

More ethanol in gas causes worries

New blend could damage boat engines, older cars, lawn mowers

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Capital Gazette Communications

Published 10/27/10

The federal government will now allow gasoline to include up to 15 percent ethanol - a move that has worried groups including boaters, environmentalists, gas station owners and even lawn mower manufacturers.

The new blend, dubbed "E15," is approved only for cars and light trucks that are of the 2007 model year or newer. But the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is reviewing whether older vehicles should also be allowed to use it.

Previously, gas could contain no more than 10 percent ethanol.

The E15 blend could be at gas pumps in early 2011, said Stephanie Dreyer, a spokeswoman for Growth Energy, an ethanol industry trade group that sought approval for E15.

"Being capped at 10 percent was stifling investment in the market. We were bumping up against this blend wall," Dreyer said. "We are producing too much, and there's nowhere for the ethanol to go in the market."

While ethanol producers are thrilled, many other groups are more cautious.

Gas station owners may have to deal with new pumps and tanks if their suppliers decide to offer E15, said Paul Fiore, vice president of government affairs for the Washington, Maryland, Delaware Service Station and Automotive Repair Association.

Few gas station owners are set up to make choices such as embracing or rejecting E15, Fiore said.

Fiore isn't sure how many of his group's 400 members are for or against E15. But he said many will be worried about liability or responsibility if customers pump E15 into older cars that may not be able to handle it.

He doesn't think pump labels- currently in the works - will help.

"I, for one, find the EPA's reliance and trust in a label on a pump laughable. Most people don't read anything on the pump," Fiore said.

Boat owners, too, should be concerned, said Margaret Podlich, vice president of government affairs for BoatUS.

Some older boats, Podlich said, have trouble with the 10 percent blend. Often, the E10 causes boaters to go through fuel filters rapidly. Occasionally, she said, fiberglass fuel tanks have melted.

"We don't know what 50 percent more ethanol will do," she said.

While E15 isn't approved yet for marine engines, Podlich said BoatUS is concerned it could be.

BoatUS is among several organizations behind an anti-ethanol web campaign called "Follow the Science."

Another participant is the Natural Resources Defense Council, a major environmental group.

The NRDC's Nathaneal Greene, writing on the group's official blog, said more emissions testing is needed before E15 is widely used.

"Burning ethanol can cause toxic air pollutants to be emitted from vehicle tailpipes, especially at higher blend levels like E15," Greene wrote.

Greene pointed out that ethanol usually is made from corn. Many environmentalists don't support growing more corn - thus using more fertilizer and polluting waterways with dead-zone-inducing nutrients - for uses such as fuel.

Other Follow the Science participants include the Recreational Off-Highway Vehicle Association and the Motorcycle Industry Council.

The Outdoor Power Equipment Institute cautions people to make sure they don't put E15 gas into lawn mowers, snow blowers, chain saws, blowers and other landscaping and maintenance tools.

"Almost without exception, current equipment is not designed, built or warranted for mid-level blends," warned institute vice president Kris Kiser in a statement.