Supers, mechanics none too pleased with mandated RFG

By J. BARRY MOTHERS

Officially, the acronym RFG stands for reformulated gasoline. But some golf course mechanics and greens crews around the country might have their own spicy interpretation.

As part of the 1985 federal Clean Air Act, RFG became mandatory starting Jan. 1, 1995, in all or part of 18 states with the worst ozone and air pollution problems. RFG supposedly pollutes less because it has lower levels of volatile compounds like benzene and contains an oxygenate like ethanol.

But complaints and anecdotal evidence against the new, technically "cleaner" gas have been piling up.

Some golf course mechanics are finding RFG yields lower mileage, less engine power and punch, more frequent tune-ups and nagging repairs on everything from greens and fairway mowers to weed-whackers. The gas is also less stable and many distributors recommend a storage life of no more than 30 days.

"The big surprise to me was mixed-gas items," said Eric Ingenbrandt, mechanic at the 18-hole Trenton (N.J.) Country Club (CC). "I have five Echo weed eaters (models SRM 2501, 2502) and on two of them had to do carburetor rebuilds because the diaphragms are wearing out. I've already cleaned carbon out of the mufflers once on all of them and changed spark plugs. I don't know how much can be attributed to this new gas ... but prior to this I'd only done one carburetor in five years, and that was four years ago."

RFG is being used statewide in Connecticut, Delaware, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Rhode Island and the District of Columbia. It is also required in metropolitan areas in parts of California, Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, Maine, Maryland, New Hampshire, New York, Pennsylvania, Texas, Virginia and Wisconsin. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency said some areas with less-serious ozone problems have elected to use it also. It was estimated 33 percent of all gasoline used in this country after Jan. 1, 1995 would be reformulated.

RFG — also known as methyl tertiary butyl ether (MTBE) — is considered "cleaner" gas. The content of toxic benzene has been reduced from about 15 percent to around 1 percent. But benzene contains lubricants that help engines run smoothly. Without these lubricants, engines run drier and hotter, which can lead to a variety of problems with carburetors, cylinders, spark plugs and head gaskets.

EPA estimates RFG produces 15 to 17 percent less pollution than conventional gasoline by reducing harmful vehicle emissions of smog-forming compounds and air toxics. It also estimates 1.3 million tons of ozone-forming emissions will be prevented in the first phase of the program from 1995 to 1999.

EPA conceded in an early press release that RFG "may" reduce gas mileage on cars by 1 or 2 percent and, that "Certain oxygenates may not be compatible with small lawn and garden equipment engines, especially older ones."

"I'm all for pollution control, but I don't think anybody thought this out," said Harold George, head mechanic at 36-hole DuPont CC in Wilmington, Del. George oversees 300 pieces of maintenance equipment as well as 100 golf cars and 18 trucks. "It got forced on us, as usual. I don't think people realize how much small equipment can be used.

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