

Spotlight on Weights & Measures



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COMPLAINTS



For the month of July the following complaints were received in the respective categories:

- Service Stations 4
- Quantity Control 3
- Sub-metering 3
- Measuring Devices 3

All complaints were investigated and three of these complaints are worth a closer look.

A consumer who purchased unlabeled firewood in a burlap sack filed one complaint. Firewood, when packaged, is required to have a quantity statement indicating the volume as well as the identification of the seller of the product and the type of wood. The inspector who handled this particular complaint talked to the store owner and the distributor and educated them on the labeling requirements for packaged commodities as required by the Fair Packaging and Labeling Act. The complainant was particularly annoyed after she handled the firewood because she claimed it contained poison oak that infected her kids.

A second complaint involved a consumer that purchased bulk propane from a local company. The complainant noticed that filling his tank had increased in price over time. The propane distributor had mailed a courtesy statement every so often, but did not indicate the price per gallon of the fuel deliveries. This raised some flags with the consumer who was frustrated over the increasing prices that caught him unaware.

The consumer received a truck meter delivery ticket every time he ordered a propane delivery, but he had failed to notice the ticket presented to him indicated the price per gallon as required. The truck's delivery meter is a commercial device which is certified by the Division for use. Newer meters have ticket printer requirements which must be met in order to be certified in compliance. Legible printing of the price per gallon is only one requirement.

Propane is a petroleum product, and like gasoline and diesel fuel has increased in price dramatically over the past few months. Because bulk deliveries of propane range between 200 and 400 gallons, even a

COMPLAINTS

Continued

small price increase is magnified in the total sale.

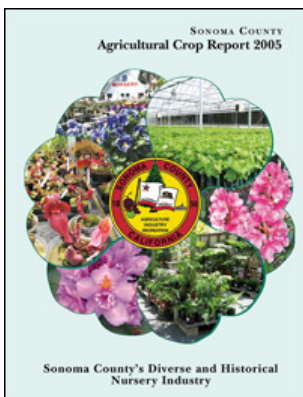
A third complaint involved a resident who had a huge electricity bill through her PG&E services. She indicated the PG&E customer service representative was unable to answer all her questions and she was convinced she had not used such a large amount of electricity. She indicated her electric bill was in the high \$800 for the last couple of months.

The inspector explained to the complainant the Division of Weights & Measures does not have jurisdiction over residential meters. The Public Utilities Commission (PUC) has the jurisdiction. Weights & Measures regulates only non-PUC regulated sub-metering installations like those found in mobile home parks. The inspector explained that meter readings, billing dates, and rates must be included on every utility bill. An abnormal use could indicate a misread meter or an appliance might be malfunctioning. We suggested she visit a local PG&E district office near her home and ask for a staff person to help her with her bills in order to determine if there had been an error in the billing of her services. No indication yet as to whether she was successful in resolving her issue with PG&E.

HARVEST SEASON

Every year the County Agricultural Commissioner produces a "Crop Report" and presents it to the Secretary of California's Department of Food and Agriculture (CDFA). The County of Sonoma has published our annual crop report for the 2005, which is currently available on-line at the following link: www.sonoma-county.org/agcomm/crop_report.htm

How does this relate to the County's Weights and Measures Division? The main crop in the County of Sonoma is wine grapes to the tune of \$430.5 million dollars. This involves the buying and selling of grapes over scales of all types.



As grapes are harvested, money changes hands between grape growers, wine producers, and grape pickers. Both the seller and the buyer are interested in getting an accurate weight on the quantity of grapes they are either buying and/or selling. Field workers

are paid based on the weight of the product they pick and are also interested in having their work weighed over accurate scales.

All this buying, selling, and accounting of commodities and services takes place over scales. Vehicle scales weigh trucks full of grapes and juice(s), crane scales weigh gondolas or bins full of grapes, and floor scales (dormant scales) weigh bins which have been picked by field workers. All these scales have to be certified annually by the County's Weights & Measures Division.

Inspectors apply tolerances to all commercial scales along with a variety of other performance test requirements. Only when a scale passes these tests, will they be given a passing Seal and be allowed to be used in the marketplace.

So the next time you open up a bottle of your favorite local Cabernet Sauvignon or Chardonnay, rest assured your local Weights & Measures officials have been on the job making sure that the growers, buyers, and field workers received their livelihood using a scale which was certified to insure each transaction was correct.

CONSUMER TIP

Firewood season is fast approaching. With today's high-energy costs, many of you may be considering purchasing firewood for fuel. As an informed consumer, you should become acquainted with the term and the dimensions of a "cord" of firewood.

A "cord" is a legal measurement defined by law. A cord of firewood is 128 cubic feet ranked (placed in rows) and well stowed wood (no cross stacking). This is commonly stacked in a row of parallel wood lengths of 2 feet stacked 4 feet high by 16 feet long or two rows, 4 feet high, 4 feet wide, and 8 feet long (see figure A).

A cord or a fraction of a cord ($\frac{1}{3}$, $\frac{1}{2}$) is the only legal measure for firewood over $\frac{1}{8}$ of a cord. Any firewood sold in quantities less than $\frac{1}{8}$ of a cord (16 cubic feet) must be sold in cubic feet or a fraction thereof.

Terms such as a "truck load" or "pile" have no legally defined meaning and are therefore arbitrary because there is no way of determining how much firewood you are actually receiving in a "truck load".

When you buy firewood make sure to get a receipt from the seller and it should state the following:

1. seller's name and address
2. price for the quantity sold
3. amount sold
4. species or type of wood
5. date of sale

If possible, get the seller's phone number and write down the license plate number of the delivery vehicle.

When the wood is delivered, ask the seller to stack it (you may have to pay extra for this service) or stack the wood yourself. Measure the wood before using any of it. If the cubic measurement indicates that you did not receive the correct volume, contact the seller before you burn any wood. If this does not resolve the issue, you can call our office to mediate the disagreement on your behalf.

Last year the Division of Weights and Measures received a complaint regarding the term "seasoned" firewood. This is a loosely defined term used in the industry which refers to the condition of cut wood that has been allowed to "sit" for a period of approximately six to twelve months. Seasoned wood has no more than 22% moisture content. If you want wood ready to burn and you are purchasing it after the rainy season has begun, chances are that you will get "wet" wood.

The Division of Weights and Measures is primarily concerned with the "quantity" of wood being represented and not necessarily the quality of wood unless it is grossly misrepresented. If you have any questions regarding the sale of firewood, contact our office at the number listed below.

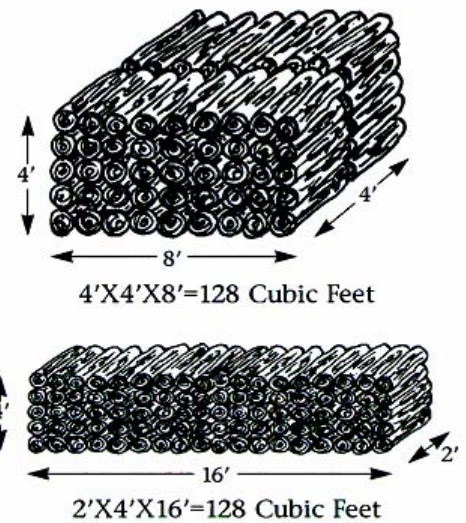


Figure A

133 Aviation Blvd., Ste. 110
Santa Rosa, CA 95403

PHONE:
(707) 565-2371

FAX:
(707) 565-3850

We're on the Web!

See us at:

www.sonoma-county.org/agcomm_weights_measures/