washingtonpost.com

Slow to Wave ‘Green’ Flag

NASCAR Faces Challenges in Possible Use of Alternative Fuels

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Sunday, July 27, 2008; D04

Indianapolis Motor Speedway hosts the biggest race-day crowd in the country twice each year, but the giant oval was built in 1909 as a testing ground for automobile manufacturers.

That was the rationale behind motorsports in its infancy: not to entertain, but to serve as a laboratory that produced technology to benefit the car-buying public. And innovations such as the rearview mirror, front-wheel drive and disk brakes followed.

Fast-forward to 2008 and $4-a-gallon gasoline. Car-buyers are clamoring for energy-efficient vehicles, while policymakers urge less dependence on foreign oil.

But if either is looking to NASCAR to point the way forward, they’re in for a wait.

NASCAR Chairman and Chief Executive Brian France pledged in July 2007 to look more aggressively at the possibility of using alternative fuels in the sport’s racecars. But after 12 months of study at NASCAR’s Research and Development Center in Concord, N.C., the sport is far from deciding which alternative -- whether ethanol blends, diesel, hybrids or a variation to come -- represents the fuel of the future.

“We’re not on hold by any means, we’re just being very thorough,” says Mike Fisher, managing director of the R&D center. “It’s not as easy as flipping a switch,”

So today at Indianapolis Motor Speedway, 43 stock cars will hurtle into the first turn of the Allstate 400 burning 98-octane racing fuel and getting roughly six miles per gallon.

NASCAR drivers don’t feel the financial pinch at the pump. They get their racing fuel (known as 260 GTX) from Sunoco, which has provided it for free since becoming NASCAR’s official fuel supplier in 2004.

Sunoco has sold ethanol-blended gasoline for 12 years and continues to explore other alternative fuels, according to spokesman Thomas Golembeski. But for now, NASCAR and Sunoco believe its high-octane racing fuel is best suited for the high-performing stock cars.

The very notion that NASCAR could be “green” sounds like an oxymoron.

NASCAR’s fender-banging spectacle is a celebration of excess -- 850-horsepower engines, earsplitting noise and speeds nearing 200 mph.

But as attitudes toward gas-guzzling vehicles sour and concern for the environment increases, NASCAR runs the risk of being perceived as squandering precious fuel and callous to the environment.

Aware of the danger, NASCAR has launched several “green” initiatives that have nothing to do with the sticky issue of fossil fuel. Among them: The tires deemed obsolete after just 30 or 40 laps of racing each weekend now are being shredded and recycled, and used motor oil and lubricants also are being collected and re-refined.

“Those efforts will certainly bear fruit much faster than any change in the [fuel] we run,” notes Marcus Jadotte,

NASCAR's managing director of public affairs. "We run 43 cars on a racetrack, and the amount of fuel burned by those cars is minuscule compared to the overall consumption of petroleum-based products."

But in the view of U.S. Sen. Evam Bayh (D-Ind.), even symbolic gestures are important. That's why he and Sen. John Thune (R-S.D.) wrote France last year asking him to consider switching to ethanol.

While ethanol, a fuel typically derived from renewable sources such as corn, has lost some of its appeal amid evidence that its broad-based use raises food prices, Bayh remains an advocate and believes NASCAR should model "green" behavior.

"Venerated institutions like NASCAR have a responsibility to lead by example and embrace renewable sources that are produced here at home," Bayh wrote in an e-mailed statement last week.

Other racing series have done just that.

The Indy Racing League switched to 100 percent ethanol in 2007, and its signature event, the Indianapolis 500, didn't lose any luster.

The American Le Mans Series, which bills itself as "a global leader in green racing," uses an array of fuels -- all of them alternative fuels that are available to consumers. Its Audis run on diesel; its Chevrolet Corvettes run on cellulosic ethanol (made from organic matter such as grass clippings rather than corn or sugar). A gas-electric hybrid is expected to compete in 2009.

"Our series represents a rolling development lab for the major automobile manufacturers to bring new, cutting-edge technology, not only to make a better racecar but to make a better production car," says Scott Atherton, the series' president and CEO.

But NASCAR has an entertainment-driven philosophy that, in some ways, makes switching fuels more challenging.

For starters, its rulebook is designed to stifle innovation rather than encourage it. That's because the key to staging side-by-side races, NASCAR officials believe, is ensuring that no car has an advantage over another.

As a result, all cars must run the same fuel to reduce the chance of a team spiking it with an illegal additive. All of the cars' bodies also must be identical. Only the engines differentiate a Ford, Chevrolet, Toyota or Dodge. And at the moment, those four manufacturers don't necessarily agree on what the "fuel of the future" is any more than do environmentalists or legislators.

General Motors is bullish on E85 (85 percent ethanol, 15 percent gasoline), and its executives have prodded NASCAR for years to consider a switch.

To prove its viability, GM engineers recently tested a NASCAR engine using E85. It didn't run as far on a gallon of ethanol, according to Pat Suhy, who oversees GM's NASCAR effort, so NASCAR officials would have to increase the size of the cars' fuel cell if they didn't want to add more pit stops during races run with E85.

But the test proved that GM would be ready to switch to ethanol-powered engines whenever NASCAR is ready, Suhy said.

Still, it's not clear that Toyota, Ford and Dodge would be equally enthused because they haven't invested as heavily in E85-compatible production cars.

“It’s really a challenging and difficult problem from the engineering side, the implementation side, the political side and the public relations side,” says Lee White, president of Toyota Racing Development.

Moreover, NASCAR is notoriously resistant to change. The sport didn’t stop running leaded gas until 2007, enjoying a little-known exemption written into the federal Clean Air Act for nearly four decades.

But NASCAR simply must adapt to the harsh reality facing all Americans, whether they’re struggling to fill their gas tanks or buy heating oil, says Ray Evernham, co-owner of Gillett Evernham Racing.

“It’s not around the corner, but the handwriting is on the wall as far as fossil fuels and the internal-combustion engine,” Evernham says. “Whether it’s going to be organic-based ethanol or kudzu, NASCAR is going to have to follow the way of the world.”

But Evernham also believes the federal government should take the lead on energy policy and invest in the type of research that the cash-strapped automotive industry can’t afford.

“NASCAR was late switching from leaded to unleaded gas,” Evernham concedes. “But this is quite a bit more of a crisis.”

It’s a crisis that Doug Yates, who oversees Ford’s NASCAR engine program, says he’s eager to confront.

“It’s easy to take a position as an engine builder: ‘Don’t change anything.’ “ Yates said. “But we need to use the sport we have to help auto manufacturers and the U.S. economy. If we can do something to help and advance technology, wouldn’t that be great?”

NASCAR Notes: Two-time defending NASCAR champion Jimmie Johnson ran a lap at 181.763 mph at Indianapolis Motor Speedway to win his first pole at the Brickyard in seven previous tries. . . .

Kyle Busch led all but three laps to win the Kroger 200 in Clermont, Ind., for Toyota’s 15th victory in 22 Nationwide Series races this season. Busch won his 15th race of the season spanning NASCAR’s three series, breaking the record of 14 set by Kevin Harvick in 2006. He has six Nationwide wins in 20 starts.