
Fume fears fuel change in county pump protocol

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Top it off for ya?

The Lane County commissioners say the answer is easy: Heck, no.

The board voted unanimously this week to encourage employees not to "top off" county vehicles at the pump, and to cut the engine if they must idle longer than 20 seconds.

The county wants to publicize two ways to cut down on excess gas fumes that carry the risk of cancer. Those risks are especially serious for two groups - children and gas-station attendants, a toxics expert said.

"We all drive up and (the gas station attendant) says, 'Can I top ya off?' and for most people that question just didn't have a lot of meaning," said Jim Goes, of the county's community health advisory committee, which made the proposal. "I think most people have no sense they are being exposed to benzene at gasoline stations."

Benzene, a component of gasoline that can cause leukemia, gets into the air when vehicles run or when gas tanks are "topped off" - that is, filled past the automatic shut-off point, the county said.

Benzene is a particular concern in the Northwest. Earlier this year, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency adopted tougher-than-expected restrictions on the benzene content in gasoline, yielding to lawmakers who wanted to crack down on Pacific Northwest oil refineries that historically produced gasoline with high levels of benzene.

Children are especially vulnerable to benzene because their bodies are still developing, said Lisa Arkin, executive director of the Eugene-based Oregon Toxics Alliance, which focuses on environmental health issues.

Researchers in Europe found that children who live close to gas stations were four times more likely to develop leukemia, Arkin said.

Research also shows a higher incidence of leukemia in the children of people who are exposed to benzene at work, such as gas station attendants, Arkin said.

"Most of the workers in gas stations are of what you call a child-bearing age - between 18 and 30," Arkin said.

Besides the health risks, both topping off and idling are known to waste fuel.

The Sacramento-based Western States Petroleum Association, which represents petroleum companies in six states including Oregon, has no formal position on

topping off gas tanks, spokesman Tupper Hull said.

He added, however, that topping off tanks can "bypass" systems in vehicles and fuel-pump nozzles that capture harmful vapors.

"We would have a concern about anyone engaging in activities that may pose some increased risk to their health," Hull said. "This is an area where consumers, operators, attendants and everyone can benefit from some education about how this technology works and how it can be most effectively used."

Benzene is more concentrated in gasoline than diesel, and there are few or no vapors associated with diesel, experts said.

The pure versions of alternative fuels biodiesel and bioethanol have no benzene, said Tomas Endicott, co-founder of Portland-based SeQuential Biofuels. But the company discourages topping off because some of its fuels are blends that include gasoline and therefore benzene, albeit in lesser amounts than conventional gas, Endicott said.

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