



A new blend of ethanol and gasoline may soon show up at the gas station pumps -- along with mixed messages on whether it's safe to put it in your vehicle.

Motorists driving up to pumps for the new, higher-ethanol "E15" will see government-mandated orange-and-black signs that say the new fuel blend is approved for use in all 2001 and newer cars and light trucks.

Two of the biggest carmakers offer puzzling or contrary messages, right on their gasoline caps. Toyota warns on its 2012 model gas caps not to use E15. Ford offers less-explicit advice.

"When you pull up to the pump it will say you can use this, and then you turn to your gas cap, it says you may not use this -- it's going to be very, very confusing," said Bob Ebert, service director for Walser Automotive Group in the Twin Cities.

In Congress, Rep. Jim Sensenbrenner, R-Wis., is pushing a bill to halt introduction of E15 and conduct more research. "I think this is outrageous," he said. "The government is telling consumers to use a product that the manufacturer of their car says will ... void the warranty."

E15, the blend of 15 percent alcohol and 85 percent gasoline, has undergone considerable testing -- enough for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to grant a "waiver" allowing its use in newer cars and light trucks.

Stations in Iowa and Kansas could begin selling E15 in May, said Bob Dinneen, president and CEO of the Renewable Fuels Association, an ethanol trade association. He insists that consumers needn't worry.

"E15 is probably the single most studied fuel in the history of EPA waivers," Dinneen said.

'Up to E10 gasoline only'

The auto industry doesn't share that confidence.

Most automakers, including General Motors and Chrysler, have not placed explicit E15 warnings on their gas caps. Still, the auto industry is part of a broad legal challenge to stop E15.

"We have opposed pushing E15 into the marketplace without adequate testing," said Gloria Bergquist, vice president of communications for the Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers, a trade group representing 12 automakers including Ford, GM, Chrysler and Toyota.

Toyota decided about a year ago to add an E15 gas-cap message that says "Up to E10 gasoline only."

"Our vehicles aren't backward compatible with E15, and we didn't know when it was going to hit the market," said Toyota spokeswoman Cindy Knight. "We don't want customers to damage their vehicles. It would not be covered under warranty."

Ford's ethanol message on its gas portal -- its vehicles don't have caps -- dates to 2006. The idea was to warn motorists not to fill up with high-ethanol blends of E20 to E85 at pumps meant for flexible-fuel vehicles, said Cynthia Williams, Ford's environmental policy manager.

The message doesn't mention E15, only because it wasn't a commonly sold blend for flex vehicles, she said. As E15 begins to be sold for conventional vehicles, the message could add to motorists' confusion. Ford is considering changing it, she said.

"Ford does not support the use of E15 in legacy vehicles," said Williams, who advised people to consult their owner's manual about the proper fuel.

General Motors opted not to place warnings on its conventional vehicles' gas caps, but that's not a sign of support for E15. "Warning against the use of E15 fuel on current-model-year vehicles wouldn't solve the problem of misfueling concerns for prior-model years and the resulting potential damage to engines and fuel systems of older model vehicles that weren't designed for E15," said GM spokeswoman Sharon Basel in an e-mail.

E15 faces a long road

More than 2,500 retailers, including 362 in Minnesota, now sell higher-ethanol blends for flex-fuel vehicles -- and those stations could be among the first to sell E15 for conventional cars.

Some stations have blender pumps that could be adapted to offer E15 through a separate hose.

"Retailers are learning about it and considering it," said Kelly Marczak of the Twin Cities Clean Cities Coalition, a unit of the American Lung Association that supports and tracks ethanol fuels.

In Minnesota, no stations have confirmed that they will sell E15, she said. But last month, the

EPA registered the first companies to sell E15 for conventional cars and light trucks, including three of the state's ethanol makers.

Minnesota, with 21 ethanol plants capable of producing a total of more than 1 billion gallons a year, has a big stake in E15. It could vastly expand the ethanol market, which has been limited by the 10 percent maximum blend.

Consumers purchasing fuel for off-road vehicles, boats, lawnmowers and motorcycles face other potentially confusing restrictions. That's because the EPA hasn't approved E15 for those vehicles or for pre-2001 cars and trucks. The EPA declined requests for an interview.

Marczak said widespread sales of E15 could take years, as happened with E10, the 10 percent ethanol introduced in the late 1970s, and now available at most of the nation's fuel pumps. Under a Minnesota law that is currently being updated, sales of E15 eventually could be mandated, but only if the EPA approves it for all vehicles.

E15 still needs to clear some final regulatory hurdles and a pending court challenge.

Earlier this month, a federal appeals court in Washington, D.C., heard arguments by the oil industry, carmakers and others that have challenged the EPA's E15 decision. If the court rules against the EPA, it could derail the introduction of E15.

Meanwhile, the Coordinating Research Council, a research lab in Georgia, is about to release a study that reportedly will describe damage to two car engines tested with E15. Preliminary findings, reported earlier this month by the news service Greenwire, provoked criticism from ethanol interests about the lab's research methods. The lab is funded by the oil and auto industries, but its scientists often work with government agencies and national labs.

In Congress, Wisconsin's Sensenbrenner isn't the only legislator with an E15 bill. A bipartisan Senate bill backed by Sen. Amy Klobuchar, D-Minn., would limit liability of retailers and others for problems caused by E15, including damage to car engines. The bill is supported by the ethanol industry, but AAA opposes giving "blanket immunity ... to everyone but the consumer," said spokesman Michael Green of the motorists' group.

If E15 goes on sale in Minnesota, at least one well-informed customer isn't worried.

"I would have absolutely no concerns whatsoever," said Bruce Jones, director of the Minnesota Center for Automotive Research and head of the Automotive and Manufacturing Engineering Technology Department at Minnesota State University Mankato.

Jones said he has extensively tested higher-ethanol blends in vehicles, including pre-2001 models, and has never had a problem. Even so, he sympathizes with automakers whose warranties cover only E10.

"It makes the whole warranty issue a little bit more complicated," Jones said. "I can see their point."

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- What the government says: This label, required on pumps selling E15, or 15 percent ethanol, says the fuel is approved for all 2001 and newer cars and light trucks.



- **What the government says**

This label, required on pumps selling E15, or 15 percent ethanol, says the fuel is approved for all 2001 and newer cars and light trucks. **WHAT TOYOTA'S GAS CAP SAYS** On 2012 models, the cap says "Up to E10 Gasoline Only." E10 is 10 percent ethanol, the standard blend now sold. Toyota says E15 is unsuitable for earlier models, though their gas caps don't say so. **WHAT FORD VEHICLES SAY** Ford vehicles advise using E10, with no mention of E15. The message was meant to warn motorists against using high-ethanol blends designed for flexible-fuel vehicles; Ford said it may revise it to address E15.