

Just a little \$lice

A penny here, a penny there, who wins, who loses, and why our investment in measurement matters, more than ever.

The following article includes excerpts from an interview with Don Onwiler of NCWM. The messages expressed do not necessarily reflect the views or experiences of Rice Lake Weighing Systems or its dealers.

By Jessica de la Cruz

THE NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON WEIGHTS AND MEASURES (NCWM) MIGHT IMPLY AN ANNUAL MEETING OF THE MINDS, rubbing elbows around a perfectly arranged cheese tray in some dimly lit lecture hall. But what is it, really? NCWM is an association of weights and measures professionals from around the country, who, in regular meetings throughout the year, conduct some of the most important business that you'll never see. NCWM develops the measurement standards published in the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) Handbooks 44, 130 and 133—the same documents referenced in state statutes and adopted as law in many other territories too. State and local agencies, funded by taxpayers, enforce these laws, carrying out inspections and investigating complaints in everything from fuel quality and gas pump accuracy, to food production, transportation, and virtually anything else sold by weight, measure, or count. As the Executive Director of NCWM, Don Onwiler lives and breathes the measurement world.

“The weights and measures official is the unbiased third party in every transaction, and they're invisible in that role. As consumers, we take it for granted that everything's OK, and we're getting what we're paying for,” Don explains, adding his concern about legislators'

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Don Onwiler,
Executive Director of NCWM

ever-increasing temptation to put weights and measures enforcement on the chopping block. “What consumers, industries and legislators need to know is that no one is going to do that job if that agency doesn’t receive the funding they need—and we’re seeing that happen, where no one is doing it in some jurisdictions.”

It’s a troubling thought for Don, knowing all too well how big an impact lack of enforcement can have. “This is one area where government does for the public what the public cannot do for themselves.”

The reach of weights and measures enforcement is so broad, so impactful, that it benefits not only consumers, but scale owners, scale manufacturers, and scale dealers too.

Before his position with NCWM, Don worked as a supervisor in weights and measures enforcement and also conducted National Type Evaluation Program (NTEP) testing, the program that authorizes weighing equipment for commercial use. “I was at a meat-packing plant that used a monorail scale to make 10,000 weighments per day, six days a week, 52 weeks per year. This particular scale, with a one-pound tolerance, had an error of 0.4 pounds. Multiply that times 10,000 per day and that’s 1.25 million pounds of beef they were buying every year and not getting from the beef producers. That’s the message that we try to get to scale owners, that the scale is their cash register, it’s every transaction and can compute into major losses. It could also mean major unearned gains which is unfair competition, and that’s not good for anybody.”

Any business owner will tell you that a level playing field is essential for business stability and growth. “We actually had the seafood industry come to one of our conferences and ask for more focus on their issues because there was so much inequity in their market, specifically when it comes to frozen-glazed seafood. You can find it in most any supermarket, it can be fish or scallops, or lobster or shrimp—it’s an ice glaze that helps protect the seafood. But that ice glaze

isn’t seafood, it’s water, and should never be included in the net weight declaration on the package.”

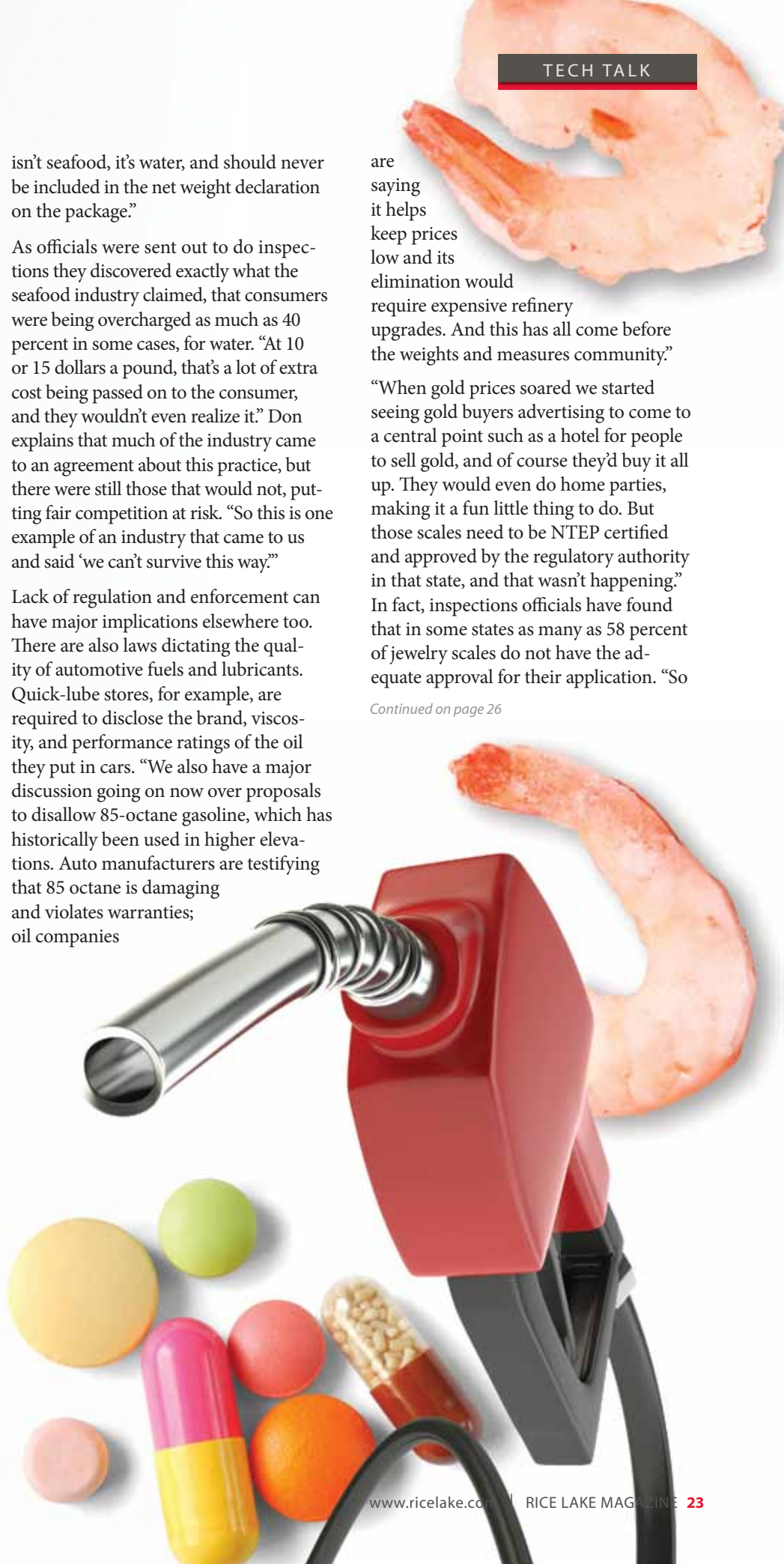
As officials were sent out to do inspections they discovered exactly what the seafood industry claimed, that consumers were being overcharged as much as 40 percent in some cases, for water. “At 10 or 15 dollars a pound, that’s a lot of extra cost being passed on to the consumer, and they wouldn’t even realize it.” Don explains that much of the industry came to an agreement about this practice, but there were still those that would not, putting fair competition at risk. “So this is one example of an industry that came to us and said ‘we can’t survive this way.’”

