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Increase in percentage of ethanol in standard grade UK petrol further threatens older vehicle fuel systems

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Dilemma ahead - which modern fuel (if any) is safe for older vehicles?

Ethanol percentage hike means more bad news for owners of older cars...

Kim Henson advises...

As has been widely forecast during the last few years - including on Wheels-Alive - the imminent introduction (now confirmed by the U.K.'s Department of Transport) of 'standard grade' 95 octane fuel containing up to 10 per cent ethanol is very bad news indeed for the owners of older vehicles, and not just classics. It adversely affects virtually all classic cars, including 'modern classics', and many petrol-powered cars built until 10 years ago.

It is well known that ethanol degrades many materials inherent in the design and construction of the fuel supply systems in such older cars, including hoses, floats, valves, seals and many other essential components. This matters primarily because fuel hoses and seals (for example) can disintegrate from within, eventually failing and resulting in potentially disastrous fuel leaks, with the obvious attendant dangers of fire. In addition, while ethanol-proof components are available for the petrol supply systems in some popular classics (notably sports models), this situation does not apply to a wide variety of vehicles, for which it will be uneconomical or even impossible to upgrade the entire fuel system.



Older vehicle petrol pumps, hoses, seals, floats, etc. - all at risk when ethanol is in the fuel mix.

In the context of the above, ANY percentage of ethanol is bad news, and the greater the proportion of it within petrol, the more potentially dangerous it is for the vehicles concerned, and eventually it has the potential to be hugely expensive/difficult/impossible for the owners of such vehicles to keep them running.

What to do? For now, try to use products which have zero or minimum percentages of ethanol within them. As stated in the Federation of British Historic Vehicle Clubs (FBHVC)



information (reproduced at the end of this article), the higher grade or 'super' unleaded petrol generally contains five per cent (or less) ethanol. The difficulty for drivers is that many fuel companies do not guarantee nor publish the actual percentages of ethanol within their fuel products. I suggest that unless they categorically state that the percentage is zero, it is possible/likely that it contains some!

Pumps labelled 'E5' indicate that the fuel dispensed from them contains UP TO five per cent ethanol. However, for example, when recently launching their new 'Synergie Supreme +' 99 octane 'super unleaded' fuel, Esso stated that for most parts of the U.K, it contains NO ethanol, and this is confirmed on their website <https://www.esso.co.uk/en-gb/fuels/petrol>, which reads:

"Although our pumps have E5 labels on them, our Synergie Supreme⁺ 99 is actually ethanol free (except, due to technical supply reasons, in Devon, Cornwall, the Teesside area, Scotland and NW England). Legislation requires us to place these E5 labels on pumps that dispense unleaded petrol with 'up to 5% ethanol', including those that contain no ethanol, which is why we display them on our Synergie Supreme⁺ 99 pumps.

There's currently no requirement for renewable fuel, like ethanol, to be present in super unleaded petrol although this could change in the future, in which case we would comply with any new legislation."



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Photograph courtesy of Esso. MONZUNO, ITALY - SEPTEMBER 14: GV of the ExxonMobil Photoshoot on September 14, 2020 in Riveggio, Italy. Chris Ricco/ChrisRiccoPhoto

Well done Esso, we say.

It should be mentioned that there are other benefits of using higher grade fuels too, notably 'cleaner burning' (with reduced build-up of harmful deposits) and potentially improved consumption (usually slight), but the downside is that there's a steep premium price per litre for stepping up to such products.

For the foreseeable future, when deciding which fuel(s) to use in your older petrol-powered vehicle(s), I suggest:

1. Avoid any fuels labelled E10.
2. Consult the websites of the various fuel suppliers to see what they say (if anything) about the percentages of ethanol in their 'super' unleaded products. If there is little or no information, contact the firm direct so that they can confirm their current position on this.
3. Always use fuel containing as little ethanol as possible, and ideally zero per cent.
4. If you are obliged to use petrol containing ethanol, there are a number of specially developed additives to help combat the adverse effects; internet searches will provide a variety of options.

For further information on ethanol and its effects, you might be interested in reading the various in-depth features that have appeared on Wheels-Alive during the last few years. If you type

'ethanol' into the search box on this website, this should bring up a list of such articles, including, most recently, one covering the introduction of Esso's ethanol-free higher grade 'Synergy Supreme⁺ 99' petrol.



Photograph courtesy of Esso. MONZUNO, ITALY - SEPTEMBER 14: GV of the ExxonMobil Photoshoot on September 14, 2020 in Riveggio, Italy. Chris Ricco/ChrisRiccoPhoto

Note: I have included many articles on Wheels-Alive about the increasing amounts of ethanol in petrol and the potential dangers/difficulties; if you are interested in reading more about these aspects, please enter 'ethanol' in the search box on the home page of this website - a list of the features will appear, to help you.



The Federation of British Historic Vehicle Clubs (FBHVC) always keeps a watchful diligent eye on developments relating to the use of older vehicles, and in a recent release, clarifies the introduction of E10 petrol for their owners...

The Federation says, "After an extensive consultation process, the Department for Transport has announced that they will legislate to introduce E10 petrol as the standard 95-octane petrol grade by 1 September 2021. They will also require the higher-octane 97+ 'Super' grades to remain E5 to provide protection for owners of older vehicles. This product will be designated as the 'Protection' grade.

The introduction of the 95-octane E10 grade and the maintenance of the Super E5 protection grade will be reviewed by the Government after 5 years to ensure they remain appropriate to the needs of the market. In relation to the E5 protection grade, such a review will examine market developments over the period. HM Government have sought to reassure FBHVC members and historic vehicle owners that, without a suitable alternative becoming available, it is highly likely the Super E5 protection grade would continue to be available.

Filling stations that stock 2 grades of petrol and supply at least one million litres of fuel in total each year, will need to ensure one product is the Super E5 protection grade. While not all filling stations meet these criteria, almost all towns across the UK will have a filling station that supplies the 'Super' grade and currently one major retailer, a national supermarket group, has committed to offer the product. The main exception to this is in certain parts of the Highlands, north and west coast of Scotland, which will be covered by an exemption process and allowed to continue to market the 95-octane E5 grade.

The Federation therefore recommends that all vehicles produced before 2000 and some vehicles from the early 2000s that are considered non-compatible with E10 - should use the Super E5 Protection grade where the Ethanol content is limited to a maximum of 5%. To check compatibility of vehicles produced since 2000, we recommend using the new online E10 compatibility checker: <https://www.gov.uk/check-vehicle-e10-petrol>



It should be noted that some Super E5 Protection grade products do not contain Ethanol as the E5 designation is for fuels containing up to 5% Ethanol. Product availability varies by manufacturer and geographical location and enthusiasts should check the situation in their location.”

About the FBHVC:

They say, “The Federation of British Historic Vehicle Clubs exists to uphold the freedom to use historic vehicles on the road. It does this by representing the interests of owners of such vehicles to politicians, government officials, and legislators both in the UK and (through the Federation Internationale des Vehicules Anciens) in Europe. There are over 500 subscriber organisations representing a total membership of over 250,000 in addition to individual and trade supporters. All our directors operate in a voluntary capacity supported by our secretary.”