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From the May 2008 Issue

Opinions vary on Minnesota E20 test results

By Timothy Charles Holmseth and Kris Bevill

The Alliance of a Safe Alternative Fuels Environment (AISAFE) responded in March to the positive results of a year-long, in-depth study conducted by the state of Minnesota and the Renewable Fuels Association on the use of E20 in conventional gasoline-powered vehicles. The group said it believes it's too early to determine that E20 is safe, and insists more testing needs to be done.

"It is much too early to draw definitive conclusions about E20's compatibility for products or vehicles not designed for use with this fuel," said Kris Kiser, spokesman for AISAFE, a coalition that represents various equipment, marine, small-engine and vehicle manufacturers. He said he believes the Minnesota E20 testing may have been incomplete, pointing out that mid-level ethanol blends have different effects on conventional vehicles, boats, chainsaws, lawnmowers, motorcycles, all-terrain vehicles, snowmobiles, hand-held tools and other products. "If you introduce a fuel that has potential effects, we think you should test them on a broad range of products," he added. "Vehicles must undergo very comprehensive testing, and small engines such as lawn and garden equipment, motor boats and many other products must also be thoroughly studied."

Kiser said neglecting to test the fuel on a wide range of products can cause safety issues. A chainsaw that is running too hot because the fuel isn't compatible could cause the chain to engage prematurely, he explained. A snowmobile that fails in severely cold weather is a safety issue, he said.

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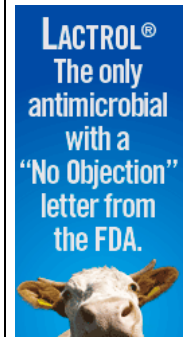
Kiser

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Mike Schommer of the Minnesota Department of Agriculture contended that the Minnesota study used nationally recognized standards and protocols to ensure research quality. The study focused on standard passenger vehicles, gas-electric hybrids and delivery vehicles. The vehicles were driven by University of Minnesota employees, who submitted log books, and certified professionals, who drove the vehicles quarterly and submitted their findings, as well, he said. In addition to road tests, researchers conducted laboratory tests to evaluate the effects of E20 on materials found in conventional vehicle fuel systems. The test results indicated that E20 was compatible with the vehicle fuel systems, Schommer said.

As the renewable fuels standard was being passed in the Energy Independence & Security Act of 2007 in December, AISAFE urged Congress to have the U.S. EPA and U.S. DOE further examine the effects of mid-level ethanol. Since August, Kevin Stork, a team leader of the vehicle technologies program at the DOE's


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Office of Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy, has been evaluating the impact of both E15 and E20 on new and older vehicles. His team recently began testing the effects of mid-level ethanol blends on larger non-road and specialty engines such as all-terrain vehicles, boats and motorcycles. 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 showed that small, non-road engines have an increased rate of nitrogen oxide emissions, coinciding with previous test results.

Tested engines still met the regulated EPA emissions standard; however, Stork cautions that the EPA will pay 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 will release the results of its small-engine tests. Large vehicle test results will be available in approximately one year. "The data we have collected thus far is by no means sufficient to assess in positive or negative ways the impacts of intermediate blends," he said.

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