Lack of regulation and enforcement can have major implications elsewhere too. There are also laws dictating the quality of automotive fuels and lubricants. Quick-lube stores, for example, are required to disclose the brand, viscosity, and performance ratings of the oil they put in cars. “We also have a major discussion going on now over proposals to disallow 85-octane gasoline, which has historically been used in higher elevations. Auto manufacturers are testifying that 85 octane is damaging and violates warranties; oil companies

are saying it helps keep prices low and its elimination would require expensive refinery upgrades. And this has all come before the weights and measures community.”

“When gold prices soared we started seeing gold buyers advertising to come to a central point such as a hotel for people to sell gold, and of course they’d buy it all up. They would even do home parties, making it a fun little thing to do. But those scales need to be NTEP certified and approved by the regulatory authority in that state, and that wasn’t happening.” In fact, inspections officials have found that in some states as many as 58 percent of jewelry scales do not have the adequate approval for their application. “So

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New Life for Steel

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As it passes through the shredder, the scrap is sized per consumer specifications. The machine looks like a medieval torture device. Each hammer strike creates a sea of echoes between the mountains of scrap metal in the 26-acre yard.

The now-shredded autos, post-consumer goods (refrigerators, washers, swing sets, etc.) and a host of other input materials are sent through a magnetic separation system to prepare the steel and then move on to a variety of sophisticated separation equipment to remove other metals such as copper, aluminum and stainless steel.

Running at a breakneck pace, the shredder can process 100 tons per hour and fills 80 rail cars per month (each rail car passes over Rice Lake load cells) in addition to outgoing truck loads. Once sorting and separating is complete, the steel leaves the

facility, destined for re-use in the construction or manufacturing industries.

In addition to steel, Alter processes copper, aluminum, titanium and other exotic metals. The company is constantly expanding and looking for growth opportunities, both domestically and internationally.



The shredder can process 4,000 tons of scrap in a 40-hour work week.

“Everywhere I go,” says Ken, “I see more and more SURVIVOR scales. More than anything else. People know that Rice Lake means quality. Alter enjoys a solid business relationship with Rice Lake and working together provides us and our customers with accurate, consistent weights that are at the core of our business.” ■

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we started paying more attention to this. This is another example of a regulated industry being supportive of weights and measures enforcement, because some pawn stores, competing against these fly-by-night operations, actually ran articles in their association magazines informing the gold-buying community about the regulations that apply.”

With each state’s willingness to enforce NTEP and require it for commercial weighing applications, not only are consumers protected, but scale manufacturers and dealers are as well. “NTEP certification gives a dealer something that they can point to, that they’re selling equipment the regulatory authority will approve. The uniformity of requirements from state to state is a great benefit to dealers. We even have a model regulation for the registration of service persons, which gives the state something to look at when they’re creating licensing and registration programs for service agents, so that the standards are similar from state to state.”

“We need to be aware that by providing a level playing field for businesses, we receive the benefit of lower prices as well. If the competition is fair, then the prices are going to be lower and we’re getting what we pay for. If the competition is unfair, we’re either getting cheated on quantity in our purchases or cheated on price. But we don’t think about that.”

Of course, laws and regulations mean nothing without the proper enforcement. “Based on the studies we’ve done, the national average is about 70 cents per year, per resident to have a strong weights and measures enforcement program out there. We go to the gas station and fill up, run to the supermarket and buy our packaged meat and cereal and milk, and just assume we’re getting what

we pay for. But in that one day, driving to the store and making those two stops, we could’ve lost more than what we would’ve spent in a whole year for regulatory enforcement.”

As prices rise and fall in certain markets, the importance of regulation ebbs and flows in the public eye. “I hope that we can reach a point where weights and measures is more of an everyday thing that we’re all thinking about, and we can appreciate what those regulatory people out there do for us.”

In the meantime it’s business as usual for the members of NCWM. There is important work to be done. For now the cheese tray remains intact, but rest assured that each slice...is exactly the same size. ■

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