

## YOUR CAR COULD BE WRECKED BY NEW CORN RULING<sup>1</sup>

Emily Main<sup>©</sup>

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has announced the agency will permit more corn-based ethanol in certain vehicles. Critics say that the decision will put some consumers' cars at risk, and that it will make us more reliant upon GMOs, or genetically modified organisms (ethanol is produced with genetically modified corn). The announcement came during Non-GMO Month.

**THE DETAILS:** On Wednesday, EPA Assistant Administrator for Air and Radiation, Gina McCarthy, announced at a press conference that the agency has approved a waiver, sought by corn lobbyists and an ethanol-industry group called Growth Energy, for gasoline to contain 15 percent ethanol (also referred to E15 gasoline). Currently, the blends sold in most gas stations contain 10 percent and are labeled E10.

Using data from tests conducted by the Department of Energy, McCarthy said that E15 blends of ethanol emitted greenhouse gases at levels below what's permitted under the Clean Air Act, and that the fuel did not damage cars made in 2007 and later (warning: in older vehicles, high ethanol blends have been known to eat through hoses and other parts that weren't equipped to handle biofuels). McCarthy said that one third of the vehicles on the roads today were made in 2007 and later, and that number will grow to 50 percent by 2014.

The agency did not, however, approve the use of E15 in cars made earlier than 2006, or in small vehicles, such as motorcycles, boats, snowmobiles, lawnmowers, or chainsaws. That means any gas station selling E15 would have to set aside different pumps for E15 and for E10 blends. Therefore, the second announcement McCarthy made at the conference was that the agency is proposing a regulatory program that would require quarterly surveys to ensure that pumps clearly state that they contain E15.

EPA will make another announcement in November as to whether or not E15 will be allowed for use in cars made between 2001 and 2006. McCarthy concluded her remarks by reminding people that this is not a "mandate" that all gas stations start selling E15. "EPA is not requiring the use of E15," she said. "This is not a mandate to make E15 available all at once. Ultimately, it will be up to ethanol producers, fuel producers, and suppliers to make E15 available to the general public."

**WHAT IT MEANS:** "We're incredibly disappointed that the Obama administration will raise the amount of corn ethanol in the vehicle fleet," says Ben Schreiber, climate and energy tax analyst at Friends of the Earth, an environmental nonprofit that has been studying the dangers of ethanol for a few years. "As more and more research is being done on biofuels, biofuels are looking worse and worse," he adds.

Friends of the Earth released a report at the end of September finding that oil companies are pouring billions of dollars of research into the genetic engineering of crops to be used for biofuel

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production. And it's not just genetically modified (GM) corn to make ethanol; scientists are experimenting with GM enzymes and yeast that will help break down crops like corn into ethanol and with GM algae that can be used alone as a biofuel. At each stage of production, the report notes, there's the potential for these GM organisms to be released into the environment, where they can contaminate native species and cause unknown environmental problems. One CEO of an algae biofuel firm admitted to Friends of the Earth that his company's GM algae has been unintentionally carried out of labs on skin, hair, and clothing, and accidentally released to the wild via air-conditioning vents.

Then there's the simple issue of automobile owners unknowingly putting the wrong blends into their car, and finding themselves with a huge auto-repair bill. Not to mention the additional air pollution. "The environmental impact of ethanol actually worsens if you're using E15 in vehicles or other engines that really shouldn't be running on it," he says—things like boats, chainsaws, and all the other engines for which the EPA hasn't approved E15. "These engines run less efficiently, so you have more pollution." And Schreiber isn't encouraged by the agency's proposed labeling guidelines to prevent consumer confusion. "We know historically, when they switched from leaded to unleaded fuels, consumers continued to misfuel their vehicles," he says. "There is no label that EPA can put on pumps that will prevent consumers from misfueling their vehicles."

As McCarthy noted in her remarks, it's unlikely that you'll start seeing E15 blends of gasoline at your gas station within the next few weeks. But that means an E15 blend could creep up on you when you least expect it.

Here are a few ways to keep E15 from gumming up your engine without realizing it:

- **Know what you're getting every time you fill up.** Next time you fill up, pay attention to what's on the pump. Most states require gas stations to display signs that indicate the level of ethanol and you might see a label that says something like "Contains up to 10% ethanol." If you get into the habit of checking with each fill-up, you'll be more likely to notice when the percentage increases and alter your fuel needs accordingly.
- **Find ethanol-free gas.** It's rare, but every once in a while you can find a gas station selling 100 percent gasoline that contains 0 percent ethanol. You're still relying on fossil fuels, but it's likely your car will get better gas mileage; ethanol has 30 percent less energy than gasoline, and therefore your car gets worse gas mileage when you use it—kind of like the way high-fructose corn syrup slows you down when you fill up on junk food.