

As Prices Climb, More Drivers Flee Pumps Without Paying

More Stations Make Prepaying Mandatory To Cut Thievery, Which Cost \$237 Million Last Year

By Anna Levine-Gronningsater
The Christian Science Monitor
NEW YORK - Call it theft to obtain octane.

As gasoline prices stay well above \$2 per gallon, gasoline station owners are increasingly encountering customers who pump but don't pay.

The rising theft rates are yet one more sign of consumer frustration over the relatively high price of topping up their tank. Only five years ago, it cost \$24 to fill up a 20-gallon tank. Today, it costs \$46. For many low-income people, the increase is more than they can manage.

But high prices are provoking not just those struggling to make basic ends meet.

Some thieves who are driving away from \$30 tabs are doing so in \$20,000 late-model SUVs. Unpaid bills can also be for \$50 fill-ups, which suggests that drivers are going as far as completely filling up their tanks instead of just taking the few gallons they need to get home.

"Given the demographics that we hear about, this is a crime driven more by anger than economics," says Jeff Lenard, a spokesman for the National Association of Convenience Stores. "The consequence of these prices rising is that drivers blame the guys who are least responsible, who have been

hit harder than the customers."

Last year, when gasoline prices were lower, drive-offs cost the nation's gas stations \$237 million. And with gasoline prices climbing steadily - average pump prices nationwide are almost \$2.32 - some analysts say that number could be even higher this year.

The problem is driving some states to implement strict new penalties. On Aug. 1, Iowa and Minnesota will join 25 other states in allowing judges to suspend the driver's licenses of those caught driving off without paying. Fines have been raised for gasoline thieves in Oklahoma and Virginia. And starting this summer, car owners in South Dakota are liable for any stolen gas pumped into their tanks, even if they aren't in the car.

But Ralph Bombardiere, executive director of the New York State Association of Service Stations and Repair Shops, points out that penalties are only a deterrent. Many stations don't even notice the thefts until tallies are made at the end of shifts, and there is no way to keep a sharp eye on cars with suspicious drivers.

"All they have to do is not get caught until they reach the next exit. It's just too easy," Mr. Bombardiere says.

As a result, more gas stations are offering prepay as the only option for buying gas so that sta-

tions can more effectively control the gas passing through pumps.

There are profit-margin downsides to mandating prepay, however. Higher gas prices are prompting more customers to prepay by using credit cards outside at the pump. Not only does that mean fewer customers are going inside the convenience stores to pay with cash, and possibly buy a newspaper or candy bar with their fill ups, but credit card companies charge gas stations processing fees.

But some localities insist enforcing mandatory prepay will be more cost-effective in the long run.

"The police department was spending an inordinate amount of time on issues involving gasoline theft," says Tom Courtney, city manager of Twin Falls, Idaho, which passed a prepay only ordinance last November. "Like most police departments, they were extremely busy with other more pressing issues. The opportunity to basically eliminate a category of crime by passing a law requiring prepayment was very attractive."

In Twin Falls it was the gas station owners themselves who had made the suggestion to the city council, while other stations across the nation are exploring other alternatives.

Some are trying to improve the appearance of security, installing intercoms at the pumps through which workers inside can greet drivers as they pull in.

"To a regular customer, it says, 'Good morning,'" Lenard says. "To a prospective thief, it says, 'We're watching you.'"

Franchises or stations with returning customers are also experimenting with versions of the PumpStart card, used by QuikTrip in Oklahoma. Drivers can still post-pay with cash as long as they register for the card, which records their license number as they swipe before pumping.

Mustafa Serdar, manager of a service station on the Upper East side of Manhattan, says that prepay is still the easiest way for him to prevent theft.

Even though Mr. Serdar says he has seen few drive-offs at his BP station, where drivers can fill up for \$2.69 a gallon before hitting FDR Drive, he does recall an incident in January when prices started to rise. "It was a very busy time, so I guess he took advantage of that," he says. "We couldn't notice." The computer notified him of the theft within minutes, but at that point there was little he could do. "We just put it in the loss column," he says.

Serdar was prepared to add another loss last month when an absent-minded taxi driver pulled away without paying. But the next day the driver returned to pay his bill - \$50 to fill up his tank.

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Michigan Politics

By George Weeks



Special Interest Groups Crucial to Fundraising

In seeking the post, House Speaker Craig DeRoche, R-Novi, vowed to ratchet up fundraising for his party's campaign war chest. Mission accomplished. He's already a million dollar man.

A highlight of the nonpartisan Michigan Campaign Finance Network's report on the "torrid fundraising pace" of the state's top 150 political action committees was that the GOP House led all PACs in the first six months of 2005, doubling its amount for this point in the 2004 cycle.

It raised \$1,023,796, "the most successful six months of a cycle in history" for either House caucus, according to DeRoche spokesman Matt Resch.

House Democrats also doubled what they raised at this point for the last election, when they gained five seats and narrowed the GOP majority to 58-52. They raised \$545,201 but have much more cash on hand because Republicans had a bigger debt to eliminate.

