

DROP

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Division of Standards — specifically, in the Bureau of Gas/Petroleum Inspection.

“I love this work. I feel like I’m actually doing something to help somebody,” says the 13-year veteran of the job. He spent years working on oil derricks in the Pacific off California before that, and later working as a gas pump mechanic.

Cass’s outfit is one of those little-known, under-recognized, probably overworked state agencies whose employees seem to do everything you would want of government: They remain conscientious; they protect the consuming public as well as store and service station owners from potential hazards, or abuses; and they do it almost invisibly.

Last week Cass rolled into the Mystik Fruit Market on U.S. 41 in East Naples, parked his 225,000-mile Ford Ranger loaded with small tools and four five-gallon measuring containers quietly in the corner of the parking lot, and walked inside.

“Hi, I’m Ron Cass from the Department of Agriculture, gas inspections, and I need to see your licenses and your storage tanks,” he told the man behind the counter.

The process had begun. The result, ultimately, would be a new sticker on each of the pump stations outside in the parking lot — if the pumps and the system passed inspection.

“We do these about every 500 or 600 days — over 500 days and we begin to get nervous,” Mr. Cass said.

The sticker is key, and prominently visible. Next time you get gas, look for it with the name of a famous actor: Charles Bronson. The actor is dead now, but his namesake heads the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Affairs, and you can see where Ron Cass or perhaps Paul Mills, to the north, have punched the date of inspection, and given the pump a pass, with Bronson’s name on it.

The territories of inspectors are huge, especially considering that only 51 inspectors cover the 67 Florida counties, and the state has about 9,200 retail and wholesale gasoline stations.

Cass for example, must inspect gasoline pumps in several counties, and in towns from Moore Haven and Clewiston in the east, across Collier County to Naples in the west, and north to Sanibel and Captiva Islands, in Lee County.

The U.S. Census Bureau reported in 2006 that Florida, California and Texas alone account for more than 20 percent of United States service stations with paid employees — that’s more than 23,400 of a total 116,855 stations nationwide, which amounts to roughly one station per 2,500 people.

Within that framework, the state department issued 497 stop-sale orders in the last year (2007-2008). To do that, officials carried out about 231,000 inspections, cited almost 3,500 pumps for not being calibrated properly, and issued about 33,100 correction notices for poorly maintained pumps.

For Steve Hadder, the Tallahassee-based head of the Bureau of Gas/Petroleum Inspections — he’s Cass’s boss — the hardest part of the job is its changing nature.

“A long time ago, we only had to just inspect the calibration on a pump and take a few samples,” he explains.

“Today there is electronics, computer work, a lot of consumer complaints, and price investigations.”

In that regard, several stations in Collier and Lee were investigated during the most recent hurricane, Fay. The rules are



JIM MCLAUGHLIN / FLORIDA WEEKLY

Petroleum inspector Ron Cass gets ready to inspect gas pumps and tanks at an East Naples gas station. Last year, the state made 231,000 inspections on Florida service states.

fairly simple, says Mr. Hadder: “Gasoline is in the free marketplace, and you can charge anything the market will bear — except during a state of emergency (so declared by the governor).

“Then you have a right to maintain your profit margin — say your margin was 10 percent profit before the emergency, you can charge enough to maintain that. And you can’t increase it unless you have justifiable cause.”

Uh-oh, justifiable cause. And that would be?

“Maybe if you had to buy a generator, or bring in more people and pay them,” says Mr. Hadder.

Another problem his inspectors face are credit card skimmers, electric decoding devices used to steal credit card numbers from pumps meters. That technology received widespread notice first in 2004, when they were used at gas stations from Orlando to Naples, and about 100 thefts were reported initially.

“I don’t know if we’ve solved that — there are credit card skimmers everywhere, not just in gas stations but in restaurants or auto-parts stores or what have you,” admits Mr. Hadder.

“But we look at that on a daily basis, and all my inspectors are trained to spot them. And we work with the FDLE and other law enforcement agencies to stop it.”

The Inspection

Cass himself is a spearhead of this consumer protection agency, a diminutive, soon-to-be-70-year-old man with blue eyes and heavily freckled skin inherited from a lifetime of outdoor work.

Born and raised on a farm in Indiana, he left home to join the Navy, returned in 1960 to marry another Hoosier and find various jobs, before finally going to work in the oil industry, on derricks off the California coast. Later, he became a gasoline pump mechanic, somebody who can fix them as surely as the best car mechanics.

Now, however, he’s not allowed to become involved in telling any owners what’s wrong with a pump, even if he knows; neither can he do any freelance work on the side, fixing pumps, or for that matter take free food or gifts from owners.

“Especially the foreign-born ones, sometimes they want to feed you, because it’s their culture,” he says. “But we don’t take anything.”

In spite of his relatively small size, there’s nothing receding about Mr. Cass — nor rude, either — when he walks into the store and announces that he’ll be inspecting pumps, storage tanks and

checking licenses.

