

HURRICANE RITA: 'Plenty of gas to go around' this time

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Panic? What panic?

A day after rush-hour motorists lined up at gas stations, fearing shortages from Hurricane Rita, the pumps cleared and gas prices remained steady Saturday in metro Atlanta.

"I think there will be plenty of gas to go around," said Quik-Trip customer Alfred Dupree, 54, as he filled up his red pickup truck. "I'm not worried about a gas shortage at all. I go buy gas when I need it, just like I always have."

Hurricane Rita appeared to have spared the bulk of refineries clustered on the Texas coastline, but industry officials cautioned that it was too early to assess the damage or effects of power outages.

"Remember, the power outages are what bedeviled recovery efforts after Katrina," said oil analyst John Kilduff of Fimat USA in New York.

The outages caused by Katrina temporarily halted the delivery of fuel through the Colonial pipeline, prompting a buying panic by motorists in Atlanta and other cities along the pipeline's Houston-to-New York route. Gas prices spiked above \$5 per gallon at some Atlanta stations.

This time, the company staged truck-size portable generators that could keep fuel flowing even if other power sources shut down, said Steve Baker of Colonial Pipeline.

"We learned a lesson from Katrina," he said.

Saturday was business as usual for gas stations in Conyers, despite a rush Friday after Gov. Sonny Perdue, citing concerns about a possible gas shortage, requested that Georgia schools close Monday and Tuesday.

There were no long lines at the pumps, nor was there an unusual hike in prices, with regular running from \$2.68 to \$2.79 a gallon.

A survey of stations found some with pumps that were out of regular gas, while a few stations were out of the more pricey premium.

The Quick Spot on Salem Road was playing it safe, limiting customers to 15 gallons. The pumps were flush with gas, with the exception of diesel, which had run out recently.

Still, pump prices could spike if oil refineries --- especially those near Lake Charles, La., and Beaumont and Port Arthur, Texas, where Rita hit hard --- are slow in resuming production.

Before the storm came ashore Saturday, 16 of the 26 refineries in Texas shut down and evacuated crews. Four refineries in Louisiana and Mississippi remain closed almost a month after Katrina.

The average retail cost of gasoline nationwide was \$2.75 a gallon on Friday, up from \$1.87 a year earlier, according to the Oil Price Information Service of Wall, N.J. That was consistent with gas prices in metro Atlanta.

Crude oil prices dropped sharply Friday as traders welcomed news that Rita had weakened to a Category 3 hurricane, suggesting that damage to refinery capacity in the Gulf could be less severe than originally feared when it was a top-of-the-scale Category 5 storm.

That provided little comfort to consumers, however. Leah Reuter, 35, was suffering sticker shock and some SUV guilt as she gassed up her 1996 Chevrolet Suburban on Saturday afternoon at the BP station on Moreland Avenue in Little Five Points.

She put only 14 gallons in her 50-gallon tank, but it cost her \$40.49.

"Unbelievable," she said, noting that when she bought the Suburban four years ago, gas prices were only beginning to climb.

She got the SUV when she lived in Douglasville. Now she, her husband, and their two children live in downtown Decatur. "We walk a lot," she said.

Rafiq Devji was helping his brother, who manages the station, on Saturday afternoon, said the station ran out of regular unleaded gasoline Friday and was without it for 19 hours until a new supply arrived early Saturday. There were no lines at the station Saturday afternoon, but most of the pumps were occupied.

Devji said he thinks Perdue's concerns about supplies prompted a rush on gas by some customers. Some industry experts agreed, saying Perdue's tactic only intensified consumption.

"It makes no sense from a supply-and-demand situation," said Randy Stuart, a marketing professor with Kennesaw State University. "Why didn't Sonny encourage walking, carpool, and riding MARTA to school on Monday and Tuesday? He's encouraging people to continue their habits."

Back at the BP station in Little Five Points, Reuter said she was getting gas because she needed some, not because she was reacting to the governor's announcement.

"My parents were like, 'Fill up! Fill up!' but I thought, 'No,' " she said.

"It's an interesting thing for the governor to do, but I think we need to look at transportation alternatives --- I say as I lean against my Suburban," she said with a wry smile.

Staff writers Kathy Brister, Leon Stafford, Patti Bond and Matt Kempner and news services contributed to this article.