

Teacher Tune-up

Quick Content Refresher for Busy Professionals

Why doesn't the US use the metric system as our common measurement?

There are historical, economic, and social reasons that explain why the United States hasn't adopted the metric system, despite the fact that the rest of the world (except Myanmar and Liberia) has adopted it as the official system of measurement. This difference is not for lack of trying; there have been attempts to make the shift in the US, but so far they've always failed.

The thirteen British colonies that became the first states inherited traditional English units of measurement. After the US won its independence from England, the founders addressed the issue of weights and measures in the US Constitution, ratified in 1788: "The Congress shall have the power To... fix the Standard of Weights and Measures" (Article I, Section 8). Thomas Jefferson, then Secretary of State, took on the task in 1790, and pursued the idea of a metric system, but was both thwarted in his efforts and not entirely convinced it was right for the new republic.

Around the same time, France was developing and refining the metric system, with the intention of creating measurements that would be adopted and used by all countries and people. In 1798, France invited dignitaries from around the world to travel to Paris and find out about the newly developed metric system, but snubbed the US because of increasing hostilities between the two nations. (Indeed, France and the US fought an undeclared naval war from 1798 to 1800.) The US did not adopt the metric system, in part due to these strained relations and in part because many felt that the system in place already worked. Many in power also felt unsure whether the French plan to make the metric system the international standard would succeed.

As time passed, however, the metric system gained wider use, and by 1865 most of Europe had adopted it. Finally, in 1866, the US Congress passed a bill allowing but not requiring the use of the metric system. The US sent delegates to the next international meeting in Paris and signed the 1875 Treaty of the Meter, which established the International Bureau of Weights and Measures. The US received a prototype meter and kilogram in 1890, each painstakingly made of a platinum-iridium alloy to the most exacting standards then possible. In 1893, the US adopted the meter and kilogram as the fundamental standards by which to define customary measurements such as the pound, the foot, the quart, etc.

In 1896, lawmakers proposed a bill that would make the metric system mandatory. The US seemed likely to join the movement to make the metric system the international standard and adopt it into common use. Congressional hearings included 29 people who presented testimony; only six of these were opposed to passage of the bill. These six each argued that the cost and inconvenience of switching to the metric system was prohibitive to industry, especially manufacturers of high-end machine tools. Everything in American industry—from the manufacture of screws up to the largest machines—was based on the inch, and manufacturers would face high costs to reconfigure everything to the metric standard. As a result, the bill failed in Congress and the metric system



did not become the measurement standard in the US. Subsequent attempts at making the metric system the standard met similar resistance from the manufacturing sector.

Despite these economic pressures to maintain the inch as the standard measurement, the use of the metric system was permissible by law, and in fact was adopted by some sectors, notably the medical and scientific communities. Medical and scientific research often involves international collaboration and thrives on the sharing of information, which makes the International System of Units, or SI units, a valuable asset in these fields.

In 1971, a report from the US National Bureau of Standards recommended that the US require transition to the metric system over a period of 10 years. Once again, Congress acted, passing the Metric Conversion Act in 1975. However, the act omitted the 10-year requirement and made the conversion only voluntary. Schools began to teach students about the metric system, highway signs began to include distances in both miles and kilometers, but still the new system didn't stick. Slowly, the metric equivalents disappeared off the highway signs and out of the curriculum, and the momentum to adopt the metric system dissipated.

Today, the economy is global and the world feels like a smaller place. US companies increasingly find themselves competing in other countries, building facilities outside the US, or buying and selling throughout the world. The old argument claiming that US industry would pay too high a cost to convert to metric runs up against the added expense of working in two systems at once. Globalization has increased the pressure to standardize and conform to the system that's used worldwide.