

Road racing goes green

American Le Mans Series, EPA devise an eco-friendly ride

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This Corvette C6.R will compete using E85, an ethanol-based fuel, during the 2008 American Le Mans Series. The Series' "Green Racing" initiatives for the 2008 season were announced earlier this month at the North American International Auto Show in Detroit.

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fuels, including a zero-sulfur diesel and a mixture that is 85 percent ethanol.

"Some would shake their heads in disbelief, that the EPA and DOE would be endorsing an auto racing series as being a potential benefit to them," said Scott Atherton, president and CEO of the American Le Mans Series, or ALMS. He called the association between the EPA and a racing series "unprecedented."

Indeed, environmentalists and racing enthusiasts haven't exactly been the best of friends in the past.

In recent years, the EPA had to prod a reluctant NASCAR to stop using leaded gasoline. But the ALMS, which boasts of having "the real cars of tomorrow," seems to be going in the opposite direction.

By requiring its competitors to choose between clean diesel, E10 (a 10 percent ethanol, 90 percent gasoline blend) or E85 (85 percent ethanol), ALMS hopes to educate race fans and develop new fuel technologies that burn cleaner and reduce dependence on foreign oil. Ethanol, also known as grain alcohol, is most commonly made from corn, but can also be made from wood chips or switch grass. It produces far fewer harmful emissions than fossil fuels.

"There's a direct link from the race track to the consumer, because in the not-distant future, those will be exactly the fuel choices we face in the fuel stations of tomorrow," Atherton said.

Of the eight manufacturers that compete in ALMS, Corvette took the lead last week, announcing it would run its race cars exclusively on E85 in 2008. Aston Martin and at least one other as-yet unannounced manufacturer will

It's not every day that an environmental official asks for a round of applause for an auto racing series.

But that's what the federal Environmental Protection Agency's Margo T. Oge, director of the office of transportation and air quality, did last week at the North American International Auto Show in Detroit, when she applauded the American Le Mans Series for its involvement in the newly announced Green Racing Initiative.

Oge was on hand for the announcement with representatives from the federal Department of Energy and SAE International, formerly known as the Society of Automotive Engineers, which joined the Braselton-based racing series in a partnership promoting the use of cleaner, renewable

also run E85. Audi, a dominating force in the series, runs on zero-sulfur diesel.

Steve Wesoloski, GM Racing's road racing group manager, said he's not worried about Team Corvette's performance with the new E85 fuel.

"We want to demonstrate that by running E85, it doesn't mean you're only going to go 40 mph for 40 miles," Wesoloski said. "We're going to be able to go 195 mph and show some real performance."

Fuel consumption remains the only issue. It takes more fuel to equal the energy of the higher gasoline content of E10. Atherton acknowledged that engineers are working on the issue to create an even playing field. The solution is likely to involve varying fuel cell sizes, with E85-powered machines carrying more fuel.

But Atherton notes that while gasoline and diesel have higher energy content, ethanol has a higher octane level, which allows an engine to operate at a higher compression. "If anything, (E85) raises the performance," Atherton said.

ALMS is not the first racing series to use ethanol. The Indy Racing League switched to a so-called "100 percent ethanol" in the 2007 series. But Atherton said the IRL's approach is different, because there are no cars currently on the road capable of running E100. There are "millions" of flex-fuel cars on the road now that can run E85, Atherton said.

"We're showcasing technology that has an application to the road cars that you and I would potentially be driving in the future," Atherton said.

The endorsement of SAE International, a 103-year-old global organization perhaps best known for establishing the standards of horsepower and motor oil classifications, gave ALMS the legitimacy to be taken seriously by the EPA and DOE.

"We felt like green racing was a good opportunity to harness the power of racing in order to take steps toward a sustainable future in transportation," said Tom Ball of SAE International. "The automotive industry is in a race for sustainability, and racing provides a real-time laboratory for innovation. The American Le Mans Series is one of many racing series we hope to see participating in (green racing)."

Margot Perez-Sullivan, a spokeswoman for the EPA, confirmed that the Green Racing Initiative marked "the first time we've been working with a racing organization to establish these protocols."

"The green racing initiative, if it is successful, will help spur and showcase innovations that will move from the raceway to freeway," Perez-Sullivan said.

Reece Nanfito, a spokesman for the Omaha, Neb.-based Ethanol Promotion and Information Council, says his group's job of spreading the word about ethanol is getting a huge boost from ALMS.

"To have a racing series endorse E85 is a strong statement," Nanfito said. "It's a strong statement that using E85 is beneficial for the environment, and it reduces our dependence on foreign oil. But it also demonstrates that E85 is a high-performance fuel."

Nanfito says other sanctioning bodies are asking about ethanol. "We've seen a greening of motorsports movement that's taking shape," he said.

Atherton welcomes other series to join in green racing. "We encourage any and all to follow," Atherton said.

And while the CEO doesn't name any particular racing series, there's little doubt who he's talking about when he says some racing favors "personalities and entertainment" over developing progressive technologies, including renewable fuels.

"There's other forms of racing that seem to be completely oblivious to any need to head in this direction, and I think they are the ones that will be held accountable," Atherton said.