

Wild variations in gas prices leave me puzzled

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UP FRONT/COMMENTARY

GRANGEVILLE - A person could be tempted to become skeptical about why gas prices jump up and down with such wide variations from one part of the country - or the state - to another.

Last week we were told the reason gas prices in Idaho are up nearly 20 cents a gallon more than in the rest of the country is because of financial troubles at a Utah oil refinery. Some guy in Salt Lake City bounced a check and now we here in Idaho have to pay the price.

I never realized the petroleum business was that fragile. But, then, I began to wonder the last time there was a big bump in price and we were told the oil company manager's grandma had died and he shut down the plant to attend her funeral. Oil distribution, it seems, is like a virus. Somebody sneezes and everybody within hundreds of miles comes down with the flu.

I also cannot understand the wide range in the price of gasoline between the Camas Prairie and that in the Lewiston-Clarkston Valley.

Sometimes it seems as though people in the valley must have a giant straw they're using to suck up their gasoline straight from the ground, while we here in the hinterlands have to have ours flown in by carrier pigeon. It's at times like those that we prairie folk wait until we go to Lewiston to fill our tanks, forcing gas stations and convenience stores up here to run specials on deli chicken and bean burritos, just to pay the monthly overhead. You hate to do that to local businesses, but when you can save 30 to 40 cents a gallon on gasoline, you can hardly afford to pass it up. Of course, you spend as much to drive down there as what you save on the gas prices, but we try not to think about that.

Let's assume there's a logical reason that gas prices are so much cheaper in the Lewiston-Clarkston area than here on the Camas Prairie. Such as, oil distributors sell more of it down there, or they get free lunches or people are nicer in the valley than on the prairie. It's hard to get a straight answer from oil marketers on that question. But, whatever the reason, it would seem that whether the gas price is high or low, the differential between the valley and the prairie would remain the same.

That's not the case. A few months ago when gas prices were around 50 cents a gallon cheaper than they are now, there was a 30-cent to 40-cent difference in price between Lewiston and Grangeville.

Today, when prices are around the \$3 mark, the difference is about 4 cents.

I've asked a number of oil distributors and marketers and hear convoluted explanations that have something to do with the line-up of Mars and Venus and whether there was rain in Australia last summer.

A few years ago I even noted that prices in Grangeville were actually lower than in the Lewiston-Clarkston Valley. I was told that was because we here on the prairie get most of our petroleum products from Montana, whereas the valley's supply comes from Oregon or California.

Sounds great, but one question remains: So if our oil comes from Montana, Oregon or California, how come some guy's bounced check in Utah is affecting us now?