

Ensuring fuel quality

Monitoring standards

Fuel quality standards in Ireland are set by the European Union and are monitored by the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government.

The fuel you put into your vehicle has been through rigorous testing procedures at every stage from the refinery to the petrol pump. At the refinery, the refiner checks the quality of the fuel prior to sale to ensure it meets the appropriate EU Fuel specifications. The purchaser will generally arrange for an independent inspection at this stage. When the oil is being transported and stored, oil companies and shipping companies have quality management procedures to ensure that the product remains at the quality it was when purchased. If there were any doubt or dispute about fuel quality along this path, the product would be checked again by independent inspection.

EU Directive 98/70/EC requires each country to put in place a regime of sampling motor diesel and petrol and testing the products to ensure that the key environmentally related quality parameters are in compliance with EU standards. In response, the oil industry – in consultation with the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government and with their agreement – put in place a nationwide fuel quality monitoring system.

At the level of the individual distributor, there are independent inspections through the year. An independent inspector performs random checks on petrol pumps by taking samples from forecourt pumps and subjecting the fuel to exhaustive examination. The inspector carries out these checks at a number of service stations so that product from every oil company is checked in each province of the Republic. This happens twice a year and the inspectorate reports its findings to the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, who in turn report them to the EU.

‘Laundered diesel’

There is a particular issue in Ireland that results from there being a different tax treatment for Marked Gas Oil (for non motor vehicle use e.g. agricultural machinery, or construction machinery) than there is for Motor Diesel fuel (Derv). This has led to some unscrupulous operators disguising Marked Gas Oil by trying to remove traces of its distinguishing dye. This illegal activity involves ‘laundering’ the fuel using chemicals such as sulphuric acid and caustic soda as bleaching and neutralising agents. Laundered fuel can cause serious damage to a vehicle’s engine. Also, the process of ‘laundering’ diesel leaves highly toxic waste products which are invariably inadequately stored or just dumped in public places causing serious pollution.

Everyone should be on the look out for ‘laundered’ diesel. This criminal activity of adulterating fuel is a threat to public safety and the environment as well as resulting in a severe cost to the Exchequer.

Car, van and truck owners should be very wary of diesel that is not sold from reputable outlets. The risk of damage to the vehicle from 'laundered' diesel is very considerable. Quite apart from this immediate self-interest, few vehicle owners would wish to conspire to help an illegal trader breach contract, breach trademark legislation, evade tax, play fast and loose with environmental regulations and allow havoc on the roads with oil tankers driven by unregulated drivers. The Irish Road Haulage Association has already previously highlighted the fact that unscrupulous hauliers who use such diesel are undermining legitimate hauliers and are thereby dragging everybody down.

The Revenue Commissioners have warned that this illegal activity may crop up anywhere in the country. IPIA congratulates them and the Garda Siochana on their success in tracking down hundreds of thousands of litres of illegal product. Vehicle owners can help by using common sense when buying diesel from reputable sources only. If a motorist has doubts about the credentials of the person selling them diesel, then he/she should exercise prudence in order to stay within the law.