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QuickPoint! Oregon's Self-Service Gas Prohibition Probably Won't End—But It Should

By Steve Buckstein

Only two states prohibit motorists from pumping their own gasoline: New Jersey and Oregon. I'm not sure what excuses the powers-that-be use in New Jersey, but here they in-effect warn that "[you'll set yourself on fire](#)." The ban went into effect in 1951, and the only attempt to end it failed at the polls in 1982.

The Oregonian published a [provocative editorial](#) last week making fun of our self-serve ban, but prohibitionists came out of the woodwork to make argument after argument in favor of keeping the ban.

The three most popular arguments for keeping the ban seem to be:

I don't want to pump my own gas, so you can't either;

The ban is a good "make-work program" that keeps people employed and tax revenue flowing; and,

Employing attendants doesn't make our gas more expensive anyway.

First, I don't want to pump my own gas either, but that doesn't give me the right to prohibit you from pumping yours. If there is enough demand for station attendants, someone will fill that demand in a free market.

Second, sure, creating jobs is a good thing. But government "make-work programs" often [misallocate resources](#), costing taxpayers more than any tax revenue they might generate.

And third, if labor costs have no impact on prices, then why not mandate one attendant for every pump? Or, mandate one checkout clerk for every customer at the grocery store? Lots of jobs will be created at apparently no cost to consumers; what could go wrong?

In short, it seems that too many Oregonians see our self-serve gas ban as something that makes our state unique. The ban probably won't end, but it should.

Steve Buckstein is founder and Senior Policy Analyst at Cascade Policy Institute, Oregon's free market public policy research organization.

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