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**[Ban on gas tank topping is in the pipe](#)****A new rule designed to cut emissions of the carcinogen benzene takes effect July 1****BY [TIM CHRISTIE](#)***The Register-Guard*

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Ron Thurman has worked around gasoline his entire working life — refining it, hauling it and, now, pumping it at the Astro 76 station on McVay Highway in south Eugene.

“One way or another I’ve been dealing with this mess,” he said Tuesday afternoon while taking a smoke break.

So if a customer asks Thurman to top off the tank — adding more gas after the pump automatically clicks off — he’ll do it. But, under state regulations that take effect July 1, gas station attendants will be forbidden to top off gas tanks. And that’s fine with Thurman, an assistant manager at the station.

“It’s the way it should be,” he said. “What good does it do to put 20 more cents in?”

And, starting in 2011, gas station owners across Oregon will be required to use technology that captures gasoline vapors normally emitted when underground tanks are filled. Such systems are already required in Portland, Salem and Medford.

The new regulations are an effort to reduce the amount of benzene, a carcinogen, and other chemical vapors that are released into the air when gas is pumped or spilled. The Department of Environmental Quality estimates the rule will keep two tons of benzene out of Oregon’s air each year.

Benzene has been a hot issue in the Northwest in recent years. In 2007, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, yielding to pressure from federal lawmakers, adopted tough new restrictions on the benzene content of gasoline. The rules closed loopholes that allowed refineries in the Pacific Northwest to escape modernization and continue producing gasoline with high levels of benzene.

Topping off is an age-old custom at gas stations. Some customers want to get as much gas as possible in their tanks. Others, particularly those who pay cash, want to pay a nice even number. Many attendants will ask if a customer wants the tank topped off, and some gas station owners like the practice because it allows them to sell more gas.

But the practice risks spilling gasoline and emitting hazardous chemicals into the air, endangering the health of gas attendants and motorists sitting in their cars, DEQ officials say. Topping off also can damage equipment in a vehicle’s gas tank intended to keep

vapors from leaking.

“If people understood the disadvantages of topping off, they probably would stop doing it,” said Uri Papish, operations manager of the DEQ’s air quality program. “If they knew they weren’t getting their money’s worth because of evaporation, their behavior would probably change.”

Gas stations will be required to post signs that say “Do Not Top Off.” Enforcement is likely to be based on complaints, Papish said. If a single station generates numerous complaints, then state officials might do an inspection, he said.

Greg Grimes, another assistant manager at the Astro station, said he doesn’t understand why state officials decided to enact a ban on topping off.

“I think it’s a waste of time,” he said. “Customers who want it done should have a choice.”

What’s an attendant supposed to do if the pump clicks off even though the tank isn’t close to full, as can happen with certain vehicles, he wondered.

“Anyone who does this long enough knows when a vehicle is full enough,” he said.

Motorist Manja DePiero of Springfield, who filled up at the McVay Highway Astro station, said she never asks the attendant to top it off.

“I don’t feel the need for it,” she said. “I’m usually in a hurry.”

The Oregon Petroleum Association did not oppose the move to ban topping off, said the group’s executive director, Paul Romain.

“It’s not that big a deal,” he said.

But the group is concerned about the new regulations that require stations to control vapors as gas is being pumped into underground storage tanks, he said. Stations that pump at least 40,000 gallons per month will be required to use vapor capture control systems starting Jan. 10, 2011. Those that pump at least 20,000 gallons per month will be required to use such systems by Jan. 10, 2014.

The new vapor control rules, combined with new federal regulations, will keep 28 tons of benzene out of Oregon’s air each year, reduce emissions of other vaporized chemicals by 1,610 tons and save more than a half-million gallons of gasoline, according to DEQ.

Installing a vapor capture control system at a station with three underground tanks costs about \$6,000, Romain said. The problem is, there’s not much of a profit margin selling retail gasoline these days, he said.

“You can’t make enough money at a station to pay for this stuff,” Romain said. “You can’t raise your prices high enough because you don’t have enough volume.”

He predicted at least some owners of gas stations in rural areas will decide to close

rather than spend the money on vapor capture control systems.

“There’s no way to absorb this,” he said. “Do you raise your prices or just say, ‘I can’t raise my price because I’m driving too many people to the next town.’ ”

Even if the regulations pose some economic hardship, that has to be weighed against the benefit to public health, said Lisa Arkin, executive director of the Oregon Toxics Alliance.

“What are the larger costs of the health of my gas station attendants, and of people who live in homes near the gas stations?” she said. “These homes are being exposed to carcinogenic vapors 24/7 — what’s that cost?”

“What are the economic benefits of not contributing to global warming?”

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