

NEW YORK — Gasoline prices in the United States posted their second-biggest increase ever in a two-week period, due to the rise in crude oil prices stemming from the turmoil in Libya, an industry analyst said Sunday.

The national average for a gallon of self-serve, regular gas was \$3.50 on March 4, according to the Lundberg Survey of about 2,500 gas stations, up 32.7 cents from the previous survey on Feb. 18.

The gross price increase was the biggest since the 38.44 cent-rise that occurred in the Aug. 26-to-Sept. 9, 2005, period following Hurricane Katrina, according to survey editor Trilby Lundberg.

"It is certainly in response to the jump in crude oil prices, which are responding both to the output reduction from Libya and from the shock value of Libya's crude on other crudes," Lundberg said.

Traders are also responding to the "fear factor" caused by continuing turmoil in 15 countries in the Middle East and Africa, several of which are important oil producers, she said.

"The effect ripples to the physical crude oil market around the world," she said.

The current average price is nearly 78 cents above the year-ago level, but is still about 61 cents below the all-time high of \$4.1124 on July 11, 2008.

Among the U.S. metropolitan areas in the survey, San Diego has the highest per-gallon average price at \$3.87, while Billings, Montana, was the lowest, at \$3.15.

Even if crude oil prices do not rise further, Lundberg said she would not be surprised to see the pump prices go higher in the near future, because refiners and retailers have not fully passed through the increase in crude prices.

"In the short-term, we may easily see another 10- to 15-cent rise merely from catch-up in margins of refiners and retailers," she said.

The survey results could provide more ammunition for a U.S. strategic oil reserve release.

White House Chief of Staff William Daley said earlier Sunday on NBC's "Meet the Press" that the Obama administration was considering tapping into the strategic reserve as a way to help ease soaring oil prices.