Senate Republicans, who rule by a 22-16 margin, out-raised Senate Democrats, \$787,230 to \$373,531.

Fundraising by the parties is crucial, but ever more important in some individual races is what interest group PACs distribute to legislators friendly to their interests. Example: the Michigan Beer & Wine Wholesalers Association, currently seeking to curtail direct sales by wineries, ranks ninth among all PACs for the six months at \$210,662.

That ranks just ahead of the \$200,000 of the PAC of the United Auto Workers, whose Lansing political interest has a more narrow partisan focus: electing Democrats.

The campaign finance network's report noted the PACs of Sen. Jason Allen, R-Traverse City, who at \$63,150 ranked 34th among the 150, and two other senators who had lesser amounts in what the network called "an apparent preview of the contest to succeed term-limited Senate Majority Leader Ken Sikkema as their caucus' leader."

The 150 top PACs have raised \$9.4 million for the 2006 cycle, 36 percent more than for the 2004 cycle at this point. Rich Robinson of the Michigan Campaign Finance Network says, "Political fundraising is outpacing every other sector of the Michigan economy."

Moneybag Mitt

Some of that infusion into the state's economy comes from outside of Michigan. Item: the Commonwealth PAC of Mass. Gov. Mitt Romney, a prospective

2008 presidential candidate who donated \$68,000 to Michigan Republican candidates and party organizations in 2004 and so far in 2005.

That includes \$5,000 for the Michigan GOP, \$2,500 each to Secretary of State Terri Lynn Land and Attorney General Mike Cox (as well as \$2,500 to Cox's own PAC), and \$1,000 each to U.S. Reps. Joe Knollenberg of Bloomfield Hills, Candice Miller of Harrison Township and Joe Schwarz of Battle Creek. It also includes \$20,300 to 25 county parties, the biggest donations being \$2,500 for Oakland County (where he was raised as the son of Gov. George Romney); \$1,500 each to Wayne, Macomb, and Kent.

The northern most county on Romney's list, Grand Traverse, received \$1,000.

Romney also gave \$1,000 contributions to 12 state senators, including Allen and Michelle McManus of Lake Leelanau.

Romney gave \$2,000 to Sen. Mike Bishop of Rochester—who might end up in a race with Allen to lead the GOP caucus and be Senate majority leader if Republicans retain the majority.

In 2004, Romney gave \$16,500 to 30 candidates for the state House, including \$500 each to David Palsrok, Manistee, and Howard Walker, Traverse City.

The Michigan PAC contributions of Romney, featured speaker at a \$750,000 March fundraiser for Senate Republicans, were wisely targeted. Many of the recipients could be delegates to the 2008 Republican National Convention.

How seriously is Romney considering a 2008 run? After first declining an invitation, he's now agreed to be a luncheon speaker at the Michigan GOP's Sept. 23-24 Leadership Conference on Mackinac Island, expected to be attended by several other prospective presidential contenders.

Delegate Moore?

Filmmaker Michael Moore, organizer of the highly successful Traverse City Film Festival, was asked at one of the festival's public forums whether he would seek national office. No, he said, but he's likely to try to be a Democratic precinct delegate from Antrim County.

Asked later if he'd be interested in going on to be delegate to a state convention, he said, "Yeah."

George Weeks is the political columnist for The Detroit News and is syndicated by Superior Features.

Drought Can Damage Trees Now, or in Years To Come

By Bill Cook

Upper Peninsula Extension Forester

Drought affects trees in a variety of ways depending on many conditions. Water stress may kill a tree or, more commonly, predispose it to a wide variety of ailments. Some of these ailments may not become visible for several years.

Root systems draw water from the soil. That water moves throughout the tree to maintain chemical reactions in the living cells. As trees respire, water is expelled and "leaks out" through small pores in the leaves, twigs, branches, and trunk.

During dry periods, the larger humidity difference inside and outside the tree causes increased water loss. Higher temperatures accelerate cell metabolism, which requires additional amounts of water. The response to water stress involves closing the many small pores and drawing more water from the soil.

As soil moisture becomes increasingly low, maintaining an adequate water balance in living tissues becomes more difficult. Sandy or coarse soils dry out quicker. Loamy soils hold water best. Heavy soils hold more water longer, but much of it becomes unavailable to small tree roots

owing to the physical chemistry of water and very tiny soil particles.

The inability of a tree to maintain an adequate water balance, for whatever set of reasons, is called water stress. A moderate amount

Droughts make trees more susceptible to cold winter weather. By adding a light application of phosphorus and potassium fertilizer, a tree will be better "winterized."

of stress may slow growth or cause premature autumn color change. More stress might first result in death of leaf tissue. Browning leaf edges owing to water stress is called leaf scorch. Conifers may drop older, less efficient needles. Excessive water stress can kill trees, especially those of certain species and very young trees that have less developed root systems. This year's plantings and transplants will likely suffer high mortality rates unless they have been watered.

