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METRICATE YOUR ENGLISH!

I recently attended a conference and found myself doing the usual mental juggling of English vs. metric units during most of the presentations. At least it's getting easier—there are more papers in metric units and I'm getting a better "feel" for certain units without too much conversion. I do admit that I'm looking forward to the day—as has happened with smoking—that English units are banned from the meeting room. You may feel that is wishful thinking (or worse), but a portion of the Omnibus Trade and Competitiveness Act of 1988 has mandated the use of SI units by federal agencies and employees by the end of fiscal 1992. Considering the substantial number of government employees at our meetings and conferences, and assuming that they comply with the spirit and letter of the Act, we could see a real impact on the use of metric units. What about those who have difficulty with the growing use of SI units? As an ex-smoker, I can sympathize with those who have to (or want to) break nasty habits—U.S. Customary units, of course. I'm somewhat biased toward SI units, having been force-fed them by a former employer. And, unlike broccoli, I've gradually gotten to like them.

Why bother, you might say—I've always done it that way, most of my references are in English, and I'm comfortable with it. Well, you better look around a bit. This country will survive economically only if it integrates with the rest of the world, assuming that the dwindling number of English unit countries (United States, Liberia, and Burma) can't maintain a large enough trading bloc. But wait—if you teach, you can do your students a real favor. They need to be literate in both English and metric units because of the transition in the 90s. Also keep in mind that publications will move faster and faster toward SI units (as many journals now require). There's another wrinkle to all of this. Students and professionals from other disciplines are much ahead of us in metric usage. We are an interdisciplinary area that benefits from interaction with other disciplines. Our increased use of SI units will enhance these relationships.

I think that you'll help yourself as well. Have you ever tried to do a lumber yield study in our current units? Want to guess at the multiple conversion factors from nominal sizes to metric? (Just in case you weren't aware, metric volumes and sizes for wood products are actual, not nominal). If you would like to have your published research results stand the test of time, don't just soft-convert to metric—design in metric and think in metric. I'll freely admit that I get discouraged in marking up and replotting results that are in "archaic" units. The odd numbers that you get are deterrents to convenient use. If you want to make the plunge, I would recommend getting a copy of ASTM E380-89a, Standard practice for use of the International System of Units.

I sometimes reflect on the pleasure of being an ex-smoker when I'm on a transcontinental flight, with a further side benefit of being alive. And, like swearing off smoking, you can do almost the same thing with English units. Cold turkey. Your students will thank you for it. Someday.

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