

“More motorists blame the pump”

By Andrew Seaman



Photos by H. Darr Beiser, USA TODAY

Increase in complaints: Maryland Department of Agriculture Weights and Measures inspector Ethan Halpern checks the accuracy of a pump at a gas station last month.



Gauge: Inspectors make sure the amount of gas dispensed matches what the consumer is charged for.

More motorists blame the pump

Complaints about accuracy soar along with price of gas

By Andrew Seaman
USA TODAY

As gas prices rise, so does the number of calls to state complaint lines about problems with gas pumps.

Despite the increase in consumer complaints about pump accuracy, state Department of Agriculture weight and measurement officials say the number of problem pumps is no higher today than it was a year ago.

A USA TODAY review found that Maryland, Oregon, Pennsylvania, South Carolina and Washington received about twice as many complaints in May compared with the same month in 2007. Florida, Maine, Oklahoma, Texas, Virginia and Wyoming also reported big increases.

Elaine Lidholm, director of communications for the Virginia Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, said complaints are up 56% from 70 in May of last year to 109 this May. But, she said, only 10 of this May's complaints, or 9%, have been justified so far compared with 13% of last year's.

Bryan Black, spokesman for the Texas Department of Agriculture, said his state received 268 complaints this May, up 74% from a year ago. Just 5% of complaints have had merit, he said.

State officials say consumers often feel they are charged for more fuel than they pumped. An e-mail complaint Black received last month said: "I filled my car with 18 gallons of gas when I had a quarter of a tank left. My tank just holds 18 gallons total!"

Another person, Black said, noted that he had filled up a 2.5-gallon container but was charged for 3 gallons of gas. Others may question the octane level of the fuel purchased.

An increase in complaints led New Jersey to form a task force to check gas stations for violations, said Jeff Lamm, spokesman for the state's Division of Consumer Affairs.

The additional complaints can strain state resources. Carol Fulmer, director of consumer services for South Carolina's Department of Agriculture, said his department tries to check every gas pump once a year, but with 19 field inspectors and 140 complaints a month, it can be difficult.

"There are only so many inspections you can do in a day," Lidholm said.

Black said the rising cost of gas is behind the increase in complaints.

"When you see \$4 a gallon, people are very serious about making sure they get exactly what they are paying for," Black said.

"Consumers deserve to get what they pay for," said New Jersey Attorney General Anne Milgram, "especially when they are paying record-setting prices for gasoline."

Lidholm said complaints have surged before. "The last time was September (and) October 2005, after Hurricane Katrina," she said.

In most cases, states decide how often station pumps are checked for accuracy, said Marta Gates, director of operations for the Service Station Dealers of America and the Washington, Maryland, Delaware Service Station and Automotive Repair Association. In Texas, for example, state law requires pumps to be checked every four years and rechecked if a complaint is received, Black said.

Dick Piper, director of the Colorado Division of Oil and Public Safety, said most of the complaints are from people who believe they have been cheated by the pump. However, he said, when a problem is found, it is usually the gas station owner losing out.

"More than 50% of the time (the problem) does favor the customer," he said.

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