After a drought breaks, the impacts are not over. More commonly, the weakened condition allows a number of pests and pathogens to more successfully

attack tree tissues. Trees whose leaves are eaten by gypsy moths or budworms, in combination with a drought, are at higher risk of damage or death. Water stressed pines attract bark beetles, which can kill trees, especially red pine. Mature oaks in sandy soils may die from two-lined chestnut borer attacks over several growing seasons.

The introduction of fungal pathogens during these weak periods can have a longer lasting impact. For example, an Armillaria fungus might enter water stressed roots. Over several years, that fungus might grow and eventually kill the tree. On the other hand, with good growing conditions the natural defenses of the tree might defeat the fungus. Some tree species are better at this than others.

Droughts make trees more susceptible to cold winter weather. By adding a light application of phosphorus and potassium fertilizer, a tree will be better "winterized." Be careful to not add nitrogen.

The drought impact on trees can be very localized. Sometimes, a single tree within a group will die, clearly seen in plantations. Death might be in the year of the drought or it might be a couple of years later. Balsam fir commonly displays this behavior.

Soil structure can be highly variable resulting in other local impacts. A tree growing above a large boulder or over a hard pan might die, while its neighbors may recover. Small clay pockets, fissures in bedrock, microtopogra-

phy, and sandy pockets contribute to local variability that can spell survival or death for a water stressed tree.

In 2004, much of the Upper Peninsula experienced a cool, wet summer. Higher water saturation levels in the soil forced tree roots to grow closer to the surface in order to obtain enough oxygen, and sometimes killed roots further down. That new root growth near the surface became more vulnerable to soils dried out by this year's drought. Many tamaracks and other shallow-rooted tree species have died because of this extreme wet-dry cycle.

Competition for scarce soil water becomes intense during dry periods. Most trees simply cannot out-compete grasses and herbs for water. We normally think of competition for light, but the underground battle for water and nutrients can be more important to the long term survival of trees.

Any time drought is combined with other health issues, trees are at higher risk of damage and death. Drought can tip the scales for trees simultaneously facing an insect attack, a disease, or damage from home construction, laid cable, paving, or lawn mowing. Conversely, trees weakened by drought may fall victim to opportunistic insects and diseases several years ahead.

Drought impacts are usually longer term affairs, in addition to current year effects. Doubtless, we will see the complex effects of the drought of 2005 for several years to come.

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359 Reagon Street, PO Box 277, Saint Ignace, MI 49781

Telephone (906) 643-9150 • Facsimile (906) 643-9122

Hessel Office: 138 Pickford Avenue (906) 484-2268

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Advertising Director

Dawn R. Huskey

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The quotation under the flag of *The St. Ignace News* on Page 1 is from the 10 triads written by Dr. Fred Newton Scott, creator and teacher of the first continuous course in journalism in the United States at the University of Michigan in 1890. The 10 triads are chiseled on the parapet of the Detroit News Building at 615 Lafayette Boulevard, Detroit. They were headed "Ideals of the Press" or "The Newspaper in a Free Society," and serve as a reminder of what a free press means to us.

Step Into the Light To Ask Township Questions

To the Editor:

In the last election, Clark Township voters spoke in a clear and resounding voice by sweeping out the Township Board and electing new leadership. Since then, our new Board has been working extremely hard to take care of our Township and clear up any messes that they inherited. While I may or may not agree with everything they do, I applaud them all for their dedication, honesty, and integrity. They have a tough job and I believe they deserve our support.

Lately, there has been a sleazy and underhanded effort to undermine them. Through Web sites posted with phony names and slanted and sometimes inaccurate "newsletters" with no names attached, some people seem to be bent on misleading our community and making things difficult for our elected officials.

When I had concerns with Township matters, I talked to Board members face to face, went to Board meetings, and asked questions and wrote letters with my real name attached. Our democracy works best when voters are informed and speak their minds.

Unfortunately, the people behind this sleazy effort are cowards, unwilling to step into the light, use their names, ask intelligent questions, and ask for board response. They seek to create havoc rather than work together for community improvement. I urge *any* member of our community to speak out. Let our officials know when you support them or when you disagree. Let us also disregard these cowards unless they are

Letters to the Editor

willing to show themselves and be part of the solution rather than inciting more dissent.

Rick Shapero
Cedarville

Family Pet 'Killed in His Own Yard'

To the Editor:

We live at 313 Reagon and on July 12 my husband went out in the yard and there was a ring of fur with a cat collar, which was black and had little white paws on it. A piece of D-con laced meat was nearby and our little dog, Chico, got it and before we could get it he ate some of it and became very ill. He started to bleed and was throwing up. We took him to the vet and were told the meat he ate was laced with D-con.

He was killed in his own yard. How would you, the person who did that, like to suffer like he did? He weighed 7.5 pounds and wouldn't hurt anyone.

I hope you can live with yourself after making the remark that there were too many cats and dogs in the neighborhood. I would rather have a cat or dog and no mice, moles, or rats. The cat you killed was probably someone's pet, just as Chico was ours.

We had him for eight years and he was a true friend. I sure hope you sleep better at night knowing what you did. You can be proud of yourself.

Arvilla R. McCall
St. Ignace