Why isn’t the US metric?

Lightning Talk
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A World Standard

- International System of Units—or SI (Système International)
- In the US, the metric system has been used in science, education, and manufacturing since the 19th century
- Approved for use in 1866 by Congress
- SI made the basis for defining all other weights and measures in 1893
- Thomas Jefferson, pioneer of the United States Public Land Survey System, was a major advocate of decimals and the metric system in the founding years of the United States
- US maps (NGA, USGS, NOAA, Census etc) metrified following the adoption of NAD83
- MGRS, all datums and geoids, National Grid, USPLSS all metric
- The National Bureau of Standards has used the system since 1964
World map of non-compliance to SI standards
A sorry recent history

• U.S. Metric Board, created to supervise the voluntary transition to the SI, was disbanded because of federal budget cuts in 1982

• State and federal government has deliberately stalled conversion from the 1980s to today

• Some groups bitterly oppose conversion on highway signs and for weather reporting

• Result is confusion in K-12 education, for students, teachers, textbook publishers

• Nation is deliberately resisting better STEM preparation, losing international competitive advantage
But....

- Meanwhile the U.S. military has increased its use of the metric system, partly because of the need to work with other nations’ militaries within NATO.
- University and research community almost completely metric.
- Export and science-oriented ventures often use the system exclusively.
- Meanwhile, the majority of manufactured goods and trade activities have quietly voluntarily converted.
- Experience shows that conversion goes relatively smoothly.
What can we do?

• Recommend the reestablishment of the U.S. Metric Board
• Restate the importance for the National Map and NSDI
• Point out (and remove) the conversion absurdities (e.g. State Plane Coordinates in Nevada)
• Educate the public (and government, and publishers) about the fact that use of traditional English units is in decline
• Make recommendations for workforce training and preparation based on US Army and USNG examples
• Start thinking metric ourselves, at least in all NGAC documents
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