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Metric Conversion:
Plans, Progress, and Problems
in the Federal Government

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Subcommittee on Science, Research,
and Technology
Committee on Science, Space, and Technology
House of Representatives

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee:

I am pleased to be here today to discuss our report on metric conversion activities within the federal government.¹ This report was prepared at the Committee's request and focuses on plans, progress, and problems at 37 agencies involved in implementing the metric conversion.

In summary, we found that serious difficulties may delay or prevent a timely and comprehensive move to the metric system. The Department of Commerce, as the lead agency, has not demonstrated a real commitment to guiding it and making it happen, nor have the other federal agencies demonstrated a serious commitment to making the transition.

Basically, we found that agencies have not advanced beyond the early planning stage. Only six agencies have completed metric guidelines, the first essential step toward conversion. Only two agencies, the Department of Defense and the General Services Administration, have prepared detailed transition plans identifying specific subject areas for review. As a sign of the overall lack of progress, 27 agencies, including 13 of the 14 major agencies, told us that more than three-fourths of the transition work remains to be done. Although the Congress intended federal agencies to use metric to the extent economically feasible by the end of 1992, no

¹Metric Conversion: Plans, Progress, and Problems in the Federal Government (GAO/RCED-90-131, March 30, 1990).

agency has developed timeframes indicating the extent each agency plans to accomplish conversion by then. Also, no agency has set a specific date for conversion.

The lack of Federal commitment to making the metric transition happen is also illustrated by the absence of staff assigned to the transition effort and by the inactivity of interagency metric subcommittees. For example, the majority of the 37 agencies we surveyed each assigned less than 1 staff year to the effort in fiscal years 1989 and 1990. In addition, at the time of our review, 9 of 10 interagency metric subcommittees, which are responsible for coordinating federal actions involving procurement, transportation, education, and other areas essential for a successful conversion, had not convened. Two more subcommittees met for the first time only within the past month.

BACKGROUND

U.S. conversion to the metric system has taken on new importance because of growing concerns about the trade deficit and our nation's declining competitiveness. The United States remains the only major industrialized nation with a non-metric measurement system and thus may be severely disadvantaged when competing in global markets. Because metrication is viewed as a key trade and competitiveness issue, the Department of Commerce serves as the lead agency. It chairs the Interagency Committee on Metric Policy

and the Metrication Operating Committee which guide and coordinate the government-wide transition.

In an effort to spur metric conversion, as part of the Omnibus Trade and Competitiveness Act of 1988 (better known as the Trade Bill), the Congress required each federal agency, to the extent economically feasible by the end of fiscal year 1992, to use the metric system in its procurement, grants, and other business activities. Following a Committee request to review the implementation of this requirement, we surveyed the 37 federal agencies where metric conversion would have the greatest impact. Thirty-six of the 37 agencies responded to our questionnaire and provided the primary basis for our assessment.

PLANNING FOR METRIC

CONVERSION HAS JUST BEGUN

As a first essential step, the Trade Bill mandated that agencies prepare guidelines for metric conversion. As of February 1990, however, we found that only six agencies had completed such guidelines. An additional 16 agencies expect to prepare them by the end of 1990. Twelve agencies did not identify a date for completing them, and three more did not expect to finish them until 1991 or 1992.

In general, we are concerned about the content as well as the timeliness of agency guidelines. According to a conference committee report on the legislation, the guidelines were to be modeled on a Department of Defense directive that contained all the essentials for metric conversion. However, only two of the five agencies (other than the Department of Defense) that had completed their guidelines conformed with this model. Guidelines at three agencies did not provide adequate information; in one case, the guidelines consisted of three memos 10 or more years old. In addition, many agencies did not state when they would finish their guidelines or said it would take another year or longer to complete them.

We also found that only three agencies have advanced very far in developing transition plans that identify specific areas of agency concern and steps to address them. The Department of Defense issued a plan in January 1989 providing for 16 task forces in areas ranging from specifications and standards to coordination with foreign countries. The General Services Administration issued its plan in April 1990. The Nuclear Regulatory Commission has drafted a detailed report examining major areas and options for conversion.

In addition, we found that time frames and milestones for measuring progress toward metric conversion have not been

developed, and no agency expects to complete its conversion by the 1992 time frame cited in the law.

PROGRESS HAS BEEN LIMITED

In addition to planning, agencies have initiated a variety of activities to promote metric conversion, but overall progress is limited. In particular, to facilitate the transition, agencies have established various metric committees. However, key interagency policy and operating committees and subcommittees, as well as internal agency committees and task forces focusing on specific issues, such as procurement, have only started to explore conversion issues. One positive sign is that many of the key agencies have formed internal metric committees. Ten agencies reported that they had developed internal committees, and three more plan to develop them.

