

PROMOTING AN HONEST MARKETPLACE FOR FUEL

By Dusty Rhodes, Hamilton County Auditor

The success of free markets is based on accurate information for potential buyers. One of the basic services of government is to assure consumers are getting what they pay for. Our office participates in this process with our Weights and Measures Division. A small, highly trained staff checks dispensers and price scanners across the county.

The effectiveness and professionalism of the Hamilton County Weights and Measures Division was honored last month with the Frank Gallo Award from the Ohio Weights and Measures Association. This award is given annually to an agency for a commitment to excellence in this important work.

Most people see our sticker on the gas pumps when they fill up. But they are surprised to learn that while we can tell them how much fuel they are getting we can not tell them what is being put in their tank.

Ohio is one of only four states that do not test fuel quality and octane. How important is this? Channel 19 in Cleveland recently tested fuel quality at twelve gas stations in that area. Three of them failed the test. That is a 25 percent failure rate. People paying for high octane were getting regular octane fuel.

That failure rate is not inconsistent with other states and areas that checked fuel before beginning quality testing began. It is a safe bet that without such testing; one in five people paying for high octane gas are not getting it.

Aside from being ripped off, if your vehicle requires high octane and you are not getting it could cause your engine to run poorly. Without an active fuel quality testing program you could be getting impurities which could damage your engine.

Here's the best part. Our office could test for fuel quality *at the same time we test for volume*. When we visit local gas stations we could add a quality check. Aside from the one time cost of hand held testers we could provide this critical service with existing staff, from our existing budget with little additional cost.

So why hasn't this basic consumer protection been instituted?

The State Legislature has refused to give us the authority to do so. Efforts to gain this ability dating back at least fifteen years have been repeatedly thwarted by petroleum industry lobbyists in Columbus.

Most recently the petroleum industry succeeded in giving authority for testing fuel quality to the Ohio Department of Agriculture (ODA). They had to know that ODA had no funds to set up such a program, much less to duplicate the inspectors which County Auditors already have in place and on the job across the state.

I hope members of the next State Legislature will be able to stand up to the lobbyists and give us the ability to provide this critical service to consumers. You should have some assurance that you are really getting what you are paying for at the gas pump.

Dusty Rhodes
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