



Washington State Department of Agriculture News Release

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WSDA Weights & Measures emphasizes fuel pump inspections to protect consumers

OLYMPIA – As the summer travel season begins and motorists start making vacation plans, the Washington State Department of Agriculture (WSDA) is stepping up motor vehicle fuel pump inspections to make sure drivers are getting their money's worth.

Washington vehicles consume more than 3 billion gallons of gas a year. With gas prices at record levels, motorists want to know they're getting what they pay for.

"May and June are priority months for our inspectors to test gas station meters," said Kirk Robinson, manager of the WSDA Weights and Measures Program. "We ensure that the volume displayed on the pump is going into the vehicle's tank. We also check the quality of fuel to protect consumers from substandard products."

Last year, nearly 2,000 pumps were taken out of service because of errors found by WSDA inspectors. About 10 percent of the fuel pumps have problems, ranging from false measurements to leaking hoses or malfunctioning displays. When inspectors find a gas pump that is shorting the customer, they order the device out of service and require the station to repair it before using that pump again.

Measurement tolerances are very strict, Robinson said. Inspectors test the meters by using methods developed by the National Conference on Weights and Measures. To pass, the pumps must deliver within 0.5 percent of the quantity tested to pass. On a 10-gallon purchase, the total must be within 6.4 fluid ounces of the amount delivered.

"In some cases, we find pumps dispensing too much fuel," said Robinson. "When that occurs, we let the station continue using the pump, but notify the business so they can get it repaired."

In addition to pumping the fuel into precisely calibrated measuring containers, they inspect the devices to ensure they are correctly calculating the charges and that the pump's safety features are in place. Inspectors also measure the amount of water in storage tanks to make sure it does not exceed state standards.

Over the past 15 years, fuel quality has improved dramatically. WSDA began a testing program in 1991 and found a fuel-quality compliance rate of 72 percent. In 2006, the compliance rate climbed to 98 percent.

The state's 46,000 registered fuel pumps dispensing gasoline, diesel and biofuels are inspected every 29 months on average.

The Weights & Measures Program receives about five complaints a week involving fuel issues. Robinson said the inspector's mission is to protect the public and promote fair competition among businesses.

Motorists can take some precautions to make sure they aren't overpaying at the pump:

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- Make sure the display is set to zero before pumping any gas.
- Make sure the correct price or any discounts you qualify for are reflected in the price before you start filling your tank.
- Check the price by multiplying the number of gallons by the unit price and check your receipt before you leave the station.
- Make sure you are using the proper grade of fuel. Most cars run on regular or 87 octane fuel and don't need the higher octane, more expensive grades. Check your owner's manual for vehicle requirements.

To get the best fuel efficiency, WSDA suggests:

- Consolidate trips and errands to cut down on drive time and miles.
- Slow down. The faster you go, the more fuel you burn.
- Avoid jackrabbit starts.
- Lighten the load. Don't haul extra weight in your trunk, cargo area or passenger compartment.
- Keep your car tuned and your tires properly inflated.
- Avoid traveling during rush hours to reduce fuel consumption in stop and go traffic.
- Use your air conditioner sparingly.

The Weights and Measures Program responds to complaints about motor fuel and can be reached at (360) 902-1857 or at wtsmeasures@agr.wa.gov. The cities of Seattle and Spokane also have weights and measures programs. To contact Seattle's program, call (206) 386-1298. For Spokane, call (509) 625-6611.

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