In response to our questionnaire, 14 agencies stated that they have also identified federal measurement-sensitive concerns such as specifications or standards and regulations affecting their conversion to the metric system. Eleven agencies reported efforts to modify these measurement-sensitive concerns for metric purposes. The extent of these individual agency efforts, however, is somewhat limited. For example, the Department of Defense, which has been reviewing many areas essential to metric conversion, stated that these activities had occurred to only a very limited extent. The

General Services Administration has undertaken efforts only with regard to federal regulations, whereas its review of thousands of more detailed agency specifications is not yet underway.

Agencies recognize that extensive work needs to be done before metric conversion can become a reality. When asked to estimate the amount of work remaining, 27 of the agencies, including Commerce, Defense, and the General Services Administration, stated that more than three-quarters of the work is still ahead of them.

PROBLEMS NEED TO BE ADDRESSED

Problems relating to metric conversion call into question the federal agencies' commitment to completing the transition. About three-quarters of the 37 agencies allocated less than 1 staff year each in fiscal year 1989. Some increases are shown for fiscal year 1990, but the figures remain at low levels, with 20 agencies continuing to report less than 1 staff year assigned to the conversion effort. Commerce, as the lead agency, reported 3.5 staff years, and the General Services Administration only 1.25 staff years for fiscal year 1989. We found that only the Nuclear Regulatory Commission had made a preliminary estimate of the total time and resources needed for the effort. According to its draft report on metric conversion, the Commission expects its conversion process to last until 1997, require 20 to 25 staff years, and cost \$2 million to \$3 million.

Coordinating the conversion is a formidable task in view of the large number of agencies and issues involved. Thus, leadership from Commerce and the role of interagency committees become paramount concerns. In this regard, just this month, the Under Secretary of Commerce for Technology, who is expected to provide high-level coordination for this transition, was appointed.

Another important area of difficulty involves the interagency subcommittees of the Metrication Operating Committee. Although these subcommittees are essential to the success of the conversion effort, at the time of our review, 9 of the 10 subcommittees that cover key transition areas have not convened due to various problems, including vacancies and uncertainty about who is to appoint members. Two more subcommittees met for the first time only within the past month. Since these ten subcommittees are also expected to coordinate the federal conversion with the private sector, the delays in convening them have weakened the agencies' coordination of metric conversion both inside and outside the federal government.

Fifteen federal agencies, including the Department of Defense and the General Services Administration, told us that measurement-sensitive concerns in the private sector are likely to hinder their transition. Although some major industries such as the automotive sector have converted to the metric system, others are slow to

convert. One of the most difficult areas, according to seven agencies, is the construction industry, and other areas cited range from food to the electric industry to postal equipment. Even the main federal procurement agencies, the Department of Defense and the General Services Administration, stated that their ability to influence metrication in the private sector is quite limited.

Cost considerations involved in metric conversion are also likely to limit the use of the metric system in at least one major federal procurement. The National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) estimates the additional costs in metric design of its proposed space station at about \$200 million, based on information provided to NASA by all of the major contractors involved in the space station's development. NASA's metric coordinator told us that the Agency has no basis to challenge this estimate. As a result, NASA officials decided in late 1989 not to "go metric" with the space station.

Finally, with regard to metric education in federal agencies, problems are evident especially in the Department of Education. Although the Trade Bill directs agencies to increase understanding of the metric system through educational information and guidance, the Department of Education as of January 1990 had not established a policy for responding to this requirement nor had it appointed a chairman to the interagency subcommittee on metric education. Because of a common interagency need for leadership in this area,

the General Services Administration and the Office of Personnel Management may serve as lead agencies for metric education activities, but this decision has not been finalized.

CONCLUSIONS

Our basic assessment is that metric conversion has been limited by problems associated with implementing it. A combination of factors--including minimal staff resources, difficulty in organizing interagency subcommittees, and measurement-sensitive concerns in the government and private sector--suggests that conversion may take much longer than the Congress envisioned. If the federal agencies are to achieve significant progress toward metric conversion, a greater level of commitment must be forthcoming, and coordination not only between agencies but with the private sector will be essential.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the problems that we have identified, we recommended in our report that the Secretary of Commerce, as head of the lead agency in guiding and coordinating the federal metric transition, take steps to focus attention on each of these issues. These steps should include efforts to develop guidelines along with specific time frames and a realistic estimate of resources needed to support

metric conversion, as well as efforts to encourage the effective use of interagency subcommittees as soon as possible.

In view of these problems and especially the low level of resources that agencies have made available to support metric conversion, we believe the Congress may wish to require that agencies follow guidance provided by Commerce and include in their annual reports to the Congress a realistic estimate of the resources needed and the time frame required to achieve metric conversion.

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That concludes my statement, and I will be happy to answer any questions that you have.