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From the April 2008 Issue

Minnesota E20 study receives criticism

By Kris Bevill

Web exclusive posted March 21, 2008 at 11:55 a.m. CST

A group representing approximately 15 small-engine and outdoor recreational vehicle manufacturers has issued a response criticizing a recent University of Minnesota study that looked at the feasibility of using E20 in standard vehicles.

On March 12, the Alliance for a Safe Alternative Fuels Environment (AIISAFE) issued a response stating that more testing is needed to determine the full effect of E20 on engines that aren't specifically designed for that particular ethanol blend. "This study falls far short of what is needed to answer important technical questions or determine national fuel policy," said Kris Kiser, a lobbyist for AIISAFE and vice president of public affairs for the Outdoor Power Equipment Institute, an AIISAFE member. "Vehicles must undergo very comprehensive testing, and small engines such as lawn and garden equipment, motorboats, and many other products must also thoroughly be studied."

The Minnesota study explored the use of E20 in standard vehicles but didn't test the fuel on small engines, such as boats, motorcycles or lawnmowers.

Kiser told EPM that AIISAFE is concerned about all engines, especially in boats and snowmobiles where engine failure can pose a serious threat to the user if catastrophic failures occur while in use. "We applaud Minnesota for the work," he said. "Our goal is to protect consumers. There's a tremendous area of liability. ... We're industries that depend on how our customers view our product."

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Kiser suggested the possibility of a "gasohol flashback" in the sense that if E20 was used and caused problems, consumers would then be opposed to all blends of ethanol, similar to the gasohol problems experienced in the late 1970s. "We don't want an untested fuel dumped on the American public because the flashback will drive it from the marketplace," he said. "Whatever comes, it'll be OK as long as we know what the effects are and consumers are educated about those effects."

AIISAFE's attempts to ensure that mid-level ethanol blends aren't "dumped" into the public's gas tanks resulted in a December amendment to the Energy Independence & Security Act of 2007 that requires the U.S. EPA to respond to any petitioned fuel waiver requests within 180 days. Prior to the amendment, if a request wasn't responded to within the time frame, it automatically passed. Now, due to Amendment 211 F4, any request from Minnesota to waive the current legal limit of 10 percent ethanol has to be considered by the EPA.

"We're not anti-ethanol," Kiser said. "We're certainly not [against] any biofuels at all. We understand the need for energy security and independence from petroleum producers and marketers. We're concerned that some ethanol producers, in their rush to bring [E20] to the marketplace, are asserting the simplicity of transition. It's complicated."

As the renewable fuels standard was being passed in the EISA in December, AIISAFE urged Congress to have the EPA and U.S. DOE further examine the effects of mid-level ethanol. Since August 2007, Kevin

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Stork, a team leader of the vehicle technologies program for the DOE's Office of Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy, has been evaluating the impact of both E15 and E20 on new and older vehicles. His team also just began testing the effects of mid-level ethanol blends on larger non-road and specialty engines such as all-terrain vehicles, boats and motorcycles.

Stork said the DOE is conducting studies due to increased public interest but also because EISA requirements will demand greater volumes of renewable fuels in upcoming years. According to Stork, problems with the current E85 infrastructure, which include lack of pumping stations and transport issues, may result in some states finding it difficult to meet upcoming legislative production demands. Thus, he said the use of intermediate blends will become vital to states striving to meet required amounts of renewable fuels. "The most successful state with E85, Minnesota, is the one that's pushing for intermediate blends, which I think illustrates better than most things why there are some serious limitations to E85 within the time frame that is desirable and in the law," Stork said.

Results of the DOE studies could increase the use of renewable fuels "if it makes sense to do so," Stork said. Preliminary DOE test results show that small non-road engines have an increased rate of nitrogen oxide emissions, which coincides with previous test results. Tested engines still met the regulated EPA emissions standard; however, Stork cautions that the EPA will be paying very close attention to emissions results.

Stork said more studies will need to be completed before conclusions can be reached about the impacts of mid-level ethanol blends. The DOE is currently performing full-life catalyst tests and other wear-and-tear studies. This summer, the DOE should release data results of small engines tests. Large vehicle test results will be available in approximately one year. "We're really not in a position right now to draw any conclusions about the vehicles per se, except that at least with late-model vehicles, drivers might not initially notice the impact of E20 on their vehicle operation," Stork said. "The data we have collected thus far is by no means sufficient to assess in positive or negative ways the impacts of intermediate blends."

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