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Gas stations, retailers battle shortages

Storms strain chain of supplies for businesses

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Gasoline was gold Tuesday as motorists scrambled to find it even though many stations had run dry — victims of a one-two hurricane punch.

Meanwhile, the storms combined with curfews, power outages and scarcity posed an unprecedented challenge to major retailers such as Home Depot, McDonald's and Publix.

Tom Koehler, manager of the Mobil station at Daniels Parkway and U.S. 41 south of Fort Myers, was one of the lucky few to have a plentiful supply after getting a 9,000-gallon delivery of regular fuel Monday morning by independent hauler Curtis Marston of Abenaqui Carriers in North Hampton, N.H.

Koehler ran out Sunday but said he has generally been able to stay supplied. After Monday's delivery, he said, "We're in great shape."

Marston, a co-owner of Abenaqui, said Exxon Mobil Corp. called him last week to haul gas in Florida because of anticipated shortages caused by disruptions of trucking and closures at the ports of Miami and Tampa.

The gas he brought to Koehler's Mobil station, for example, was from the east coast. The port of Tampa, though closer, was still closed Monday because of Hurricane Frances, Marston said.

Just getting to Florida was a struggle, he said. "We came down into Brunswick, Ga., no problem, laid over Saturday night, but by Sunday morning the storm had already hit the coast. We had to wait until noon or 1 o'clock for it to move away from Interstate 95 so we could get down."

Even then the ride wasn't easy, he said. "That was some driving, it was very difficult: a lot of wind and trees down on the road."

Customers were glad to find fuel when they could. Beth Wilke had filled up for a trip to St. Petersburg earlier Tuesday but was down half a tank and decided to get more when she saw Mobil had gas. "I made a U-turn and filled up."

Uncertain deliveries

Elsewhere, supplies were spotty. Chuck Fundermark, owner of Chuck's Whiskey Creek Service Station on McGregor Boulevard in Fort Myers, had no gas Tuesday and said his supplier wasn't sure when it would be available.

Ken Kasten, owner of Sanibel Shell Service Station on Sanibel, had gas but was out of diesel because of the large amount of heavy construction machinery using that fuel.

"Diesel's the biggest problem," he said. "The demand was extremely high because of the rebuilding after Hurricane Charley."

Shortage of gas was also hampering some businesses.

Tomas Gonzalez, owner of Flora Flowers in Fort Myers, said one of his two vehicles is out of gas. "Luckily there is gas in the other one," he said. However, he had no deliveries to make Tuesday, so he wasn't too



"I could be home right now — some of the people down here don't realize it," says Curtis Marston of North Hampton, N.H., president of operations/sales with Abenaqui Carriers, as he unloads 9,000 gallons of regular unleaded gasoline Tuesday at the Mobil gas station at the corner of U.S. 41 and Daniels Parkway south of Fort Myers. He drove the empty tanker truck down Sunday as the storm was moving through Florida, picked up the fuel on the east coast, and has been delivering gas to Mobil stations on the west coast. *TODD STUBING/The News-Press*

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worried.

Finding enough gas to run three taxi cabs day and night is starting to worry Jim Glenn, president of Orange Taxi in Fort Myers.

"We are a little worried now. We had some difficulty (getting fuel) last night," Glenn said.

"The drivers are constantly looking for gas. Somehow or other we have been lucky," he said.

Groceries step up

Meanwhile, a wide variety of other retail goods were in short supply as the back-to-back hurricanes put a strain on Florida's supply chain.

Even though Hurricane Frances brought little more than tropical storm winds and rain to Southwest Florida during the holiday weekend, many shoppers found empty shelves where perishables such as bread, milk, eggs and meats should have been.

But by Tuesday, the grocery supply system was cranked up to full speed, according to two large supermarket chains.

"Our distribution center is rocking and rolling," Camille Branch, spokeswoman for Kash n' Karry, based in Tampa, said Tuesday. "As early as Sunday night we started pushing those perishables back in the stores."

Ahead of a storm, Kash n' Karry had scaled back on delivery of perishables.

Stores in the Fort Myers and Naples areas were the first to reopen Sunday, Branch said.

Kash n' Karry supplies its 103 stores from its Lakeland distribution center.

At Lakeland-based Publix Supermarkets, high winds kept delivery trucks off the roads for a time.

"We had to wait for the winds to subside to 39 miles per hour or less," said Maria Rodamis, spokeswoman. "We are doing everything we can to restock all our shelves. It will be a process continuing all this week."

Rodamis said even though many Publix stores have generators, they can fail or not keep food at the proper temperature.

"We monitor very closely and we never compromise the integrity of food. If there's any question, we discard it," she said. "Food safety is the No. 1 priority."

Waiting for supplies

Some McDonald's restaurants were offering limited menus as they waited for supplies to be delivered, while others were unaffected.

"We are just missing some produce and dairy products," said Jan Rank, manager of McDonald's on Santa Barbara Boulevard in Cape Coral. Until deliveries arrive, she said, "we are trying to borrow from each other."

It's been a mammoth logistical challenge for Atlanta-based Home Depot.

While re-supplying Southwest Florida after Hurricane Charley, the company had to also start shipping massive amounts of storm supplies to the east coast as residents braced for Hurricane Frances. And now Hurricane Ivan is breathing down its neck with the potential for further demand for supplies.

"This is the biggest resupply Home Depot has ever undertaken," said Don Harrison, spokesman. It entailed pulling merchandise out of stores as far away as California as well as pushing suppliers for more.

As of Tuesday, the company had about 1,000 trucks en route to Florida stores, he said, carrying such items as tarps and plywood.

Generators are still in short supply "so we are having to prioritize them according to need," Harrison said.