



Washington State Department of Agriculture News Release

For immediate release: May 12, 2008 (08-17)
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WSDA Weights & Measures check to verify that fuel station pumps measure up

OLYMPIA – With motorists facing sky-high fuel prices even before Memorial Day, 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.

“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. “With these record prices, drivers need to know they are getting what they pay for.”

The state's 49,000 registered fuel pumps dispensing gasoline, diesel and biofuels are inspected every 28 months on average. Washington vehicles consume more than four billion gallons of gas and diesel fuel a year.

In the first three months of 2008, more than 1,800 fuel pumps were inspected. Ninety-four percent of the pumps were found to be accurate, but 115 pumps were tagged temporarily out of service due to volume errors or other problems. A sticker on each pump that passes inspection shows consumers when the device was last tested and approved.

Measurement tolerances are strict. 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—just over half the volume of a can of soda. 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.

WSDA also inspects the devices to ensure they are correctly calculating the charges and that the pump's safety features are in place. Inspectors can find leaking hoses or malfunctioning displays. Motor fuels are sampled to make sure they meet quality and octane requirements. Inspectors also verify that water condensation in storage tanks does not exceed national standards.

Weights & Measures fields about a dozen complaints a week, mainly from drivers who find the program's e-mail address and phone number on the fuel pump stickers. Consumers may be concerned when the fuel meter shows more gallons pumped into their tanks than they think their vehicle should hold. Drivers also file a complaint if they find the price at the pump does not match up with the price advertised on the station's signs. Pump meters can jump ahead to show a cost even before the pump starts dispensing fuel.

WSDA also finds that some pumps dispense more fuel than the consumer pays for. That can happen when meters become less accurate due to wear and tear and they under-report the amount dispensed. When that occurs, inspectors let the station continue using the pump, but notify the business so they can get it repaired.

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“The goal of our inspections is to provide a level playing field for both the consumer and the business owner,” said Robinson. “It’s important that the consumer doesn’t get shorted, but we also let station managers know when they are giving away free fuel.”

The Weights & Measures Program offers the following tips motorists may take while fueling their vehicles:

- 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.

As consumers approach the heavy spring and summer driving seasons, the AAA of Washington has the following recommendations to get the best fuel efficiency:

- 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.
- Keep your car tuned, your tires properly inflated, and replace dirty air filters.
- 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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