

SPOTLIGHT ON WEIGHTS & MEASURES

SONOMA COUNTY SEALER OF WEIGHTS AND MEASURES



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COMPLAINTS

May was a busy month for consumer complaints related to service stations. Our division received the following complaints:

- Service Stations 10
- Quantity Control 2
- Sub-metering 1

Of the ten service station complaints received, five were related to meter accuracy, four were related to pricing or advertisement problems, and one was related to suspicious fuel quality.

Of the five suspicious meters, one was placed out of service for being out of tolerance and not functioning correctly. The rest of the meters in question were kept in service because the inspectors were unable to replicate the experience which occurred to the complainant. As inspectors, if a meter is determined in tolerance or functioning correctly, we are unable to take any adverse action against the business until we can witness and attest to a problem existing with the meter.

Three service station complaints involved price signs posted on the street. Two service stations in Petaluma were advertising their "cash sale" prices on the street signs and when the customer pulled up to the dispenser, they noticed that the "credit price" was a few cents more per gallon. Service stations are allowed to sell fuel at various prices for "cash sales", "credit sales", "car wash discounts", or "full service" prices but they must clearly post the conditions of any sale. If a service station offers petroleum of one particular type at various prices and they choose to advertise the lowest price, they are required to also post their highest price along side the lower price in order to avoid the

"enticement" of customers to their establishment.

One complaint received was against a local supermarket that operates a service station and offers reduced prices for "club" members. The complainant indicated she was not given the reduced price at the pump after she had presented her club card. The complainant stated this was an ongoing issue which has occurred to her on more than one occasion. The inspector who handled the case purchased some fuel as an every day customer and was given the reduced "club" price. The inspector was unable to substantiate the nature of the complaint at this particular time, but these types of complaints are frequently followed up on with other counties in order to determine if it is occurring throughout the State or if this was just an isolated incident.

One of the Quantity Control complaints was related to Spanish Peanuts at a local supermarket placed in more than one location throughout the store. When the price changed they forgot to manually change one of their shelf signs and a customer happened to be charged the higher "non sale" price rather than the expired "sale price" that the shelf indicated. Expired signs inadvertently left on shelves do not exempt a business from any responsibilities or obligations they are required to sell at the correct advertised price.

The sub-metering complaint concerned a "granny unit" that was being rented out by tenants who felt they were being charged incorrectly for their electricity use. There are jurisdiction issues involved with PG&E and Weights and Measures that must be investigated further, but the complainant did not want to be evicted if he reported his land lord's behavior. At this point the complainant is in the process of getting back to us with additional information

CONSUMER TIPS

Petroleum Information to Know

Q: What is gasoline?

A: In general, gasoline is a complex mixture of many components, called hydrocarbons, which are refined from crude oil. The hydrocarbons are blended together to produce a fuel used to power spark an ignition, internal combustion engines. The blending of these hydrocarbons may vary from refinery to refinery. Finished gasoline, however, is required to meet certain specifications as defined by federal and state regulations and the American Society for Testing and Materials.



Q: What is ASTM?

A: The American Society for Testing and Materials (ASTM) is an organization comprised of volunteer representatives from automobile manufacturers, equipment manufacturers, gasoline producers, and pipeline companies. The ASTM develops specifications for gasoline in order to provide a product that will provide satisfactory performance, under varied operating conditions, for all vehicles.



Q: What is meant by Octane?

A: The Antiknock Index, commonly referred to as Octane, is a measure of a gasoline's ability to resist preignition or engine knock. The Antiknock Index posted at the retail pump, such as 87 Octane, is the result of a formula which most closely depicts the average receptivity of the gasoline to engine knock. This average is displayed on the gasoline pump with a sticker showing (R+M)/2 Method.

The Research Octane Number, or R in the equation, is a measure of the gasoline's ability to resist knock at low speed under relatively mild operating conditions, such as city type driving. The Motor Octane Number, or M in the equation, is a measure of the gasoline's ability to resist knock at high speeds and under severe operating

conditions, such as towing a boat or climbing steep hills. The average of these two numbers defines how well the gasoline will resist engine knock under most conditions.

Q: Which gasoline octane grade should I use in my vehicle?

A: Your first reference should be the vehicle Owner's Manual. Each vehicle manufacturer includes, in the Owner's Manual, the recommended minimum octane for normal operation of the vehicle. As a general rule, use the octane grade which prevents your engine from knocking or pinging.

Q: What is Reformulated Gasoline?

A: The Clean Air Act of 1990 identified specific areas in the United States with higher concentrations of air pollutants. To improve air quality, the Environmental Protection Agency mandated certain areas would require Reformulated Gasoline (RFG). RFG is gasoline which has been specifically manufactured to reduce undesirable emissions from vehicles. RFG must meet more stringent specifications compared to conventional gasoline (non-RFG). These more stringent specifications, which also require the addition of oxygenates to the gasoline blend, reduce air pollutants from vehicles. The oxygenates provide additional oxygen in the combustion chamber and thereby result in a more complete combustion of the gasoline.

Q: I've noticed that gasoline has a different odor. What has changed to cause this difference?

A: Oxygenates in gasoline, such as RFG, may give the fuel a different smell. Typically, the oxygenate Ethanol, is the source of the smell, though other oxygenates may be present.

