

**November 2002**

## **Summary on FPLA-Metric Forum**

On November 7, 2002, NIST's Weights and Measures Division and the National Conference on Weights and Measures (NCWM) sponsored a public forum to initiate support for a Congressional amendment of Fair Packaging and Labeling Act (FPLA) to allow manufacturers the option of using metric only labeling on all packages. Currently FPLA requires manufacturers to provide both inch-pound and metric units, called "dual-unit" marking. More than sixty people including representatives of state and federal agencies, foreign governments, trade associations, manufacturers, retailers and other interested parties attended the forum held at the U.S. Department of Commerce in Washington, D.C.

The forum included several presentations that explained how changes in the global labeling environment and retail marketplace have substantially increased consumer familiarity and acceptance of metric units in connection with retail packages. Several speakers highlighted the successful use of metric units on consumer packages to provide net quantity, nutrition and health related information, and with its use with prescription and over the counter medicines, vitamin supplements, and other consumer products.

The public comments identified potential problems that may arise if metric only labeling were permitted. The forum explained why the option of metric only labeling is needed and how it can be implemented so that it has a positive impact in the marketplace.

A collaborative effort among government, industry and other interested parties is needed to encourage Congressional action to permit metric only labeling through an amendment to FPLA. This effort will be coordinated using a working group on labeling which will be a coordinated effort between NIST and the NCWM. Participation is open to any interested party. The group will develop support for the amendment and responses to the objections that will arise, and ultimately assist stakeholders in implementing metric only labeling with the goal that it be both cost effective for industry and ensure consumers can easily make value comparisons.

Comments and key lessons of the forum:

- The Federal government must work with the states, industry, and others to promote greater consumer understanding and use of metric units and encourage them to use value comparison tools (e.g., unit pricing) to assist them in making the transition to metric only package labeling and in getting the best value in their purchases.
- The NCWM reports that more than 75 percent of the states have amended their labeling requirements to permit the use of only metric units on packages that are subject only to state jurisdiction. In addition to changing FPLA, other state and

Federal (e.g., USDA, FTC and FDA) laws and regulations may need to be changed so consumers have access to consistent information on package labels.

- The European Union Directive will not permit inch-pound units on consumer packages after January 1, 2010. Representatives of several consumer product companies said they would be burdened with significant extra production, warehousing and other costs if they are required to maintain two types of packaging for the same product if the “dual units” requirement in FPLA is not removed.
- Industry representatives (e.g., Proctor and Gamble, Crayola, and other members of the Art and Creative Materials Industry) stated strong support for changing FPLA to allow them the option to label the net contents in only metric units. The bottom line is to let the marketplace determine when consumer packages should change to metric only labeling.
- Proctor and Gamble stated that to avoid negative customer reactions, they must consider the concerns of both retailers and consumers when considering the change to metric units. The company also said that industry has no incentive to conduct consumer studies at this time, because they don’t have the option of labeling net contents in only metric units.
- Companies must and will do consumer research before making this change. Industry does not expect an immediate change in their U.S. marketing practices even if FPLA is changed. Several manufacturers commented that if FPLA were changed they would consider introducing metric only labeling during new product introductions or when current products undergo a significant change in packaging or formulation.
- We must make a concerted effort to break the perception that many people have equating conversion to the metric system with a mandatory change in package sizes (called “hard conversion.”) This mindset is a major stumbling block to voluntary conversion to the metric system. A majority of the objections to the metric only labeling option expressed at the forum related can be traced back to this viewpoint. As mentioned above the states, through the NCWM, have already taken the lead in the area of metric only labeling by eliminating their package size limitations and they now permit the use of metric only labeling on a number of products along with complete flexibility in package sizes.

Objections came primarily from food retailers and a dairy industry representative. Their concerns related primarily to the potential problems that would be encountered if changes in package sizes are imposed (i.e., hard conversion to metric sizes). Some retailers believe consumers might not accept metric only labels or they would not be able to use the metric units to make value comparisons. Their other objections relate to the expense of replacing shelf labels and to the possibility of consumer complaints if they do not see inch-pound units in the marketplace.