



Ted Cruz's half-baked position on ethanol

In an attempt to appease Iowa corn farmers, the sometime-frontrunner mires himself in controversy.

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All the Republican presidential candidates want to win Iowa, where there are many, many [corn farmers](#). The result is that most of the hopefuls genuflect to the federal [Renewable Fuel Standard](#), which mandates 18 billion gallons of biofuels, included ethanol, be blended into the fuel supply for 2016.

Ted Cruz, vying for frontrunner status in Iowa with Donald Trump, is on record opposing this standard. He wants a “free and fair energy marketplace.” Cruz says, “We should embrace all of the energy resources with which God has blessed America: oil and gas, nuclear, wind, solar, and biofuels and ethanol. But Washington shouldn’t be picking winners and losers.”

OK, that’s a clear position. But Cruz doesn’t want to leave it at that, because he wants those Iowa corn farmer votes. And he’s getting heavy flak from the biofuel people. Here’s [the Washington Post](#):

The ethanol lobby is bird-dogging Cruz everywhere he goes. Upset by his pledge to phase out the Renewable Fuel Standard, employees of an industry-funded group—which is run by the son of the popular Republican governor—follow Cruz everywhere he goes in a camper. They hand out flyers attacking him to people at his event. They have a field operation, run attack ads and plaster voters who might be amenable to Cruz with mailers.

Uh oh, not good, Ted. Trump is rising in the polls. So the senator from Texas [writes an op-ed piece](#) in the Des Moines Register, clarifying that he doesn’t oppose ethanol — and it gets him deeper in the muck. Get this, he proposes to rescind “the EPA blend wall.” In other words, he doesn’t think that the current E15 product — 15 percent ethanol — is ethanol enough. “If allowed full market access, mid-level ethanol products like E25 or E30 could prove quite popular with American consumers, who are increasingly concerned with fuel economy,” Cruz wrote in the Register.

'Flex fuel' vehicles like this one can run on gasoline or ethanol, but they seldom use the latter. (Photo: [Autoweek USA/flickr](#))

Cruz cited an analysis that “opening up the market” in this way would increase ethanol demand to 24 billion gallons by 2030, requiring more than 8.5 billion bushels of corn.

There’s so much that’s problematic with Cruz’ op-ed that it’s hard to know where to begin. For one thing, increasing the ethanol content *reduces* fuel economy, because of ethanol’s lower energy density. The Energy Information Agency reports that when ethanol content was increased from 2 percent in 1993 to nearly 10 percent in 2013, it resulted in a decline of about 3 percent in the average energy content per gallon of gasoline over that 20 years.

Dan Becker, director of the Safe Climate Campaign at the Center for Auto Safety, told me there might be a "sweet spot" where higher concentrations of ethanol can lead to a slight increase in fuel economy, but he agreed there are also many risks associated with it.

Even the [EPA’s approval of E15](#) was massively controversial. [Here’s what Popular Mechanics](#) had to say when that blend was introduced:

Some industry groups believe the higher concentration of E15 will cause problems...[T]he main issue is whether or not your vehicle will be covered under warranty for any damage caused by E15 usage, and in many cases the answer is no.

AAA said in 2012 that [the EPA should halt E15 sales](#) because of possible damage. The association said, “Research to date raises serious concerns that E15 ... could cause accelerated engine wear and failure, fuel system damage and other problems such as false ‘check engine’ lights.”

Remember, this is E15 we’re talking about. Cruz would immediately authorize E30. According to Becker, "Blithely increasing the ethanol content of fuel can have serious detrimental consequences, increasing the damage to auto engines, and also boats and small engines." He added, "Mr. Cruz has raised pandering to an art form in advance of the Iowa caucuses."

An email to the Cruz campaign was not immediately returned.

Among automakers who said their warranties wouldn’t cover the E15 problems were BMW, Chrysler, Nissan, VW and Toyota. Citing the fuel’s potential corrosive effect on fuel lines and gaskets, automakers such as Honda, Mercedes-Benz, Ford, Kia and Volvo said using E15 will void their warranties. The Alliance of Automobile Manufacturers, representing 12 automakers, also took a stand against that blend.

The protests [definitely go beyond cars](#). Small gas engine tool makers [such as Stihl](#) also warn against E15. “Stihl outdoor power equipment is not designed for ethanol blends higher than 10 percent ethanol or E10,” the company said. And boat owners are up in arms, too.

“Providing consumers with an option to use E15 in their marine engines is harmful and poses a safety hazard,” said Lee Gordon of Mercury Marine.

I could go on. I can't say with any certainty that E15 does damage engines, but it sure makes people nervous. One thing I do know is that if Ted Cruz' ringing endorsement of E30 or even higher blends were well-known, there'd be a major outcry.

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