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Quick Facts

The level of interest in using alcohol as a motor fuel has followed cycles of fuel shortages and/or low feed-grain prices.

Alcohols become more similar to petroleum fuels as their chemical weights increase.

Alcohols burn more completely, thus increasing combustion efficiency.

There are numerous disadvantages to using alcohols, particularly methyl and ethyl alcohol; a larger quantity of fuel is required to produce a specified power output.

The relatively low boiling points and high vapor pressures of methyl and ethyl alcohol indicate that vapor lock could be a serious problem, particularly at high altitudes on warm days.

Less engine power would be produced as the water content of an alcohol increased; also, vapor lock, fuel mixing and starting problems would be increased with the presence of water.

Advantages of mixing alcohol with gasoline are that alcohol tends to increase the octane rating and the carbon monoxide emissions from the engine are reduced.

The primary disadvantage of mixing methyl and ethyl alcohol with gasoline is that under certain conditions the alcohol separates from the gasoline; separation is caused by the alcohol molecules' tendency to absorb water.

Alcohol may be blended with diesel fuel to produce diesohol, or alcohol may be added to the air intake of the engine through a commercially available system designed to do this.

Alcohols may be corrosive to certain materials used in engines.

Alcohol has been used as a fuel for internal combustion engines since their invention. Reports on the use of alcohol as a motor fuel were published in 1907 and detailed research was conducted in the 1920s and 1930s. Historically, the level of interest in using alcohol as a motor fuel has followed cycles of fuel shortages and/or low feed-grain prices.

The properties of methyl, ethyl and butyl alcohol are compared with octane (high quality gasoline) and hexadecane (high quality diesel fuel) in Table 1. Note that octane and hexadecane (petroleum fuels) have higher boiling points, lower latent heats and are insoluble in water. The alcohols become more similar to petroleum fuels as their chemical weights increase.

Methyl alcohol has the lowest combustion energy of all the fuels listed. However, it also has the lowest stoichiometric or chemically correct air-fuel ratio; therefore, an engine burning methyl alcohol would produce the most power. It also is possible to take advantage of the higher octane ratings of methyl (and ethyl) alcohol and increase the engine compression ratio. This would increase the efficiency of converting the potential combustion energy to power. Finally,

alcohols burn more completely, thus increasing combustion efficiency.

There are numerous disadvantages to using alcohols, particularly methyl and ethyl alcohol. Although these alcohols, when used near their stoichiometric air-fuel ratios, produce more power, a larger quantity of fuel is required to produce a specified power output. For example, in an automobile, more fuel would be required for each mile driven.

The relatively low boiling points and high vapor pressures of methyl and ethyl alcohol indicate that vapor lock could be a serious problem, particularly at high altitudes on warm summer days. Butyl alcohol, because of its low vapor pressure, would be the least likely of the alcohols to cause vapor lock.

The relatively high latent heats of methyl and ethyl alcohol would cause problems in mixing these alcohols with air and transporting them through the intake manifold of the engine. Heating the intake manifold may be necessary in cold weather or before the engine reaches operating temperatures. Without external heat to more completely vaporize the fuel, the engine may be difficult to start and would be sluggish for a considerable time after starting. Butyl alcohol would be least likely to cause starting difficulties or problems during warm-up. Note that its latent heat is almost the same as the latent heat of octane.

All of the alcohols are soluble in water, but butyl alcohol is relatively insoluble compared to methyl and ethyl alcohol. Less engine power would be produced as the water content of an alcohol increased. Further, vapor lock, fuel mixing and starting problems would be increased with water.

Mixing alcohol with gasoline to produce gasohol is becoming popular. Advantages of fuel blends are that alcohol tends to increase the octane rating, which is particularly important in unleaded fuel, and the carbon monoxide (CO) emissions from the engine are reduced.



Art courtesy of Colorado Gasohol
Promotion Committee, Colorado
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Table 1: Characteristics of chemically pure fuels.*

Fuel	Chemical formula	Chemical weight (lb/mole)	Specific gravity	Boiling point (°C)	Latent heat (Btu/lb)	Combustion energy (Btu/lb)	Vapor pressure @ 100°F (psi)	Solubility part in 100 parts H ₂ O	Stoichiometric air-fuel ratio
Methyl alcohol	CH ₃ OH	32	0.79	65	503	10,260	4.6	∞	6.5
Ethyl alcohol	CH ₃ CH ₂ (OH)	46.1	0.79	78	396	13,160	2.2	∞	9
Butyl alcohol	C ₂ H ₅ CH ₂ CH ₂ (OH)	74.1	0.81	117	186	15,770	0.3	9	11.2
Octane	C ₈ H ₁₈	114	0.70	210	155	20,750	1.72	insoluble	15.2
Hexadecane	C ₁₆ H ₃₄	240	0.79	287	—	20,320	3.46	insoluble	15

*To convert to metrics, use the following conversion factors: 1 pound = 45 kilogram; 1°F = °C-32 x 5/9.

The primary disadvantage of mixing methyl and ethyl alcohol with gasoline is that under certain conditions these alcohols may separate from the gasoline. An engine adjusted to burn gasoline efficiently will produce less power from alcohol should it separate from the gasoline. Separation is caused by the polar nature of the alcohol molecules and their tendency to absorb water that also is a polar substance. Methyl alcohol is the most likely to separate and butyl alcohol is the least likely to separate. The tendency for separation increases as the temperature decreases, the quantity of water absorbed increases, and the quality of the gasoline decreases.

