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The E20 ethanol blending milestone and beyond: Chemical implications for automotive emissions and engine compatibility

Ch. Sudhakar
Department of Chemistry, SR & BGNR Govt. Arts and Science College, Khammam, Telangana, India
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Abstract
The global transition toward sustainable transportation has positioned bioethanol as a critical transitional fuel to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions and reduce fossil fuel dependency. The implementation of E20 (20% anhydrous ethanol and 80% gasoline by volume) represents a landmark technical and regulatory milestone. This review article comprehensively examines the fundamental chemical, thermodynamic, and material interactions dictated by higher-concentration ethanol-gasoline blends. From a combustion perspective, the elevated oxygen content, high latent heat of vaporization, and distinct molecular structure of ethanol fundamentally alter flame speed, radical pathways, and cylinder temperatures, resulting in substantial reductions in carbon monoxide (CO) and unburned hydrocarbons (HC) alongside complex variations in nitrogen oxides (NO_x) and unregulated carbonyl emissions. Concurrently, the polar and hygroscopic nature of ethanol poses severe material compatibility challenges, including chemical corrosion of metallic alloys via electrochemical mechanisms and the degradation, swelling, and cracking of critical elastomers and polymers within the fuel delivery architecture. This paper synthesizes current empirical research regarding engine performance shifts, phase separation phenomena, and exhaust chemistry, while exploring the technical pathways required to transcend the E20 threshold toward higher blends like E85 and pure hydrous ethanol implementation.

Keywords: Automotive emissions engine compatibility chemical kinetics material degradation

Introduction

The automotive sector remains one of the primary contributors to global anthropogenic greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and urban air pollution. In response to fluctuating crude oil markets, strict environmental mandates, and the urgent imperative to decarbonize transport infrastructures, governments worldwide have aggressively pursued fuel oxygenation strategies. Among the viable renewable alternatives, bioethanol (C_2H_5OH) has emerged as the most commercially scalable and technically viable oxygenate for spark-ignition (SI) engines [1].

The evolutionary trajectory of ethanol blending spans several decades, progressing from low-concentration mixtures such as E5 and E10 to the contemporary implementation of E20 as a standard commercial fuel grade in pioneering nations like Brazil, India, and regions of the United States [2]. Historically, E10 was widely accepted because its chemical deviations from pure neat gasoline (E0) fall within the adaptive tolerances of conventional electronic fuel injection (EFI) systems and engine control units (ECUs) without requiring hardware modifications. However, transitioning to E20 presents a non-linear escalation in chemical, thermodynamic, and structural demands.

The chemical architecture of ethanol characterized by a short-chain hydrocarbon backbone bound to a highly polar hydroxyl (-OH) group differs fundamentally from the complex mixture of non-polar alkanes, cycloalkanes, and aromatics that constitute standard petroleum-derived gasoline. Consequently, introducing 20% ethanol by volume induces profound changes in the fuel's bulk physicochemical properties. These shifts dictate the micro-level chemical kinetics within the combustion chamber and govern the macro-level material degradation across the entire vehicle fueling system. Understanding these interactions is essential as the global automotive market stands on the precipice of higher blending milestones, where standard mechanical architectures face severe operating limitations.

Physicochemical and Thermodynamic Properties of Ethanol-Gasoline Blends

Table 1: Physicochemical and Thermodynamic Properties of Ethanol-Gasoline Blends

Fuel Property	Neat Gasoline (E0)	Pure Ethanol (E100)	E20 Blend (Typical)
Chemical Formula	C_4 to C_{12} Hydrocarbons	C_2H_5OH	Mixed
Oxygen Content (wt%)	0	34.7	~7.0
Lower Heating Value (LHV, MJ/kg)	42.4 - 44.0	26.8	39.0 - 40.5
Latent Heat of Vaporization (kJ/kg)	350 - 400	840	440 - 480
Research Octane Number (RON)	91 - 95	108	98 - 101
Motor Octane Number (MON)	81 - 85	92	86 - 89
Stoichiometric Air-Fuel Ratio (AFRst)	14.7	9.0	13.6
Density at 15°C g/cm^3	0.720 - 0.775	0.789	0.740 - 0.760
Reid Vapor Pressure (RVP, kPa)	55 - 70	17	62–75 (Azeotropic spike)

Evaluating the viability of E20 and superior blends requires a rigorous analysis of the fundamental thermodynamic and chemical properties of ethanol relative to base gasoline. These parameters serve as the governing metrics for fuel metering, spray atomization, and subsequent chemical energy release.

The Oxygenation Paradox and Energy Density

The most profound structural distinction of ethanol is its inherent oxygen content, which comprises 34.7% of its total molecular mass. When blended at a 20% volumetric ratio, E20 introduces approximately 7.0 wt% oxygen into the fuel matrix. This atomic oxygen acts as an internal oxidizer during the flame propagation phase, promoting more complete chemical conversion of carbon to carbon dioxide (CO_2). However, this structural oxygen displaces energy-dense carbon-carbon (C-C) and carbon-hydrogen (C-H) bonds.

Because ethanol contains a partially oxidized carbon atom, its Lower Heating Value (LHV) is approximately 36% lower than that of typical gasoline (26.8 MJ/kg versus ~43 MJ/kg) [3]. For an E20 blend, this equates to a net reduction in fuel energy density of roughly 6% to 7%. To maintain a constant thermodynamic power output, the volume of fuel injected per combustion cycle must increase. This requires the engine control unit to scale up the volumetric fuel flow rate via wider pulse widths at the fuel injectors.

