Adoption of Metric System in the USA

The continuing controversy over general adoption of the Metric System has stimulated many intense debates among my colleagues and neighbors. One point often discussed but never resolved was the degree to which the average American could function if conversion were rapid, say within one decade. Most felt that bench scientists, already accustomed to metric measurements and motivated by their knowledge of the system's advantages, would have no difficulty. But most also agreed that the "man on the street" (i) knows practically nothing about the Metric System, (ii) would probably require at least one full generation to adjust to a change, and (iii) has no desire to make the change. Curiosity prompted me to poll a cross section of my local associates to determine their current knowledge and interest in the Metric System. The following questionnaire was sent to 33 randomly selected acquaintances with instructions to complete it without reference to conversion tables and to return it anonymously (30 were returned):

1) The posted speed limit is 50 kilometers per hour. Your old speedometer registers 35 miles per hour. Are you likely to get arrested? Yes___ No____.

2) Your auto tires used to take 28 lbs./sq. inch of air pressure. About how many grams/sq. cm. will you put in them now? 2____ 20____ 200____ 2000____.

3) On the first line below, mark off what you estimate to be one inch. On the second line mark off two centimeters.

4) Your grandmother's favorite cake recipe calls for 1 cup (8 ounces) of milk. About how many cubic centimeters should you add? 2½____ 25____ 250____ 2500____.

5) It's 30°C outside. Should you wear a coat? Yes____ No____.

6) You send your child to the store to buy a 1-pound loaf of bread with instructions to buy the ½ kilogram package. Can he carry it home? Yes____ No____.

7) The long dress design calls for two yards of material. You bought 1.8 meters (180 centimeters). Are you going to have to make a miniskirt now? Yes____ No____.

8) The new scale reads 50 kilograms. You used to weigh 110 pounds. Should you go on a diet? Yes____ No____.

9) Good farm land in your area usually sells for $1000 per acre. You see an ad for $2000 per hectare. Is it a good buy? Yes____ No____.

10) Wheat used to sell for $2.00 a bushel. This year yours sold for $6.00 a hectoliter. Are you getting rich or should you get out of farming? Stay____ Leave____.

11) Are you in favor of adopting the Metric System in the US? Yes____ No____.

The composition of the survey group was as follows:

1 housewife
1 truck driver
3 shop technicians
3 clerk typists
3 civil engineers
3 mathematicians
1 research laboratory director
4 research scientists
2 statistical clerks (female)
1 draftsman (female)
1 messenger
1 high school girl
3 research administrators
1 summer aid (college student)
2 military servicemen

The results are so contrary to those I expected that I thought they would be of interest to your other correspondents who have cited no such data in their letters to you:

1) 73.7% of the questions were answered correctly. (26.3% wrong or blank)

2) Only 3 questionnaires had all correct answers. None had them all wrong.

3) 63% were in favor of adopting the Metric System.

Despite the limited size and slightly scientifically biased composition of the group and the possibility of "trickiness" in some of the questions, the results highly favor the metric. I do, too.

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