

Post-Sandy legislation: Backup generators would prevent long gas lines

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Five months have passed since Superstorm Sandy, and legislators are nipping around the edges of bolstering the fuel distribution system so more gas can get to the consumer in the case of a widespread power outage or other state of emergency.

Large portions of northern New Jersey were without power for days after the storm, and gas stations could not dispense fuel because they are not required to have back-up generators. The closest refineries were also forced offline, and the critical Colonial pipeline was also affected (<http://bit.ly/QaxCt2> [1]). New York and Pennsylvania also had power and gasoline disruptions.

In my January 2013 column, I wrote, “States prone to coastal or tropical storms should revisit back-up generator requirements for services stations (in a way that doesn’t put them out of business), and stations should be allowed alternatives (without waiting for a governor’s decision) for fuel deliveries should a refinery go offline.”

Finally, there’s some incremental action from lawmakers:

A New Jersey Assembly committee approved a pilot program (Bill A-3930) that will provide zero-interest loans to fuel merchants located on or near an evacuation route to wire their service stations for backup generators.

The New Jersey Senate passed Bill S-2581, which will allow fuel merchants to import fuel during a state of emergency without needing to have a distributor’s license. This should at least provide some work-around options for station owners who have the electric power to dispense during a state of emergency.

The New Jersey State Senate passed Bill S-2582 letting fuel merchants — during a state of emergency — sell higher-grade fuel at the same price as lower-grade if the lower-grade fuel supply runs out.

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Published on Electronic Component News (<http://www.ecnmag.com>)

In New York State, Governor Cuomo proposed a strategic fuel reserve for the state and more pump stations along the Buckeye pipeline. Legislation has also been introduced that would require some gas stations to install backup generators. The governor also announced an amendment to the state budget that would require back-up power wiring at some service stations in evacuation areas along with a \$10,000 grant to station owners, which will come from federal relief funds.

The measures requiring back-up power wiring in evacuation zones are a literal drop in the bucket for motorists. News stories report that AAA estimated only 35 percent of gas stations in the (New York) metro area had power while less than 10 percent of stations overall had backup generators (<http://wny.cc/YucAHj> [2]). And the wiring measures do nothing about the cost of the generator itself, which could be around \$30,000.

Unless more substantial legislative action is taken to get backup generators in service stations soon, station owners will continue to say — as one such owner was recently quoted — “Let’s hope we don’t have another hundred-year storm in the next few months.” That line of thinking from owners and legislators is unacceptable given the lack of contingency which became clear in Sandy’s wake and the toll it took on countless businesses and individuals, including the elderly and infirm.

Source URL (retrieved on 12/18/2014 - 5:46pm):

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[1] <http://bit.ly/QaxCt2>

[2] <http://wny.cc/YucAHj>