

major factor in any decision to shut down is the refiner's current financial situation. It is very difficult to assess an individual refinery's current financial situation. This includes a refiner's debt, as well as its profitability in producing fuels other than those affected by a particular regulation. It can also include the profitability of other operations and businesses owned by the refiner.

Such an intensive analysis can be done to some degree in the context of an application for special hardship provisions, as discussed above. However, in this case, EPA can request detailed financial documents not normally available. Prior to such application, as is the case now, this financial information is usually confidential. Even when it is published, the data usually apply to more than just the operation of a single refinery.

Another factor is the need for capital investments other than for this proposed rule. EPA can roughly project the capital needed to meet other new fuel quality specifications, such as the Tier 2 or highway diesel sulfur standards. However, we cannot predict investments to meet local environmental and safety regulations, nor other investments needed to compete economically with other refiners.

Finally, any decision to close in the future must be based on some assumption of future fuel prices. Fuel prices are very difficult to project in absolute terms. The response of prices to changes in fuel quality specifications, such as sulfur content, as is discussed in the next section, are also very difficult to predict. Thus, even if we had complete knowledge of a refiner's financial status and its need for future investments, the decision to stay in business or close would still depend on future earnings, which are highly

dependent on the prices of all products produced by that refinery.

Some studies in this area point to fuel pricing over the past 15 years or so and conclude that prices will only increase to reflect increased operating costs and will not reflect the cost of capital. In fact, the rate of return on refining assets has been poor over the past 15 years and until recently, there has been a steady decline in the number of refineries operating in the U.S. However, this may have been due to a couple of circumstances specific to that time period. One, refinery capacity utilization was less than 80 percent in 1985. Two, at least regarding gasoline, the oxygen mandate for reformulated gasoline caused an increase in gasoline supply despite low refinery utilization rates. While this led to healthy financial returns for oxygenate production, it did not help refining profit margins.

Today, refinery capacity utilization in the U.S. is generally considered to be at its maximum sustainable rate. There are no regulatory mandates on the horizon which will increase production capacity significantly, even if ethanol use in gasoline increases substantially.²⁸⁵ Consistent with this, refining margins have been much better over the past two and a half years than during the previous 15 years and the refining industry itself is projecting good returns for the foreseeable future.

6. Fuel Prices

It is well known that it is difficult to predict fuel prices in absolute terms with any accuracy. The price of crude oil dominates the cost of producing gasoline and diesel fuel. Crude oil prices have varied by more than a factor of two in the past year. In addition, unexpectedly warm or cold winters can significantly affect heating oil consumption, which affects the amount

of gasoline produced and the amount of distillate material available for diesel fuel production. Economic growth, or its lack, affects fuel demand, particularly for diesel fuel. Finally, both planned and unplanned shutdowns of refineries for maintenance and repairs can significantly affect total fuel production, inventory levels and resulting fuel prices.

Predicting the impact of any individual factor on fuel price is also difficult. The overall volatility in fuel prices limits the ability to determine the effect of a factor which changed at a specific point in time which might have led to the price change, as other factors continue to change over time. Occasionally, a fuel quality change, such as reformulated gasoline or a 500 ppm cap on diesel fuel sulfur content, only affects a portion of the fuel pool. In this case, an indication of the impact on price can be inferred by comparing the prices of the two fuels at the same general location over time. However, this is still only possible after the fact, and cannot be done before the fuel quality change takes place.

Because of these difficulties, EPA has generally not attempted to project the impact of its rules on fuel prices. However, in response to Executive Order 13211, we are doing so for this proposed rule. To reflect the inherent uncertainty in making such projections, we developed three projections for the potential impact of the proposed fuel program on fuel prices. The range of potential long-term price increases are shown in Table V-A-4. Short-term price impacts are highly volatile, as are short-term swings in absolute fuel prices, and much too dependent on individual refiners' decisions, unexpected shutdowns, etc. to be predicted even with broad ranges.

TABLE V-A-4.—RANGE OF POSSIBLE TOTAL DIESEL FUEL PRICE INCREASES (CENTS PER GALLON)^a

	Lower Limit	Mid-Point	Maximum
2007 500 ppm Sulfur Cap: Nonroad, Locomotive and Marine Diesel Fuel			
PADDs 1 and 3	0.9	1.5	3.4
PADD 2	2.3	3.0	4.8
PADD 4	1.7	4.1	5.8
PADD 5	1.0	2.8	4.3
2010 15 ppm Sulfur Cap: Nonroad Diesel Fuel			
PADDs 1 and 3	1.8	3.0	5.4
PADD 2	2.9	6.1	7.4
PADD 4	3.0	8.9	9.3
PADD 5	1.7	5.9	8.4

Notes:

^a At the current wholesale price of approximately \$1.00 per gallon, these values also represent the percentage increase in diesel fuel price.

²⁸⁵ Both houses of the U.S. Congress are considering bills which would require the increased

use of renewables, like ethanol, in gasoline and diesel fuel. While the amount of renewables could

be considerable, it is well below the annual growth in transportation fuel use.