

Propane...on or off?

Another question that gets asked a lot is “Can I travel with the propane on?” This question is usually tied to using the refrigerator (and sometimes the furnace) while traveling down the road. The simple answer is, yes you can. But it also raises a couple of other questions...is it safe and is it necessary?

Can you?

The propane appliances (fridge, furnace and water heater) are designed to draw the air needed for combustion with propane from the outside and to vent any exhaust to the outside. The outside covers should be designed to prevent wind from blowing out any pilot light or the flame once ignited. So, operation while on the road should not be a problem.

Necessary?

So, you're out camping and it's time to move on to the next stop and you're worried about the items in the fridge and freezer. Will they be okay with the fridge off until you get to your next stop and can get plugged back into electricity? Probably. Most refrigerators will stay cold long enough to keep food from spoiling. If the fridge has been on and the items have been inside it for at least 24 hours, things should remain cold enough for the 8-12 hours you may be without electricity without spoiling. Items in the freezer may thaw slightly. Ice cream may soften up and ice cubes could turn back to plain old water.

A lot will depend on the outside temperature and how well the RV is insulated. It could take 1-3 hours for the inside temperature to equal the outside temperature. If it is below 80 degrees for most of your travel time, you should be fine without having the refrigerator on. If the temperature is above 80 degrees for most of your travel time, you should be okay for a short period of time...say 4-6 hours.

If you will be on the road longer than 6 hours or if temperatures will be above 90 for most of your travel time, you may want to consider purchasing a remote wireless thermometer like this one (<http://www.premiereproducts.biz/products/4115.php>). A sensor can be placed in the fridge and/or freezer and can be monitored from the driver (or passenger) seat. Should the temperature fall below a certain level (that you choose), you could pull over at the next available rest area or other safe place and turn the refrigerator on using propane and let it cool back down. Be prepared, this could take an hour or two, maybe more depending on how much it warmed up and how cold you want it.

Of course, you can always travel with the fridge and propane on and not worry much about it (except where noted below), but I would stop occasionally and make sure things are operating correctly. There is always a chance that the wind and air turbulence going down the road at 60 mph could blow out the flame from the propane.

But what if it's cold outside? Obviously the fridge and its contents are no longer a concern, but what about everything else? Do you need to run the furnace to keep things warm enough? Again, it could depend on how long you will be traveling, how cold it is outside and how well the RV is insulated. In most cases, this should not be a problem either. Most foods that do not require refrigeration should not be damaged should they become frozen for a short time. (How do you think food gets to Minnesota in the dead of winter?) Most electronic equipment has a safe storage temperature down to 0 degrees, but operating temperatures are usually well above freezing. If you need to run the furnace while traveling, make sure all vents are unobstructed or close them off if they are.

Safe?

This is the factor that gets the debate heated at times...is it safe to travel with the propane on? Most people will agree that it is safe to be traveling down the road and have the propane on and operating the refrigerator or furnace. And the new OPD valve and connecting hoses make it even safer than before.

However, almost everyone agrees that you should turn both the propane tank valves and, more importantly, all the propane appliances (fridge, furnace and water heater) off before entering a fueling station. Most states have laws that require any open flame source be turned off while fueling. The "open flame" in this case would be any pilot lights or anything that causes a spark (such as the igniter). Although fires at gas stations are rare, they do occur. I have chatted online with 2 firefighters who say they have either fought or investigated fires at gas stations that were blamed on an RV having a propane appliance on. So make sure you turn the appliance off, not just the tank valve!!!

There could also be portions of your travel where you are not allowed to have the propane on, either at the tank or the appliance, such as driving through a tunnel, across a bridge or on a ferry. There may also be tunnels, bridges or other portions of the road that have restrictions against transporting flammable liquids (other than the fuel for the vehicle). In most cases, this restriction is posted well in advance, but I have heard a few stories where people have claimed they saw no notice of the restriction until it was too late to do anything about it. If you will be traveling into unfamiliar territory, it might be best to check ahead with the state's Department of Transportation (or similar office) to see if there are any restrictions along your route.

More info

Here are a couple good web pages that also talk about propane:

Page 1

<http://home.earthlink.net/~derekgore/rvroadiervfulltimingwhatisitreallylike/id44.html>

Page 2

<http://home.earthlink.net/~derekgore/rvroadiervfulltimingwhatisitreallylike/id47.html>

The home page for the articles above is at www.rvroadie.com (<http://www.rvroadie.com>) under “Technical Articles > Propane and Alarm Systems > Propane 101” and “Technical Articles > Propane and Alarm Systems > To run the fridge on the road or not?”

Here (<http://www.rvaa.com/newsletters/fire?id=2>) is another article written by the RV Alliance America insurance company.

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