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AAA Warns E15 could cause car damage



E15, a higher blend of ethanol and gasoline, has rolled out in a handful of states. But its use in older vehicles is generating warnings from AAA, which says E15 could be harmful to pre-2012 vehicles.



The AAA says the Environmental Protection Agency and gasoline retailers should halt the sale of E15, a new ethanol blend that **could damage millions of vehicles and void car warranties.**

AAA, which issued its warning Friday, says just 12 million of more than 240 million cars, trucks and SUVs now in use have manufacturers' approval for E15. Flex-fuel vehicles, 2012 and newer General Motors vehicles, 2013 Fords and 2001 and later model Porsches are the exceptions, according to AAA, the nation's largest motorist group, with 53.5 million members.

"It is clear that millions of Americans are unfamiliar with E15, which means there is a strong possibility that many may improperly fill up using this gasoline and damage their vehicle," AAA President and CEO Robert Darbelnet tells USA TODAY. "Bringing E15 to the market without adequate safeguards does not responsibly meet the needs of consumers."



BMW, Chrysler, Nissan, Toyota and VW have said their warranties will not cover fuel-related claims caused by E15. Ford, Honda, Kia, Mercedes-Benz and Volvo have said E15 use will void warranties, says Darbelnet, citing potential corrosive damage to fuel lines, gaskets and other engine components.

Gasoline blended with 10% ethanol has become standard at most of the nation's 160,000 gas stations, spurred by federal laws and standards designed to use more renewable energy sources and lessen the nation's dependence on foreign oil. Pushed by ethanol producers, the EPA approved the use of E15 -- a 15% ethanol-gasoline blend -- in June over objections from automakers and the oil industry. It's been available at a handful of outlets in Kansas, Iowa and Nebraska since July.

EPA stickers affixed to gas station pumps say E15 is safe for use in virtually all vehicles 2001 and newer. (USA TODAY made repeated requests for EPA comment.)

But AAA -- in an unusual warning for a travel organization -- says the sale and use of E15 should be stopped until there is more-extensive testing, better pump labels to safeguard consumers and more consumer education about potential hazards. Bob Dinneen, CEO of the Renewable Fuels Association, says E15 is safe for virtually all post-2001 vehicles, based on extensive government-sponsored testing. "We think the (EPA) warning label should be sufficient to notify consumers," Dinneen says. "There are no corrosive issues with E15. If there's an issue with E15 (damaging vehicles) we're going to know about it, and the EPA is going to know about it."

But the American Petroleum Institute says a three-year study conducted by automakers and the oil industry found that E15 is a consumer safety issue for a majority of drivers with pre-2012 vehicles. "Our testing of a range of ethanol levels at 15% to 20% has identified issues about engine durability," API group director and engineer Bob Greco says.

Congressman Jim Sensenbrenner has proposed legislation requiring the EPA to authorize an unbiased study of E15, agrees with the AAA. ***"(The) findings affirm what we have already heard—E15 causes premature engine damage and voids warranties, even on new models,"*** the Wisconsin Republican says. "Concerns about E15 are not diminishing, they are increasing. That is telling. When an organization like AAA, a nationally trusted source for motorists, calls out the EPA, you would think the (Obama) Administration would listen."

The National Association of Convenience Stores says it's also worried about the effect of E15 on station pumps and fuel lines. "The EPA says its OK to sell it, but for most retailers, there is too much uncertainty related to consumer demand and liability protection, especially if it's later determined E15 is a defective product or there are problems," spokesman Jeff Lenard says.

Scott Zaremba, who has been selling E15 blends at several of his eight Zarco 66 stations in Kansas since July, says no customers have complained. He's also fueling his 2001 Chevy pickup with E15 blend.

"The same complaints came when 10% blend came in -- the world was coming to an end," says Zaremba, 47. "E15 burns well and has great performance, and four people tell me it gives them better gas mileage. I don't see any major issues with it -- yet."

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