) were the world's only non-metric holdouts.

The metric system is sneaking up on the U.S. though. According to *Business Week* magazine, many American industries have already gone metric, especially those with global markets, such as the automobile industry and the construction, farm, and office equipment industries.

Today, as the Bureau of Standards Web site points out, Americans are more metric than ever before. They buy liters of soda, ride metric bikes, and read electric meters measured in metric units. We are accepting the metric system, like it or not, but the progress is oh so slow!