Sometimes there’s hostility. “We just try to ignore it, and we’re not here to cause anybody grief,” he explains. “But if we have to lock up the pumps, we don’t back off that.”

Outside, he sets up traffic cones topped with red flags, closes access to the part of the station he’s inspecting, and goes to work.

He will do several things on this warm morning, as he begins to sweat unself-consciously in the humid air.

First, he’ll move to the diesel pumps where trucks and cars pump fuel, and then to the diesel “fill.”

That’s the pipe closed by a salad-plate-sized lid, laid into the pavement, where the tankers hook up to fill the underground storage tank (tanks range from 5,000 or 6,000 gallons up to about 20,000 gallons or more).

“We always do diesel first, because it reduces the chances of a spark and an accident, which you could get if you did gas first,” Mr. Cass explains calmly.

At the pumps, he’ll peel the front shield off each to reveal the mechanisms inside. He checks the lead-wire seal, a thing about 10 inches long that encircles and seals each calibration wheel. The wheel is no larger than a chocolate chip cookie, and each hole in it represents a cubic inch of gasoline in a gallon.

The calibrators guarantee that a customer gets a gallon when he or she buys a gallon.

Pump mechanics who adjust calibrators and find broken seals can put new seals on the calibrators so they can’t be easily altered, but they cannot override a state seal.

The state seal, however, affixed by Mr. Cass, can override the mechanic’s seal.

To check the calibrators, Mr. Cass sets his five-gallon silver cans on the pavement, and levels them with a carpenter’s level. Then he fills the can exactly to the five-gallon mark, and looks to see that the pump meter — the digital display — shows five gallons for the advertised price.

“You’re out here by yourself with nobody looking over your shoulder, so you have to be self sufficient and self motivated,” Mr. Cass says.

There is a margin of error, too, for each pump — it’s six cubic centimeters, about one teaspoon. Sometimes that shows in favor of sellers, and sometimes it shows in favor of buyers.

This pump, at Mystik, shows a plus-three cubic centimeters, which is within the tolerance (so the owner is giving away a tiny bit of gas, per gallon).

Mr. Cass believes the state of Florida

has the “best, tightest” tolerances in the country, or one of them. “In places like Indiana,” he says, “you don’t even find stickers on the pumps.”

There are consequences, of course, for violations — which are often not willful on the part of station owners, since the pump mechanisms can fail just like a car engine can fail, Mr. Cass says.

If, for example, a pump is not giving out enough gas, Mr. Cass will pull out a lock, and lock it up (notice the small holes in the metal lever-seats where the pump handle sits; the lock goes through that hole and the pump handle). They can start pumping again when they get it fixed, and prove it.

On the other hand, sometimes the pump gives out too much gas. Last year, Mr. Cass found one on Fort Myers Beach that provided an additional half gallon in every five gallons (conversely, he once discovered another pump only giving about 3.5 gallons for every five it appeared to be selling, he recalls).

Correction notices are written, as they are when something is broken — at Mystik, the spring on the nozzle of one hose, and several holes in the lever seats.

“These are expensive, maybe \$150 apiece,” he says. “So we let them drill a hole if the metal breaks, so we can get the lock in if we have to lock it.”

At Mystik, there are 20 pumps, and Mr. Cass will check each one. Then we will pour all the gasoline back into the fills, which he has opened with the key provided by the store manager.

“Used to be, the fills weren’t locked,” he says. “With this economy and people more desperate, they’re locking them now.”

Then comes another important check, for water in the gas.

At each fill, Mr. Cass lowers a plumb line with a long, bullet-shaped cone on the end marked in increments, into the storage tank through the fill. First, though, he coats the bullet cone in a special solvent that shows water.

There is water in each tank he checks — and the allowable limit in Florida is 2 inches in a tank. The water goes to the bottom, “but if the gas show 2 1/16 inches, I write a correction notice,” Mr. Cass says. “They have 24 hours to get the water out of there.”

To do that, they run a PVC pipe or something to the bottom with a simmer pump that’s explosion proof. And then they draw the water out, Mr. Cass says.

There are other checks, too, including one where he pumps some gas into a bell jar, swirls it around to create a vortex, then studies the liquid. Particles and pollutants are pushed to the outside of the swirl, then sink to the bottom.

If they exist, he can see them. Even if they don’t, he sends a sample to a state lab every day of the week except Friday. On that day, samples taken would have to sit until Monday before they reach the lab, which is too long.

By the end of the morning, Mr. Cass has completed all the tests, and written a few citations, which is normal. Nothing has to be locked up, though, or shut off.

“If you come out to a station and don’t find anything wrong, there’s something wrong,” he says, grinning. “And it’s probably the inspector.”

At Mystik, the pumps, the water in the storage tanks and the card readers are all in working order — within the mandated allowances. The owner will only have citations for some broken pump parts. That won’t cost him any money if it’s fixed promptly.

And Mr. Ron Cass only has a couple hundred more stations to check before the year’s out.

And if he has anything to say about it, at every one of them, you know you’ll be getting a gallon of good gas when you buy it. ■