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Coast Guard Aux NEWS ▶

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On 3/30/09, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch ran the following story text over ethanol use in boats: "At St. Charles Boat & Motor, owner and service manager Jerry Sims used to oversee the rebuilding of 30 carburetors in a year's time. Last year, Sims says, he stopped counting at 750. They were victims, he claims, of ethanol in gas. 'It is killing motors right and left,' Sims said. 'But the EPA keeps shoving it down everybody's throats.'" Now the people at the EPA aren't dumb. So what is the battle over? This column is about that.

The Great Solvent

It is clear that ethanol does weaken and eventually dissolve certain resin-based small-engine products, not by dissolving the engine parts but by attacking hoses, seals, connectors and storage (fuel) tank components. And, while doing it, sending gummy bits into the fuel injectors, carburetors and compression cylinders... Not just boat engines, btw, but everything downstream from your high-tech modern automobile, from ATVs to chainsaws... One may argue that it is the short-sightedness of the boating manufacturers that has caused this problem as, over the years, automakers coordinated in the search for rubber and plastic sufficiently durable to withstand the effects of alcohol fuel on tanks, hoses, seals and anything that fuel touches. But it isn't only that. Through much greater use, cars wear out faster and thus get recycled out of the "DNA pool" faster. And fuel does stay in boat fuel tanks longer and thus gets more time to get hydrophilic (absorb water) and then separate out...

The Road Ahead

It isn't completely clear where this is going. The Environmental Protection Agency probably won't decide until late this year whether to grant the Clean Air Act waiver necessary to blend more ethanol. Meanwhile, the hard-pressed ethanol industry, its farm allies and Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack are pushing for incremental increases sooner, perhaps to E12 or E13 gasoline. There is plenty of talk of going to E15, which the boating industry, supported by manufacturers of any small engine, is fighting tooth and nail.

Back in mid-March '09, the National Marine Manufacturers Association submitted requests to the EPA and Department of Energy for testing. The association pointed to disquieting reports from the Oak Ridge National Laboratory in Tennessee. Tests last fall on several types of small engines showed that ethanol raised internal temperatures, sometimes considerably. The increased ethanol content caused handheld trimmers to idle faster and engage into gear, which is clearly a safety issue. Overall, some small engines proved to be more sensitive to ethanol than others. The lower dollar-priced engines are having a tough time making enhancements while buyers just want lower prices, so this is non-trivial.

At the Crossroads of History – and Global Economics

While it isn't clear where this is going but it is clear why. Before the Great Recession that we're now in, corn-made ethanol producers and suppliers were awash in profits. But the good news about the Great Recession was bad news for oil substitutes - oil prices dropped like the rockets they were that had run out of fuel and the return of cheap oil and Americans' reduced driving has sent demand for ethanol plummeting. The industry's travails were put in stark relief when Valero, who has more than a few fuel stations here Out East, agreed back in mid-March '09 to buy seven plants of bankrupt ethanol giant VeraSun Energy for a fraction of their replacement value. There's simply more ethanol out there than there are homes for it and this is why it is the Agriculture Secretary (corn!) that is calling for more use. It has been estimated that roughly 20 percent of the ethanol production capacity in the United States is idled because of unfavorable economics. So, the battle lines are drawn.

When the EPA starts deliberating soon on the E15 request, tens of thousands of boaters are expected to submit public comments. But the ethanol industry and its allies will be offering their case, too. Mentioned in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch article noted at the top, "Ethanol is good for the environment and good for national security," said retired Gen. Wesley Clark, who ran for the Democratic party's presidential nomination in 2004. Clark is co-chairman of an ethanol industry lobbying group. "For every billion gallons of ethanol we add, it brings over 130,000 jobs," said General Clark. To boaters, Clark asserts that there would be no requirement to use fuel with the higher ethanol blend. In other words, marinas could order the type of fuel that suits them, something marina owners say would be costly and impractical. "We're not advocating a mandatory 15 percent; we're advocating the right to have 15 percent," Clark said. Powerful arguments, indeed, says this author.

But then again there is that pesky need to lower EPA Clean Air Act standards in order to use more ethanol in gasoline... which is why it isn't entirely clear where this will end up...

BTW, if you are interested in being part of USCG Forces, email me at JoinUSCGAux2008@aol.com or go direct to Lisa Etter, who is in charge of new members matters, at FSO-PS@emcg.us and we will help you "get in this thing..."