The affect of using a blend of alcohol and gasoline in an engine adjusted for gasoline is to lean out the fuel mixture. This is illustrated in Figure 1 for an engine burning blends of ethanol and gasoline. A mixture of 10% ethanol in gasoline produced more power when the carburetor was adjusted for gasoline. Increasing the ethanol content to 25%, reduced the power output. The tests results shown in Figure 1 were obtained at an elevation of 5,000 feet where an engine adjusted to operate on gasoline would be expected to run rich. The 10% blend produced a leaner and better air-fuel ratio, but the 25% blend was too lean. Because of its higher stoichiometric air-fuel ratio, butyl alcohol can be mixed with gasoline in higher concentrations without affecting performance. Similarly, because of its low stoichiometric air-fuel ratio, only a small quantity of methyl alcohol can be mixed with gasoline without affecting performance. In other words, a fuel blend containing 20% methyl alcohol would require modification of the carburetor fuel jets to optimize power output whereas a 20% blend of butyl alcohol would not.

The effect of increasing the ethanol concentration in the fuel on exhaust emissions is shown in Figure 2. As indicated previously, the primary effect of ethanol is to reduce the CO emissions. It should be noted that the same effect was obtained using straight gasoline and carefully leaning the air-fuel ratio.

Alcohol also has been used in diesel engines. In this case, the alcohol may be blended with diesel fuel to produce diesohol, or the alcohol may be added to the air intake of the

engine. A system for adding a mixture of ethanol and water to the air intake of a turbocharged diesel engine is commercially available. The primary function of the system is to cool the turbocharged air (using the latent heat), and thereby to increase the volumetric efficiency of the engine and produce more output power. A similar result can be obtained using an intercooler. Control of the quantity of alcohol added to the air intake may be difficult and could cause erratic engine operation and/or failure if a large quantity of alcohol was added to the air intake.

Tests results using blends of ethanol in diesel fuel are shown in Figure 3. The engine used in these tests was naturally aspirated. As with gasohol, the primary effect of the ethanol was to lean the air-fuel mixture and produce more efficient combustion.

Methyl alcohol, because of its highly polar nature, does not mix with diesel fuel. Ethanol can be mixed with diesel fuel provided there is little water in the ethanol. However, as the concentration of ethanol and water increases, the tendency for separation increases as the temperature decreases and the quality of the diesel fuel decreases. A diesel engine normally will not operate on ethanol nor will ethanol provide lubrication for the fuel injection system. Another problem with adding ethanol to diesel fuel is that the cetane number (ignition characteristic) may decrease below the level recommended by the engine manufacturer.

Butyl alcohol can be mixed with diesel fuel in virtually any concentration. It does not separate as water is added or as the temperature is decreased. Further, butyl alcohol does not significantly change the cetane number of diesel fuel. In blends with diesel fuel, butyl alcohol tends to reduce the solidification temperature of the fuel at low temperatures.

Alcohols may be corrosive to certain materials used in engines. Generally, methyl alcohol is the most corrosive and butyl alcohol is least corrosive. Alcohols also can cause injury or physical harm if not used properly. Persons considering use of alcohols in motor fuels should observe warning labels and follow precautions indicated thereon to avoid problems.

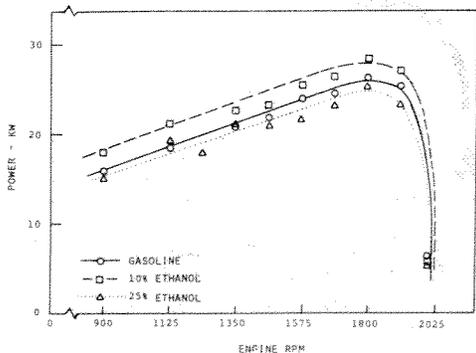


Figure 1: Gasoline engine full throttle power output using ethanol fuel blends.

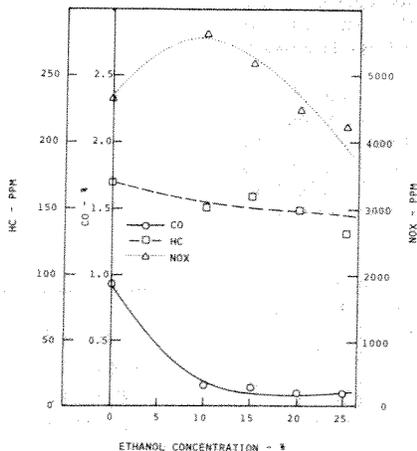


Figure 2: Gasoline engine full throttle exhaust emissions using ethanol fuel blends.

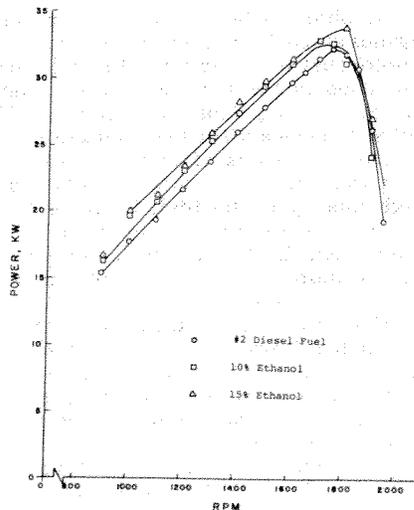


Figure 3: Diesel engine power output using ethanol fuel blends.