

## LP squad cars cost effective

By Lydia Statz, Daily Union staff writer | Posted: Wednesday, January 29, 2014 8:56 am

JEFFERSON — As Old Man Winter rages on, the price of liquid propane in Wisconsin has soared, in some cases doubling the cost of a gallon of LP gas propane over January 2013 levels.

Officials have cited increased demand due to the cold temperatures, a wet autumn that saw farmers using extra propane to dry grain and a lowered supply due to the temporary closure of a major pipeline for repairs early in the season.

The shortage has grabbed the attention of Wisconsin lawmakers and Gov. Scott Walker, who has pledged \$8.5 million in state aid for propane customers and dealers, and declared a state of emergency due to the rising prices.

Much of the attention thus far has focused on rural residential customers who largely use propane to heat their homes. The U.S. Energy Information Administration currently estimates the cost of a gallon of residential propane in Wisconsin to be \$2.29, a 46 percent increase over last year's price of \$1.54. That price is still well below the national average of \$2.96 per gallon, but some anecdotal reports from around the state report prices inching higher than the official report shows.

But the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office, which has been using the fuel in an innovative way to save costs since 1981, now is seeing its bills pile up.

More than 30 years ago, all of the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office vehicles were converted to a dual-fuel propane and gasoline system to take advantage of the cost savings. At that time, the average cost of a gallon of gas hovered around \$1.40, while a gallon of propane cost about 60 cents.

At the time, it was estimated that this change saved the department approximately \$1.8 million per year. Those cost savings bore out for the next three decades, as the price of a gallon of gas rose to approximately \$3.30 in January 2013. At that time, the department was paying only \$1.04 per gallon to fill its storage tank.

Just a year later, that invoice looks much different. Chief Deputy Jeffrey Parker said the department ordered a full load of 10,000 gallons of liquid propane Tuesday at a rate of \$2.64 per gallon.

Since the department purchases such a large quantity, that price still is cheaper than many customers nationally are seeing. "As an example, if I would have only chosen to purchase maybe

3,000 gallons of gas instead of 10,000, then the price was going to go up to \$3.35 or \$3.40 a gallon,” said Parker. The department also benefits from a federal tax credit of 50 cents a gallon.

The propane shortage and high prices are expected to last throughout winter, but likely will abate when the temperatures start to warm up sometime in March. Parker said that influenced his decision to purchase a full tank of fuel now, so that the department hopefully will not need to make another fuel purchase until the weather warms up.

Either way, Parker said, the county will be keeping an eye on the trend.

“I already have communicated with the county administrator, Ben Wehmeier, that if we saw a trend where propane did become more expensive than unleaded fuel, obviously we would stop using propane at that point and start using unleaded fuel in the vehicles,” he said.

All of the department’s vehicles have a propane tank and delivery system mounted in the trunk, in addition to the normal gasoline fuel system. Then, the car’s computer automatically tracks the vehicle’s performance and fuel levels, switching to gasoline if propane levels drop too low or if the system is not running properly.

“A propane system typically will run in the area of \$6,000 to \$6,500. But then you have to remember that you can just take the propane system out and put it on the next vehicle,” said Parker. “The cars that had the systems from the early 1980s, those lasted two decades. I mean, yes, you had to buy replacement parts once in a while, but the same systems were being placed on those vehicles for over two decades.”

After the department’s Ford Crown Victorias were retired, they were sold to the county’s Human Services Department with the propane systems intact, so many of the county’s other fleet vehicles have benefited from the cost savings through the years.

“We were probably the first county in the State of Wisconsin to go to a propane system, and so much has changed over the years regarding the efficiency and technology that goes into the systems,” said Parker. “In the old days, ... you would get backfiring that would occur once in a while, and now these systems are so technologically advanced that the guys don’t notice any difference when the car is running on propane versus when the car is running on unleaded fuel.”

He estimated that the department utilizes approximately 55,000 to 60,000 gallons of propane each year, and also makes use of a significant amount of grant funding to maintain the program.

Several years ago, Sheriff Paul Milbrath began working with a group called Wisconsin Clean Cities, which is concerned with alternative fuel possibilities. During the past few years, the group has awarded the department more than \$30,000 in grants to purchase new fueling systems and a new pumping station.