

OHIO NEEDS A FUEL QUALITY TESTING PROGRAM

Dusty Rhodes, Hamilton County Auditor

When a consumer goes to the gas pump in Ohio; they assume they are getting the posted grade. In Ohio, that's a big assumption: Ohio has no regulatory program to test and ensure the quality of gasoline, Ohioans are using blind luck at the pump.

Nearly six billion gallons of fuel are sold every year in Ohio, making us one of the largest fuel consuming states in the nation. Yet, Ohio is one of only three states without any authority to test fuel quality. (Ohio, Nebraska and Alaska).

At the start of the decade we were one of four but the Pennsylvania State Legislature passed enabling legislation to begin fuel quality testing in 2012.

A fuel quality testing program will benefit consumers both in protecting their engines and assuring them they are getting full value for their hard earned energy dollars.

If you think this doesn't matter, ask any long haul trucker how often they fill up in Ohio? You'll find most of them buy their fuel once they get over the state line.

Over the past few decades, the Ohio Department of Agriculture has commissioned three independent tests to sample the quality of Ohio's fuel. The results of these tests indicate unacceptable failure levels.

A 1999 Department of Agriculture survey of 135 Ohio gas stations in 23 local jurisdictions found that 21 percent of the samples of regular gas collected didn't meet minimum quality standards.

In 2005 the testing of 240 service stations in Summit County found "dozens of violations".

Typically from 20 to 25 percent of regular gas tested doesn't pass in locales with no consumer protection programs.

That was the experience in Missouri in 1999 and in West Virginia prior to beginning a regular testing program. Once fuel quality testing started the West Virginia fail rate dropped to under 5 percent.

That seems to have happened every time a program of fuel quality testing has begun. The instances of bad gas or octane problems drops once testing begins.

This is pretty basic. Once they know it can and will be checked, the bad guys stop their games. And of course, the converse is true, if they know no one is looking some people will try to take advantage.

The best part of instituting fuel testing is the minimal cost to taxpayers. When was the last time you heard that government wanted to provide a new service – without handing taxpayers a huge bill to do it?

The major expense of beginning any new service is hiring the staff. In this case, the staff is already there - checking Hamilton County's over 1,400 commercial gasoline pumps for fuel quantity. Checking quality could be done at the same time.

The County Auditors Association of Ohio has been seeking this authority for over a quarter of a century. So, why is Ohio lagging 47 states in ensuring a basic consumer protection?

Counties are agents of the state. We have to enabling legislation from the State Legislature. The same people who authorized County Auditors to do fuel quantity checks would have to authorize checking fuel quality.

The reason they haven't done so is the opposition of the Ohio Petroleum Institute's lobbyists. They have been successful in stopping this legislation for years.

A bill proposed in 2004 by then State Representative Timothy Grendell, (R-Chesterland), with County Auditors' support, never got a vote.

In 2007, one day before a bill offered by the County Auditors' was to come before the State House of Representatives, a provision was added to the transportation budget authorizing the start of a fuel testing program – by the State Department of Agriculture.

According to Adam Ward, the acting deputy director of the Agriculture Department, the budget bill provision in 2007 was more about heading off the momentum for the County Auditors' proposal. He said the wording essentially said, "You can set up a program, but you really can't..." because it wasn't funded. That effectively killed fuel quality testing in Ohio, as the lobbyists knew it would.

More importantly, why would the motor fuel lobby fight so hard against protecting consumers? Pardon my suspicions, but the most compelling reason why someone would not welcome an independent verification of the quality of their product is that they have something to hide.

Now that they are considering increasing the gas tax, urge your legislators to stand up to petroleum industry lobbyists. Consumers have a right to know what they are putting in their vehicles - especially if it is going to cost even more.

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