

Ethanol Overview

There are two types of ethanol produced in the United States – fermentation ethanol and synthetic ethanol. Fermentation ethanol (or bioethanol) is produced from corn or other biomass feedstocks and is by far the most common type of ethanol produced, accounting for more than 90% of all ethanol production. Fermentation ethanol is mainly produced for fuel, though a small share is used by the beverage industry and the industrial industry. Synthetic ethanol is produced from ethylene, a petroleum by-product, and is used mainly in industrial applications. A small amount of synthetic ethanol is exported to other countries.

Ethanol is the most widely used biofuel today. In 2009, more than 7.3 billion gasoline-equivalent gallons were added to gasoline in the United States to meet biofuel requirements and reduce air pollution. Ethanol is currently produced using a process similar to brewing beer where starch crops are converted into sugars, the sugars are fermented into ethanol, and the ethanol is then distilled into its final form.

Ethanol is used to increase octane and improve the emissions quality of gasoline. In many areas of the United States today, ethanol is blended with gasoline to form an E10 blend (10% ethanol and 90% gasoline), but it can be used in higher concentrations, such as E85, or in its pure form E100. All automobile manufacturers that do business in the United States approve the use of E10 in gasoline engines; however, only flex fuel vehicles (FFVs) are designed to use E85. October 2010, the Environmental Protection Agency granted a partial waiver to allow E15 to be sold in the U.S., subject to several conditions. Pure ethanol or E100 is used in Brazil but is not currently compatible with vehicles manufactured for the U.S. market. Manufacturer approval of ethanol blends is found in vehicle owners' manuals under references to refueling or gasoline.

Bioethanol from cellulosic biomass materials (such as agricultural residues, trees, and grasses) is made by first using pretreatment and hydrolysis processes to extract sugars, followed by fermentation of the sugars. Although producing bioethanol from cellulosic biomass is currently more costly than producing bioethanol from starch crops, the U.S. Government has launched a Biofuels Initiative with the objective of quickly reducing the cost of cellulosic bioethanol. Researchers are working to improve the efficiency and economics of the cellulosic bioethanol production process. When cellulosic bioethanol becomes commercially available, it will be used exactly as the bioethanol currently made from corn grain.

Source: DOE Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy,
http://www1.eere.energy.gov/biomass/abcs_biofuels.html