

Stalling lawnmowers, gunked up carburetors signs of ethanol blend gasoline use

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PLAINWELL, MI -- Is it the weather, something about the long winter, perhaps, that this spring has lawnmowers sputtering and dying across Southwest Michigan?

Nope. Blame it on the gas.

Paul Stermer on Westnedge Hill in Kalamazoo said his 9-year-old mower died, mid lawn, and then the mower he borrowed from his neighbor to finish the job did the same. It was when he borrowed a third neighbor's, and that one conked out, too, that he took his questions to Facebook and learned that gasoline was the likely culprit.

Chainsaws, boat motors and other small engines are vulnerable, too, it seems.

The culprit?

Ethanol.

The ethanol in blends of gasoline sold at the pump sucks moisture out of the air and gums up fuel systems of small two-stroke motors, said Carol Fisher, office manager at Ridderman & Sons Oil Co. in Plainwell.

The shelf life of gasoline with ethanol? About a month, compared to three months for the non-ethanol gasoline the engines operate best on, said Tom Izenbaard, co-owner of Hoekstra Hardware in Kalamazoo.

But the solution isn't as simple as dumping out the bad gas and putting in some fresh stuff, Izenbaard said.

"In the past gas when went bad we'd just clean the carburetor and and fuel system and be good to go. Now, what I'm seeing more and more, is that we often must replace the whole carburetor," Izenbaard said. "It is a bad thing."

Izenbaard said that "since the ethanol has been out there... 70 percent of my work (repairing lawn mowers) is fuel-related problems."

Using gas that has been held all winter in the can has always been a problem, he said, and since the ethanol has been introduced, "there's more moisture in the gas than ever before."

Stermer said he thought he was being a good neighbor when he topped off the tanks of the mowers he borrowed-- with gas he got straight from the pump, an ethanol blend.

Izenbaard said manufacturers recommend not buying more gasoline than can be used in a month's time, and using a "dry gas" additive, too, to be on the safe side.

Fisher, too, said it's been an ongoing problem that people are learning about via word of mouth.

"The ethanol, the alcohol, will eat through rubber hoses and gunk up the carburetor," she said. "The 90 octane that we sell here is pure gasoline. It's called recreational gas. A lot of people use it for chain saws, lawnmowers, boats, anything with two-cycle motor."

She said the gas is used in the vintage cars that visit the Gilmore Car Museum.

The gas is \$4.59.9 per gallon at Fisher's place, about the same price as premium, but the price does not fluctuate as rapidly, she said.

Other stations have the gasoline available if customers know to ask for it, something Stermer said was news to him.

"I had never heard of this before," he said.

According to its website, the National Marine Manufacturers Association will distribute 'Look Before You Pump' messaging and materials to its membership and other stakeholders this month.

The campaign was created by the Outdoor Power Equipment Institute (OPEI), an international trade association representing 100 small engine, utility vehicle and outdoor power equipment manufacturers and suppliers. The site says:

"The '[Look Before You Pump](#)' campaign helps consumers protect their boat, other non-road vehicles, and outdoor power and small engine equipment investments."

Owner's manuals of older equipment may predate the mandated blending of ethanol with gasoline, a measure designed to reduce the country's dependence on foreign oil.