



National Conference on Weights and Measures

"That Equity May Prevail"

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Consumer Complaints Rise with Fuel Prices

LINCOLN, Neb. As fuel prices rise, so do the number of consumer complaints at the gas pump. A recent survey of state weights and measures officials revealed that most of the respondents see a direct correlation between fuel prices and the number of complaints they receive. Often, consumers give little thought to the accuracy of measurements on a scale, through a gas pump, or on a package label. However, when prices increase, consumers pay greater attention.

Kurt Floren, Director of Weights and Measures for the County of Los Angeles, said the number of documented violations does not tend to increase with fuel prices. "Buying and selling occurs every day so our inspectors are performing unannounced inspections throughout the year, not just when prices are high." He added, "The fact that spikes in non-compliance do not coincide with spikes in prices and complaints indicates that the routine regulation by weights and measures officials is doing its job in protecting the marketplace. The increased diligence by consumers, though, in observing and reporting issues of concern is appreciated, helping to guide officials to potential problems and enabling prompt resolutions."

Inspectors test for accuracy, verify that the calibration mechanisms are sealed from tampering, look for leaks, and evaluate advertising practices and price computations. Some states also test fuel quality. Additionally, inspectors can make sure that individual retailers are not using the tolerances to their advantage by setting all the meters slightly in the retailer's favor.

Tim Tyson, Director of the Kansas Weights and Measures Division worries that the importance of inspection programs may be lost in budget decisions of states around the country. "Many weights and measures programs are potentially facing serious budget reductions," said Tyson who also serves as Chairman of the National Conference on Weights and Measures. "The cost for weights and measures inspection programs in most states is less than 70 cents per year for each resident. It is really a bargain as far as regulatory programs go. That much and more could be lost in one trip to the store through inaccuracies and misrepresentations."

Though some states require annual inspections for gas pumps, others have either greatly reduced their inspection frequencies or test a small percentage of dispensers based on sampling plans. Many have had to abbreviate the tests and inspections in order to cover more ground, potentially missing violations along the way that can affect the consumer.

"Retailers strive for honesty at the pump," said John Eichberger of the National Association of Convenience Stores. "Weights and measures inspectors ensure that retail dispensers deliver what the consumer pays for – this provides certainty for the consumer and the retailer and helps maintain a level playing field. The retail gasoline market is extremely competitive and transparent. Without the assurance of accurate and consistent measurement provided by these officials, this transparency could diminish and consumers and retailers alike would be disadvantaged."

The National Conference on Weights and Measures is a professional nonprofit association of state and local weights and measures officials, federal agencies, manufacturers, retailers and consumers. NCWM has developed national weights and measures standards since 1905. The organization brings the right interests together to keep pace with innovative advancements in the marketplace.

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