

Ethanol choices increase at South Dakota pumps

By Steve Miller, Journal staff Wednesday, December 26, 2007

Gasoline blended with 10 percent ethanol now is facing competition from higher blends of ethanol, which backers claim provide more power and better mileage than both E-10 and regular unleaded, yet cost less.

E-85 fuel, with 85 percent alcohol, has been around for several years, but now a few stations in eastern South Dakota and one in Rapid City are offering blends of ethanol between E-10 and E-85.

Canyon Lake Gas and Auto, which has had E-85 for several years, began offering a blend of 20 percent ethanol almost a year ago, owner Dave Gaudette said.

Although the E-20 and other higher blends are approved by the federal government for use only in flex-fuel vehicles, some motorists have begun trying the mid-blends in non-flex vehicles.

Mark Frederick of Rapid City is one of them. Although his Honda Accord is not a flex-fuel vehicle, Frederick filled it up with E-20 at Canyon Lake Gas on Tuesday afternoon. Frederick said he has been using E-20 for a while and hasn't noticed any change in performance or mileage.

Gaudette has been running E-20 in his '92 Chevy truck since January and hasn't had a problem. Neither have any of his customers who are putting E-20 into their non-flex fuel vehicles, Gaudette said.

"They say the E-20 is better than the 10," Gaudette said last week.

Doug Sombke of Conde, president of the South Dakota Farmers Union, has been running a 30 percent ethanol blend in his non-flex fuel vehicles plus his lawnmowers and his chainsaws for four years.

Sombke says he experimented, trying 20, 30, 40 and 50 percent ethanol blends that he mixed himself at his farm. He found, in his admittedly unscientific way, that the 30 percent blend gave him the best mileage and the most power, so that's what he continues to use.

A recent American Coalition for Ethanol study found that the mid-level blends of ethanol got better mileage than both E-10 and regular unleaded gas in three of the four vehicles tested. The industry group acknowledged that the finding seems counter to logic because alcohol has a lower energy content than regular unleaded gas.

Gaudette says he doesn't get any better mileage with the E-20 blend.

But one factor in the higher blends is undisputed: they are cheaper than unleaded regular and E-10.

At Canyon Lake Gas and Auto on Tuesday, E-10 was selling for \$2.75 per gallon, and E-20 was at \$2.68 per gallon. E-85 was priced at \$2.14 per gallon.

Regular unleaded was selling for \$2.76 a gallon at the BP Station at the corner of West Main and Mountain View Drive.

Gaudette doesn't carry regular unleaded.



Mark Frederick fills up with E-20, a blend of 20 percent ethanol and 80 percent gasoline, at Canyon Lake Gas and Auto recently. The pump Frederick was using is a blender pump, which blends the ethanol and gas while pumping. Photo: Ryan Soderlin/Journal staff

Sombke said the auto industry can adjust engine computers to handle the higher than 10 percent ethanol blends. But, in many cases, that isn't necessary, he said. "Many cars adjust themselves to whatever the fuel is burned as long as you don't increase the amount too drastically," he said.

Gaudette says he has one tank that holds E-85 and another that holds E-10. His E-20 blender pump blends fuel from the two tanks to achieve a 20 percent mix. His E-10 is rated at 89 octane, the E-20 at 91 octane.

The Ferney Farmers Union Coop station in Brown County has blender pumps that offer unleaded regular, E-10, E-20, E-30 and E-85, said Sombke, who is on the cooperative's board of directors.

There are a few other co-op stations in northeastern South Dakota carrying the ethanol mid-blends, he said.

Sioux Valley Cooperative in Watertown recently announced that its October sales of E-30 reached 50,000 gallons.

Gary French, general manager of the Sioux Valley Cooperative, says he is not surprised by E-30's popularity.

"As long as prices remain competitive, I expect that ethanol use will only increase," French said.

Critics of the blender pumps say the higher blends should not be used in vehicles that are not designated as "flexible-fuel" capable because it may harm the vehicle.

However, French says he has not had any complaints from consumers since installing the blender pumps.

Sombke says a study done by Lake Area Technical Institute in Watertown a few years ago found that engines run on E-10 ethanol suffer no extra wear.

"In fact, the engines were cleaner inside, with fewer corrosion deposits," Sombke said.

He said motorists who buy ethanol blends don't need to buy de-icing products in the winter because alcohol removes moisture from fuel, preventing gas line freeze-ups.

Sombke said the blender pumps cost between \$12,000 and \$16,000.

Other stations throughout the state are considering adding blender pumps, he said. Jack's Sinclair in Mitchell added six blended fuel pumps earlier this month.

Sombke said the Farmers Union will ask the 2008 South Dakota Legislature to provide incentives for gas stations to install blender pumps.

Sombke and other ethanol industry backers are happy with the energy bill passed by Congress this month that requires more ethanol to be produced over the next 15 years.

The bill includes a provision backed by Sen. John Thune, R-S.D., authorizing creation of a federal grant program to help gas station owners buy and install alternative fuel tanks and pumps, according to a news release from Thune's office.