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Providing the Option for Metric-Only Labeling

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Over the years, the NIST Metric Program, now part of the Office of Weights and Measures, has worked to promote the understanding, awareness, and acceptance of the use of metric units in the United States. The Metric Program continually explores opportunities to facilitate the use of the metric system in the United States. One area of activity is to encourage actions at the Federal and State level to allow the net contents of consumer packages to be stated only in metric units. Since the European Union has a labeling directive that will require consumer packages to be labeled only in metric units after January 1, 2010, U.S. manufacturers and exporters may find a competitive advantage in stating the content of packaged goods only in metric units. As more manufacturers adopt rational metric sizes in their packaging, it should be easier for them to market those packages throughout the world.

The Metric Program is undertaking an effort to encourage changes to the Federal Fair Packaging and Labeling Act (FPLA) that would give manufacturers the option to state the net contents of packages in only metric units or to state the net contents in both metric and inch-pound units (dual unit labeling). While FPLA governs labeling requirements for many consumer packages, the National Conference on Weights and Measures acted in 1999 to change Section 11.33 of the Uniform Packaging and Labeling Regulation to permit metric-only labeling on packages not covered by Federal laws or regulations.

Based on information provided by State weights and measures offices, State laws or regulations in 25 out of 53 jurisdictions do not appear to permit the labeling of packages in only metric units. However, 12 of these 25 jurisdictions did not provide information on the subject.

While supporting efforts to change the FPLA, the Metric Program also wants to work with State jurisdictions to encourage changes to the State laws or regulations to give packagers the option to label the net content of packages in only metric units. In the near future, the Metric Program staff will be contacting the weights and measures directors in these 25 jurisdictions to discuss this subject and ask if they need information that would help them prepare proposals to their legislatures to change their laws or regulations. Existing examples of the language in the laws of States that allow the labeling of packages in only metric units may be useful to the remaining 25 jurisdictions.

If you have any questions on this subject, please contact Gerry Iannelli (301) 975-5019, Jim McCracken (301) 975-3686 or Linda Crown (301) 975-3998. The office's email address is metric_prg@nist.gov.