

Speciale: Renewable fuel standard doesn't make sense for Texans

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By Ben Speciale



Photo: Robert White, HO

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A fueling station pump in Lawrence, Kan., offers various grades of fuel, including E15. (Associated Press)

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Folks who aren't from the Lone Star State are often surprised when I tell them Skeeter Boats, the leader in performance fishing boats, is based in Kilgore.

They're even more surprised when I tell them about the more than 150 lakes and reservoirs scattered throughout Texas and the recreational boating industry that supports more than 31,000 jobs in the state.

Recreational boating accounts for \$6.8 billion in annual economic benefits in Texas alone, and totals more than \$121 billion in economic impact across the United States. The more than 570,000 registered boats in our state support more than 1,700 businesses.

But this economic achievement is being threatened by an unusual foe: the Renewable Fuel Standard (RFS).

What appears to be an environmentally friendly policy harbors an inefficient and ineffective program that negatively impacts recreational boaters. The RFS, created under the federal Energy Policy Act of 2005, is a national policy that requires a predetermined volume of petroleum-based fuels used by American consumers to be replaced by renewable fuels - largely defined as biomass-based diesel, cellulosic biofuels, advanced biofuels and total renewable fuels. The most common renewable fuels include corn-based ethanol and soybean-based biodiesel.

The overwhelming majority of boats in Texas are small and towable - the kind you throw on a hitch behind your truck and take down to your local lake for a weekend with the family. These boats rely on small outboard engines, which have been shown to develop severe corrosion in their fuel systems when filled with E15 ethanol-based fuels. E15 - an ethanol-blended fuel that has become widely popular - is federally prohibited for use in many engine types including marine engines and poses a significant risk to engine performance and boater safety alike.

One thing is clear: The RFS might have been enacted with good intentions, but it is not without significant issues. At its inception, the RFS was championed by biofuel lobbyists as part of a whopping \$188 million effort between 2008 and 2014 to get more corn-based products into American homes. Corn and soybeans happen to be some of the top crops to receive growing subsidies - paid for by taxpayers.

Boaters aren't the only ones impacted by the policy. To the contrary, all Americans feel the pain caused by such an effort at the pump. The Congressional Budget Office estimated that full compliance with the RFS mandates would increase gas prices by 13 to 26 cents per gallon. The net cost for the average citizen? A \$277 hidden tax, paid annually straight to the bank accounts of "big ethanol."

Thankfully, the effort to push ethanol-based fuel has not gone unnoticed by elected officials. U.S. Sen. Ted Cruz spoke out against the standard in November and recently a group of 10 senators met with President Trump to discuss much needed reforms to U.S. biofuel policy.

But what do those reforms look like?

First of all, until we've addressed some glaring problems with E15 being served at the pump, we need to stop all discussion of E15 expansion.

Some members of Congress have called for an expansion of the fuel type as recently as this year. The damage this fuel does to engines is well-documented and must be stopped.

Second, we need the RFS to implement more extensive education for consumers. All too often boaters encounter dangerous issues with their engines as a result of E15 - particularly when E10 is unavailable, making E15 the only fuel available at their local stations. Little did consumers know that continued use of E15 caused damage - they simply assumed the gas they get at the pump is safe.

Finally, our elected officials must call on the Environmental Protection Agency to mandate E10 - an ethanol-blended fuel that is not detrimental to small engines - be readily available at all locations that sell E15. It's imperative that consumer choice at the pump is both protected and promoted.

Without these common-sense solutions, the plight of boaters - in Texas and across the country - will continue to undercut the economic benefits this market segment provides the American economy.

Speciale is president of the Yamaha Marine Group, an outboard supplier to 120 independent boat brands in the United States.