



Our View | Gasoline

## Time to change the rules on reformulated gasoline

**With cleaner regular gasoline and vehicles that emit less pollution, the benefits from using reformulated gasoline aren't as dramatic.**

April 7, 2012

Reformulated gasoline has played a key role in helping clean up the air in southeastern Wisconsin. Motorists here have been required to use it since 1995 in an effort to reduce ground-level ozone pollution, otherwise known as smog, which can cause respiratory problems for healthy people as well as those with heart and lung problems.

That's a necessary goal, and reformulated gasoline has helped reach it: Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources data shows that air quality has been improving and that reformulated gasoline emits less pollution than regular gasoline.

But as with other environmental success stories, the federal requirement to use reformulated gasoline may have outlived its usefulness. Congress and the Environmental Protection Agency need to revisit the issue. It may be time to lift the regulation, which adds to the cost of gasoline and has been controversial as a fuel for small engines.

An [article](#) last week by the Journal Sentinel's Lee Bergquist and Joe Taschler pointed out that the advantages of reformulated gasoline are disappearing as conventional gas gets cleaner and emissions-control equipment on cars and trucks has improved. The result is vehicles that do a lot less polluting.

At the same time, the extra cost for motorists and companies puts the region at an economic disadvantage. And any disadvantage hurts when the economic recovery has yet to pick up any real steam.

According to the article: On March 31, regular gas sold for an average of \$4.173 a gallon in metro Milwaukee. That was 22.6 cents higher than in Green Bay and 35.3 cents higher than in La Crosse, according to the AAA Daily Fuel Gauge, produced by the American Automobile Association, the Oil Price Information Service and Wright Express.

And a driver filling up a Toyota Camry in Milwaukee was paying \$6.53 more than a motorist doing the same in La Crosse. The owner of a Chevrolet Silverado 2500 pickup, with a 36-gallon tank, was paying \$12.71 more than someone on the other side of state.

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While prices have been dropping slightly recently, regular reformulated gasoline since 1995 has cost an average of 10 cents more a gallon than conventional regular gasoline, according to a Journal Sentinel analysis of Energy Information Administration data.

That may not seem like much to some folks, but this is pretty basic stuff: Manufacturing and other southeastern Wisconsin industries need to physically move things from one site to another. Commuters use cars to get to jobs. Retail businesses still rely on shoppers who use vehicles to get to them. All that requires gasoline. If gasoline costs more here than elsewhere, all those businesses and workers and families feel the crunch.

And in an increasingly competitive marketplace, such things matter.

Granted, when the fuel was first used in 1995, there was nothing that could touch it in terms of the benefits, as Bob Lopez, a DNR air policy analyst, pointed out. But the story is different today: "The gap has narrowed," Lopez said.

The EPA still defends the benefits of reformulated gas, but if that cost-to-benefits gap continues to narrow - if cleaner vehicles and regular gasoline mean that Wisconsin is not getting that much more benefit from using reformulated gasoline - it's time to consider changing the rules.

That won't be easy. While the EPA has made a preliminary determination that the region is in compliance with federal ozone standards, another tougher ozone standard is looming. And beyond that, the reformulated gas mandate for southeastern Wisconsin "is hard-wired into the Clean Air Act," said Joseph Hoch, a DNR air pollution administrator. "It would take an act of Congress to change it."

Wisconsin Reps. Paul Ryan and Jim Sensenbrenner have in the past tried to limit or stop the use of reformulated gas. Given the apparent diminishing benefits of reformulated gasoline, maybe it's time the congressmen renewed those efforts.

In 2001, Sensenbrenner sent a letter to the EPA in which he said the mandate has "cost Wisconsin consumers dearly" and added that "if my constituents are to be able to buy gasoline at reasonable prices, the RFG program must be scrapped or fixed."

It seems that's even more the case now, more than a decade later. Congress should at least start talking about it again.

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## WHAT IS RFG?

- Reformulated gasoline, or RFG, is gasoline **blended to burn more cleanly** than conventional gasoline and to reduce smog-forming and toxic pollutants in the air we breathe.
- The RFG program was **mandated by Congress** in the 1990 Clean Air Act amendments. The first phase of the RFG program began in 1995, and the second (current) phase began in 2000.
- RFG is required in cities with high smog levels and is optional elsewhere. RFG is **used in 17 states** and the District of Columbia. About 30% of gasoline sold in the U.S. is reformulated.
- The air quality benefits that RFG has achieved represent a significant part of the country's smog-reduction strategy. The RFG program, combined with other industrial and transportation controls aimed at smog reduction, is contributing to the long-term **downward trend in U.S. smog levels**. About 75 million people breathe cleaner air because of RFG.

*Should the reformulated gasoline mandate for southeastern Wisconsin be ended? To be considered for publication as a letter to the editor, e-mail your opinion to the [Journal Sentinel editorial department](#).*

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