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Page: 1A

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Auditing gas prices

Pumps are routinely checked

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On a recent hot, sunny afternoon in Richmond, Jeff Anderson squeezed a gas pump handle, filling two five-gallon stainless steel containers that sat in a two-wheel cart.

Anderson is an investigator for the Minnesota Department of Commerce. The containers measure whether the pump actually gives motorists as much gas as it promises.

When he finished at the pump, which earned a passing grade, he wheeled the cart to one of the convenience store's 10,000-gallon underground tanks and poured the light-green liquid back into it.

As gas prices have increased, so have complaint calls to the Minnesota Department of Commerce. More consumers are reporting that pumps are not giving drivers as much gas as they bought, even though the state says that usually isn't the case. A year ago, drivers called Anderson maybe once a month to report a faulty station. Now he gets about two to three calls a week, he said.

Despite the complaints, most Central Minnesotans get what they pay for at local pumps, according to a Times analysis of gas pump inspections.

But not all gas pumps pass inspectors' tests. Between April 1, 2007, and April 1, 2008, about 6 percent of gas pumps failed inspections in Stearns, Benton and Sherburne counties. That's roughly a dozen pumps each month in that time.

Pumps are tested with a margin of error of 6 cubic inches — or about one-fourth of a can of soda. For a regular pump at \$4 a gallon, that's a margin of error of about 10 cents.

The Minnesota Department of Commerce says the inspection data show its Weights and Measures department — filled with people like Anderson, who check grocery store scales as well as gas pumps, among other duties — does its job as a watchdog and that its purpose is important.

"What we want is a gallon (of gas) to be a gallon everywhere," said Julie Quinn, assistant director of the Weights and Measures division of the state's commerce department.

When a pump fails

Pumps fail inspections for many reasons. Sometimes pumps give too much gas. Sometimes hoses leak. Sometimes the meter is broken — the meter that tells you how much you've purchased.

The problems usually occur because of normal wear and tear, Quinn said. This is the way she puts it: If your washing machine ran for three or four minutes, stopped to rest for another minute or two, then ran again, going in the same cycle for 24 hours a day all year long, your washing machine probably would wear out fast.

"The fact they hold up is miraculous," she said. Quinn is surprised that so few pumps fail.

New gas pumps often failed inspections, according to the data. Pumps that are new, or have received maintenance work, are held to stricter standards for 30 days.

The standard for new pumps: A margin of error of 3 cubic inches, rather than the regular pump's margin of 6 cubic inches.

The system

When Anderson finds a problem, he usually slaps the pump with a yellow tag or a red tag, depending on the severity of the problem. The red tag means it can't be used until it's fixed. The yellow tag

means it can be used but must be fixed within 30 days.

If a pump needs work, the gas station must pay for the repair. The owner does not receive a reprimand, no matter how many yellow or red tags the station gets.

That's because the pump's owner can't do what Anderson does.

"The station owner generally doesn't have the tools to know whether he is shorting people or giving gas away," Quinn said.

The owner must, however, hire a state-certified worker to repair it.

State-certified maintenance workers are trained like state Department of Commerce investigators, but employed by private companies. They are held accountable by the state.

If the state finds three major problems with a pump within 90 days — such as pumps calibrated to a certain margin of error in the station's favor — the worker's permit can be suspended, Quinn said. That person cannot reapply for the job for 120 days.

And that person's work is checked by the state. Inspectors randomly recheck 25 percent of pumps. The commerce department also promises 100 percent inspection on new pumps.

It's a system that Kent Carda said works well. Carda is office manager at Belgrade Cooperative Association in Belgrade. Some of his station's pumps failed tests last July because they were new and were off by 3 to 7 cubic inches.

But Carda, who has worked for the convenience store and gas station for 12 years, said the system is fair. He knows it's not something he could do himself. "Heck no," he said. "There's no way."

Integrity

More consumers are calling the state to complain about inaccurate pumps. That's because more people are paying attention to how much gas goes into their tanks, Quinn said.

Anderson inspects about 30 to 40 pumps a day, or two to three gas stations. Most of the time, drivers get what they pay for, he said.

"Ninety-nine percent of times, the pump is right," he said. "I wish I'd find something that's off."

Sometimes a consumer's complaint is valid. Mills Fleet Farm in Waite Park, for example, last year had an inspection that was off by 130 cubic inches — meaning customers got about 4½ gallons of gas for every 5 gallons they paid for. The pump was flagged for repair. Mills Fleet Farm did not respond to a request for an interview.

That was a rare incident, Quinn said. It was the only pump off by that much in the three-county area, according to the data.

Some gas pumps give drivers extra gas. At Rooney's Texaco in Belgrade, one test showed a pump was giving away as much as one-fourth of a gallon of gas for every five gallons pumped. It was immediately flagged and fixed.

It was normal wear and tear, said Russ Rooney, owner of Rooney Oil. He described it as a nonevent.

"Once a year they come on in and test our pumps for accuracy," he said. "There's times it floats the other way. You just shrug and say, 'Shucks.' "

No matter what drivers experience at the pump, they almost always joke with Anderson about whether they can get gas for free.

Consider this exchange in Richmond, while Anderson filled two five-gallon containers:

"Can I have that gas when you're done?" said a man wearing a camouflage hat and driving a silver truck.

"No, probably not," Anderson said, letting out a short laugh.

The man smiled and drove off.

"If I had a nickel every time (I heard that) ... I could have retired years ago," Anderson said.

Consumers may be more jaded, but Anderson hopes they see the value in the state commerce department's dated approval sticker that he applies when stations have passed inspection.

On occasion he ends his days smelling like gas, but he doesn't mind. He loves his job. It's a job where

his integrity matters and where he can serve the public.

"I value my integrity probably more than anything else," he said.

Report problems at the pump

Was there a problem at the pump last time you filled up? Tell someone at the Minnesota Department of Commerce and they'll check it out.

Call the number on the sticker at the pump — 651-215-5821. Or visit www.commerce.state.mn.us and click on "Weights and Measures" on the upper right side of the screen, where you can find information about filing a complaint.

Find more online

Check the database see if your local gas station failed or passed inspection tests at www.sctimes.com.

Caption: Cutline 1: Jeff Anderson, weights and measures investigator, Minnesota Department of Commerce, does a yearly accuracy test of gas pumps June 25 at a station in Richmond. Cutline 2: Jeff Anderson, weights and measures investigator for Minnesota Department of Commerce, pours the gas back into the holding tanks after testing the accuracy of pumps at a station June 25 in Richmond.