Society Policy on Obligatory Use of Metric Units Questioned

The world-wide use of one system of mensuration is a worthwhile objective. In recent years this has led many scientific societies to recommend or require use of the metric system. The Agronomy Journal, Crop Science, and the Soil Science Society of America Proceedings have made use of metric units obligatory. Authors are given permission to present (in parentheses) the units of measurement in common "local" use. We wish to argue that this policy is too rigid and that continued adherence to it will result in significant losses to the societies and limit their long-term effectiveness.

We recognize that there are areas (generally covered by SSSA Divisions S-1, S-2 and S-3) in which use of metric units is the usual practice. We also note for those areas concerned with crop production (yields per unit area) and items of commerce (grain, forage, vegetables, and fruit) that the units of measure are seldom metric and, what is more relevant, that users of information concerned with crop production rarely use or deal in metric units. Further, there is little chance that a significant change in usage will occur simply because the units of length and breadth (miles, acres, etc.) are fundamental to the land tenure systems in North America and are far too complex to be altered, at least in the foreseeable future.

We contend that continued obligatory use of metric units will reduce the readership for these journals and, ultimately, limit growth for subscription lists. One does not invest seriously in unreadable journals. We do not believe that those who normally deal in nonmetric units will take the time needed to make the conversions of metric units into familiar terms. Important ideas and concepts may be overlooked or ignored because the reader has no concept of the units and terminology used. It is a widely accepted fact that learning is increased whenever the vocabulary and terminology are fully understood.

We contend that the majority, perhaps even the vast majority, of those interested in crop production (generally covered by Divisions S-4, S-6, and S-8) are seriously handicapped by the obligatory reporting of all data in metric units. The article by Young et al. (1) is a typical example. It is obvious that all field aspects of the work reported involved nonmetric units in common use in the USA; the reported metric units, obviously, conversions, are awkward and difficult to read. Further, the majority of readers would have to convert quintals, kg/ha, mm, and degrees C to bushels, lb/acre, inches, and degrees F in order to understand the various contributions of fertilizer, stored water, rainfall, and accumulated NO3-N toward yield because quantitative data describing these contributions are normally given in nonmetric units. The casual reader looking for ideas may well respond to the unfamiliar terms imposed by the obligatory use of the metric system with annoyance if not active annoyance. It is clear to us that those who should read and understand this paper are not those who normally think in metric units, and we do not believe he should be forced to make data conversions routinely in an attempt to understand reports.

We urge a review of the present policy that makes use of the metric units obligatory. We recommend that the choice of units be left to the author with the option of providing metric equivalents in parentheses or footnotes to assist other readers to make conversions. We believe that failure to make such a change will lead to a considerable decrease in support from an important number of commercial agronomists and from many others who must deal on a day-to-day basis with nonmetric units.

We continue to support maximum use of metric units whenever possible and would argue that this means that the research work normally utilizes metric units. We content that utility depends upon practical use and there are still many circumstances where metric units are not suitable for field research, for extension, or in practicing agriculture.

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Reference


Received Aug. 8, 1967.

Any other comments?—Editor-in-Chief.