

# Physics student's prefix idea is 'hella' good

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Forget 15 minutes of fame. Austin Sendek is getting hella minutes. The University of California-Davis physics undergraduate has reaped international attention since March, when The Bee wrote about his campaign to establish a new, scientifically accepted prefix, "hella," to be used in front of units of weight, distance or just about anything.

It would be used much the same as kilo, mega and giga.

However, instead of designating, respectively, a thousand, million or billion, hella would mean 10 to the 27th power, or 1 followed by 27 zeroes.

The international committee that decides such matters is expected to hear the idea at its September meeting in Paris. Chances of approval are considered to be hella slim.

Undaunted, Sendek has continued his campaign, buoyed by the attention it has garnered. Measures of interest include:

News stories in papers in New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco, as well as websites around the world.

Radio interviews with broadcasters from Canada to Australia.

His Facebook petition now has about 63,000 fans.

[Wikipedia](#) includes the proposal in its discussion of units of

measurement, while [Google](#) includes it in its online calculator.

Perhaps the most gratifying experience occurred when he returned home to Yreka, Calif., for summer break and went to visit a former teacher.

He was on the playground when a kid did a double take and asked, "Are you the hella guy?"

It turned out the teacher had shown a TV clip of Sendek's proposal.

He was quickly surrounded by fifth-graders seeking autographs and saying "hella" repeatedly. Which is quite a change from when Sendek was that age and wasn't supposed to use the word.

"I always thought of it as a borderline bad word," he said.

The word is a mostly Northern California slang usage, according to a San Francisco [linguist](#), Rachelle Waksler.

Grammatically, it's an intensifier, roughly equivalent to "really" or "a lot of."

But Sendek wants it to be precisely equivalent to 1027.

The universe, he said, is 1.4 hellameters across. The sun's power is 0.3 hellawatts.

Sendek's most recent effort was an e-mail Wednesday to professor Ian Mills, an English physicist who chairs the international Consultative Committee on Units -- the group with the last say on measurement lingo. He asked if he could present the hella proposal to the committee in person.

"I believe a personal proposition would be a fitting way to top off this whimsical international discussion, even if the committee has no intentions of actually implementing the prefix," he wrote.

Mills responded Thursday, but in the negative.

"I am afraid it is not practical," wrote Mills, who earlier agreed to share the idea with his committee. "I will let you know how your proposal is received."

At the National Institute of Standards and Technology in Maryland, work is more likely to refer to quantities at the opposite end of the scale, said spokesman Ben Stein, who first forwarded Sendek's idea to Mills in February.

They have spoken of research involving yocto newton forces, atto second laser pulses and chemical quantities measured in zepto moles, Stein said.

Sendek, though he continues to hope for hella acceptance, is opting not to fly to Paris in the hopes of catching the committee's ear.

"That's a lot of money to drop on a gamble," he said.

The CCU may not be the last word, though, said David Bacon, a University of Washington computer science/physics research professor.

Bacon has blogged in support of hella and claims it isn't just because he, too, hails from Yreka.

"It's just a cute idea," he said.

And, the United States could adopt it irrespective of the international

measurement authorities, he said. "We don't use the metric system, right?"

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