

Stockton Record

Pump pain: Owners hit by pricey upgrade

By Dana M. Nichols
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MOUNTAIN RANCH - Gasoline no longer flows from the pumps at The Gas Station in this remote mountain village.

Jerry and Jackie Yates, owners of the business, which also sells auto parts, decided to quit selling gasoline rather than buy tens of thousands of dollars in equipment all California gas stations are required to install by Wednesday to reduce pollution from escaping gasoline fumes.

"We didn't even get a price on it, because we know we can't afford it," Jerry Yates said.

That means that Yates' former customers must now make a 20-mile round trip to San Andreas to fuel their cars. And they won't be alone.

The California Air Resources Board estimates that about 5 percent of California's 11,000 retail gas stations either already have or will stop selling gasoline rather than comply with the new rules, known formally as Phase II of the state's Enhanced Vapor Recovery regulation. That translates into roughly 550 stations that will stop pumping statewide, many of them independent and small-volume stations serving remote rural areas.

Lakhmir Grewal, air pollution control officer for the Calaveras County Air Pollution Control District, estimated that three or four more of the county's 33 gas stations may ultimately stop pumping because of the new regulations.

All involved agree that higher-volume stations and those owned directly by the major oil corporations have had an easier time complying than have the independents.

In all, 22 of Calaveras County's 33 gas stations already had complied fully with the new rules by mid March. In San Joaquin County at the same time, 89 had complied and 117 had not, said Morgan Lambert, compliance manager for the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

Statewide, less than half had fully complied by late this winter. Yet about 80 percent statewide have at least obtained all the necessary permits to install the improvements, said Dimitri Stanich, spokesman for the California Air Resources Board.

Given those percentages and that there have been shortages of the required equipment, as well as shortages of people qualified to install the equipment, regulators are cutting stations some slack.

"If they are showing good-faith efforts to meet the deadline, then the district will penalize them for not making the deadline, but (will) allow them to keep operating," Stanich said.

That may be the situation at Ernie's General Store on Waterloo Road, where work crews have been on site in recent weeks installing the necessary nozzles and other vapor recovery equipment, including a carbon filter device to capture fumes from underground storage tanks.

Ernest Giannechini, owner of the independent store and gas station, said his bigger concern is whether the \$100,000 he spent will prove a worthwhile investment.

"We are really getting blasted from every which direction," he said of the situation faced by small independent gas sellers. "The only ones who can stay in business are the major oil companies."

Balagi Angle, owner of one gas station in Ripon and three in Stockton, said he has all the needed permits but his supplier is out of the nozzles he needs to meet the April 1 deadline.

"The government is going out of their bounds in imposing on small business people things we can not afford," Angle said.

Some independent station owners and some local government officials worry that the hidden purpose of the law was to drive smaller stations out of business.

"I don't think this is as much an environmental move as an economic one," said Steve Wilensky, the elected Calaveras County supervisor whose district includes Mountain Ranch. "Just the way this has been set up is, at the very least I would guess, unfortunate, and at the worst, predatory."

State regulators insist that the policy was based on science and the need to protect human health.

"These are just uncontrolled emissions. This is ten tons per day of volatile organic compounds," Stanich said of the fumes escaping from the earlier nozzles and storage tanks. Stanich said the reduction in pollution from the measures is the equivalent of removing 400,000 cars from California roads.

And he said that benefit stands even when taking into account the additional miles people in places such as Mountain Ranch will now have to drive to purchase fuel.

Meanwhile, State Sen. Dave Cox, R-Fair Oaks, has drafted SB 507, a bill that would extend the EVR Phase II deadline for a year. That bill is currently waiting for a committee hearing.

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