



NJ adroitly ensures consumers get gasoline they pay for

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New Jersey businesses are overly regulated, but that doesn't mean there aren't many appropriate and necessary rules. Some of the best protect consumers when it would be difficult or impossible for them to protect themselves.

The Office of Weights and Measures, for example, tests and certifies scales at stores to make sure customers get the full weight of the seafood, produce and deli products they buy. It also makes sure gasoline pumps deliver the volume purchased.

Observant consumers might sense when the quantity of something they're buying is short, but when it comes to gasoline quality, only a large difference would be immediately noticeable.

So it was reassuring this month when the N.J. Division of Consumer Affairs announced the results of its Operation Summer Octane effort. For two weeks, state and local officials tested 371 of the state's 3,000 gas stations to see if their premium grades of gasoline deliver the advertised octane rating.

With premium selling for about 50 cents per gallon more than regular gas in New Jersey, station owners may be tempted to mix some of the cheaper gas with the premium. The difference they can pocket exceeds the 10 cents per gallon stations typically make.

The good news is Consumer Affairs said just two of the 371 stations — fewer than 1 percent — failed to deliver their advertised octane ratings and were charged. One is in Trenton, but the other is USA Gas on Landis Avenue in Vineland. Violations of the state regulations and motor fuel laws are punishable by civil penalties of \$100 to \$1,500 per violation.

In April, this same USA Gas station was among 25 in South Jersey that the U.S. Department of Labor said failed to pay the hourly minimum wage and overtime to employees working more than 40 hours per week. The department said it recovered \$2 million in wages and damages for 87 workers at the stations.

The N.J. Gasoline, C-Store, Automotive Association welcomed Operation Summer Octane. It had suggested such checks be done annually as part of each station's meter testing. "There is such an overwhelmingly unfair advantage if a retailer commingles regular grade gasoline into the premium inventory," said Executive Director Sal Risalvato.

Risalvato praised Consumer Affairs for its professionalism and contrasted it sharply with a three-day crackdown in 2008 that he called a "fraudulent clown show." That included Attorney General Anne Milgram of Gov. Jon Corzine's administration announcing 350 gas stations had been ticketed for ripping off motorists, who were then paying nearly \$4 per gallon.

The gas station association sued Milgram to obtain documents from the sweep, which Risalvato said showed only two locations were actually shortchanging motorists and both had made unintentional errors. He said Milgram just wanted "to stand on a soapbox and make herself look like a hero."

This year's campaign also resulted in citations against 20 stations for mostly minor infractions relating to things such as signage.

Operation Summer Octane demonstrates New Jersey consumers can be confident they're getting the gasoline they want in the quantities they're paying for. No grandstanding by state officials was needed. Gas stations know state regulators have the backs of motorists.