I haven’t experienced it yet, but I understand that the metric system is coming soon. Correct? And, who’s making blueprints with metric information on them?

It’s amazing but true that the United States is the only industrialized country in the world that does not use the metric system as its predominant system of measurement.

What’s ironic is that when the metric system was adopted for international use during the 19th century the United States was part of the party. In 1875, the United States was one of 17 original signatory nations to the Treaty of the Meter. Within a few decades after endorsing the treaty, most of the signatory countries began to use the newly established metric measurement criteria. The United States, however, had different plans. Rather than adopting the metric system as the everyday standard of measure, national legislation was passed in 1893 that defined the customary measurements—the inch, foot, pound, gallon, etc.—in terms of the new system. This trick allowed the United States to comply with the spirit of the treaty it had endorsed while simultaneously allowing its citizens to retain the use of the traditional measurement system.

One hundred years later, things have begun to change. The Omnibus Trade and Competitiveness Act approved in 1988 required federal government agencies to use the metric system in their procurement and other business-related activities. A subsequent presidential order, issued in the early 1990s, required federal agencies to establish specific timetables for the conversion process. Most agencies have complied with the order, and more than $15 billion in metric projects are under construction or have been completed, most with federal funding. In addition, some state and local government projects and a few private sector projects have been designed using metric.

So who’s doing what with the federal government? As of the fourth quarter of 1997, here is a snapshot of how the U.S. government has integrated the metric system into construction:


Partially Converted to Metric—federal prisons, naval facilities and Veterans Affairs.

And virtually all work done by the General Services Administration is metric.

A number of projects that have been built using the metric system are now occupied, and most reports received from organizations that are monitoring the conversion process indicate that the construction process has not been adversely impacted by the use of the metric measuring system. Some problems have occurred regarding permit and shop drawing review, but, in general, those jobsites that start out respecting the metric system succeed in producing an acceptable end product.

Don’t expect the metric system to go away. The international trade community is becoming increasingly contemptuous of products manufactured using non-metric criteria, and many building material manufacturers, having already converted their products so that they comply with metric labeling criteria, aren’t too keen on spending the money to reverse the process.

(Specific information for this article was derived from Construction Metrication newsletter.)

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