



STATE OF MISSISSIPPI
DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE AND COMMERCE
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Column

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Consumers Take Notice Due to Inflation, High Gas Prices
By: Commissioner of Agriculture and Commerce Andy Gipson

With inflation at its highest levels since 1981 and drivers getting squeezed at the pump by high gas prices, consumers are not just paying more for goods and services, they're also paying more attention. We see that at the Department of Agriculture and Commerce as our consumer protection inspectors receive more requests for investigations at stores, and our petroleum inspectors field more complaints about questionable fuel. We want customers to get what they pay for, and we want businesses to succeed. Both of those depend on a fair market and that's just good business.

The state legislature designated MDAC's Consumer Protection Division to enforce retail food safety and sanitation laws in grocery and convenience stores, to ensure businesses adhere to weights and measure standards, to require compliance with food labeling requirements, and to verify UPC bar codes so customers are charged at the register the same as the price on the shelf.

MDAC inspectors routinely examine meat market sanitation, ensure food is stored at proper temperatures, confirm the availability of hot water and soap in restrooms, monitor stores for insects and rodents, and seek to keep spoiled or expired meat off the shelves. In the 2022 fiscal year, the Consumer Protection Division conducted 4,517 total inspections of businesses which included 5,842 retail scale inspections; 4,517 retail food sanitation inspections; 34,827 items for net weight; 2,762 disposition of garbage inspections; and 1,354 UPC price verification inspections.

MDAC performs these inspections routinely. As consumers feel the cost pressure of inflation, they are more aware of the prices on the shelves. When prices go up, complaints – especially about prices at the register not matching prices on the shelves (UPC) – go up as well. Once we receive a complaint, the inspector investigates and, if a violation is found, works to get the business into compliance. If the complaint is not a violation, the inspection serves as an educational opportunity for the business and the customer.

The same goes for our Petroleum Products Inspection Division which regulates 2.3 billion gallons of fuel consumed from Mississippi locations a year. All retail motor fuel – including gasoline, ethanol blended fuel, diesel, biodiesel, and kerosene – fall under this division which has samples analyzed at the Mississippi State Chemical Laboratory. The Mississippi State Chemical Lab checks for octane number, alcohol content, diesel flash point, biodiesel content, and whether water is present in the fuel. On site,

inspectors check calibration as well as confirm signage to ensure the proper price is displayed and the proper fuel matches the advertised claim.

The Petroleum Products Inspection Division conducts annual inspections of all fuel pumps (Retail Motor Fuel Dispensers) in the state. Last fiscal year, that included 57,745 registered devices at 2,657 stations. In addition to the routine inspections, there were 223 consumer complaints all of which were investigated within 24 hours. About 32 percent of the complaints required corrective action for noncompliance. Between the routine inspections and consumer complaints, the Department enforced 997 “stop sales.”

While the Department of Agriculture and Commerce cannot do anything about the price of gas, we can make sure you get what you pay for, and the product is what it claims. As gas prices go up, complaints increase, but the violation rate stays about the same.

I suspect you’re keeping an eye on costs, too. If you’re in a retail grocery store and see a discrepancy between the cost on the shelf and the price at the register, or notice spoiled or unsanitary food, please reach out to the MDAC Consumer Protection Division at 601-359-1148. Likewise, if you have problems at the pump and suspect you’re not getting the right fuel, the correct amount of fuel, there is water in the fuel, or you’re being charged incorrectly, please contact the Petroleum Products Inspection Division at 601-359-1101.

Most businesses in Mississippi in violation of our fair market laws do so inadvertently. They want to treat their customers – their neighbors – fairly, and, when we point out noncompliance, they work quickly to remedy the situation. So, be sure to look for the “seal of approval” on all scales and pumps where you shop. You, our inspectors and Mississippi businesses working together can continue the fair standards that make our free market work.

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