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# State steps up oversight of prices at gas stations

By [Travis Andersen](#) | GLOBE STAFF MARCH 04, 2012

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With gas prices rising steadily in recent weeks, Governor Deval Patrick has directed state inspectors to step up efforts to ensure that gas stations are not engaged in price gouging, false advertising and other deceptive practices, state officials said Sunday.

“We want to get ahead of the curve here,” Barbara Anthony, the state’s undersecretary of consumer affairs and business regulation, said in a phone interview. “We want to make sure that no one’s even thinking about price-gouging.”

Anthony said that while nine inspectors perform regular audits of gas stations to ensure compliance with

state regulations, Patrick has asked for increased oversight in light of recent price hikes nationwide.

In a statement, Anthony's office cited data from a AAA report showing that gasoline prices have risen for 11 consecutive weeks, and that Bay State drivers are currently paying \$3.73 per gallon on average, up from \$3.30 at this time last year.

The averages for other New England states on Sunday were \$3.99 in Connecticut, \$3.84 in Maine, \$3.80 in Rhode Island, \$3.81 in Vermont, and \$3.71 in New Hampshire, according to AAA.

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In addition to price gouging, the inspectors will also be on the lookout for stations that violate advertising rules, including posting street signs with lower prices than the rates being charged at the pump, the statement said.

Stations that violate advertising regulations can be fined up to \$375 for each offense, according to the statement.

"Before a driver pulls up to the pump, he or she should have a clear indication of the cost for a certain level of gas and whether there are any conditions on that price," Charles Carroll, director of the state Division of Standards, said in the statement.

Stations also must clearly indicate when marquee prices are tied to a discount for paying with cash or other conditions, officials said.

While parked Sunday at a Hess station on Brighton Avenue in Allston, Marco Raposo, 38, said he burns through about \$500 worth of diesel gasoline each week as a tow truck driver.

He said he has often been charged a different price than advertised, including during a recent stop in which he was charged \$4.12 per gallon at a station advertising a price of \$4.09.

"You see it now and then," Raposo said. "That's how they get you around here."

Anthony said that while the industry is generally compliant with state law, inspectors cited a handful of stations last year in the Boston area for false or inaccurate advertising.

She said that incidents of suspected price gouging are referred to the office of Attorney General Martha Coakley for possible prosecution, though that step is rarely taken. Anthony could not recall the last time a

station owner was criminally charged.

Glenn M. Heller, the former owner of the old Beacon Hill Gulf Station, was the first person in the country to be convicted of federal price gouging charges when a jury found him guilty of the practice in 1980.

He appealed and won a retrial, where a federal judge found him not guilty of the charges.

Hayden Meinero, 21, a student at Northeastern University who commutes by car to Southborough, said at the Hess station in Allston that he does not think he has ever witnessed price-gouging, but he would report any suspicious behavior that he observed.

“I’d complain. Absolutely,” Meinero said. “I don’t want to pay any more for gas. It’s high enough already.”

Drivers who believe they may be the victim of price gouging or false advertising can call a toll free state hotline at 888-283-3757.

*Globe correspondent Matt Rocheleau contributed to this report. He can be reached at mjrochele@gmail.com. Travis Andersen can be reached at tandersen@globe.com. Follow him on Twitter @TAGlobe.*

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