Volatility, Azeotropy, and Cold-Start Characteristics

Gasoline is a multi-component mixture exhibiting a continuous, smooth distillation curve. Ethanol, as a pure compound, possesses a single boiling point at 78°C. When mixed, ethanol molecules disrupt the weak van der Waals forces stabilizing the non-polar hydrocarbon matrix. The strongly polar hydroxyl groups of ethanol form hydrogen-bonded networks that alter the ideal thermodynamic behavior of the solution, leading to non-ideal behavior known as positive azeotropy [4].

At low blending concentrations (typically between E5 and E15), ethanol forms near-azeotropic mixtures with low-boiling-point petroleum fractions like pentane and hexane. This causes an anomalous spike in the Reid Vapor Pressure (RVP) of the blend, which often exceeds the RVP of either pure component. At the E20 milestone, this RVP expansion begins to plateau or drop slightly depending on the aromatic and olefinic composition of the base fue. However, it remains high enough to exacerbate evaporative emissions if not strictly regulated.

Simultaneously, ethanol's exceptionally high latent heat of vaporization (840 kJ/kg, compared to ~380 kJ/kg for gasoline) exerts a profound cooling effect during fuel induction. When E20 is injected into a cold intake manifold or directly into a chilly cylinder, the thermal energy extracted from the surrounding air to vaporize the fuel drops the local temperature significantly. This thermal drop suppresses the local fuel vapor pressure, preventing the formation of an ignitable gaseous air-fuel mixture during cold-start scenarios and leading to prolonged cranking periods and elevated initial unburned hydrocarbon spikes.

Chemical Kinetics and Combustion Dynamics of E20

The introduction of E20 fundamentally shifts the chemical kinetics of the ignition and flame propagation phases within the spark-ignition engine environment. These transformations are driven by the specific radical pathways generated by ethanol molecules under high-temperature and high-pressure conditions.

Radical Initiation and Flame Speed

The thermal decomposition of ethanol during the pre-flame induction period proceeds through distinct radical abstraction pathways. The initiation steps primarily involve the abstraction of hydrogen atoms by reactive radical pools ($H\cdot$, $O\cdot$ and $OH\cdot$). Due to varying bond dissociation energies within the ethanol molecule, abstraction occurs preferentially at the α-carbon atom:

The resulting hydroxyethyl radicals ($CH_3CH\cdot OH$) rapidly decompose or react with molecular oxygen to produce acetaldehyde (CH_3CHO) and hydroperoxyl radicals ($HO\cdot_2$). Under flame temperatures, this rapid generation of highly active radical intermediaries enhances the overall laminar burning velocity of the fuel mixture [5].

Ethanol possesses a substantially higher laminar flame speed than baseline gasoline across a wide range of equivalence ratios (Ø). At the E20 blending level, the elevated flame velocity accelerates the heat release rate during the early stages of combustion. This fast combustion chemistry shortens the overall combustion duration, moving the process closer to the ideal thermodynamic Otto cycle. This structural transition offsets a portion of the energy density loss by increasing the thermal efficiency of the engine.

Octane Enhancement and Knock Mitigation

One of the most valuable chemical attributes of ethanol is its high autoignition resistance, reflected in its elevated Research Octane Number (RON) and Motor Octane Number (MON). The presence of the hydroxyl group alters the low-temperature oxidation pathways (commonly termed "cool flame" chemistry) that lead to engine knock. In pure petroleum hydrocarbons, intermediate temperature heat release is driven by cyclic chain-branching operations involving alkylperoxy radicals ($ROO\cdot$) and hydroperoxyalkyl radicals ($\cdot QOOH$). Ethanol disrupts these low-temperature kinetic pathways by scavenging active radicals and producing more stable intermediates, such as formaldehyde and hydrogen peroxide (H_2O_2), which do not undergo rapid explosive branching until much higher temperatures are reached [6].

Consequently, the addition of 20% ethanol to a standard gasoline pool induces a non-linear octane boost, typically increasing the baseline fuel's RON by 3 to 6 units. This superior antiknock performance allows automotive calibrations to advance the spark timing closer to the Minimum Advance for Best Torque (MBT) without inducing destructive engine knock. Furthermore, it allows engine designers to elevate the geometric compression ratio of dedicated E20 powerplants, unlocking higher thermodynamic efficiency and power density.

Impact on Tailpipe Emissions: Regulated and Unregulated Compounds

The modifications to the combustion process caused by E20 directly influence the chemical composition of the exhaust gas matrix. This shifts the balance between regulated

emissions (CO, HC, NO_x) and unregulated toxic compounds.

Regulated Emissions: The Chemistry of Reduction

The reduction of carbon monoxide (CO) and unburned hydrocarbons (HC) via E20 usage is governed by the "enleanment effect." Although modern closed-loop engine management systems operate at a stoichiometric equivalence ratio (Ø = 1.0) by monitoring exhaust gas oxygen sensors, local micro-environments within the combustion chamber frequently experience rich deviations. These local rich pockets occur near crevice volumes, piston rings, and cool cylinder walls where fuel undergoes incomplete oxidation due to a lack of local oxygen.

The 7.0 wt% oxygen internally bound within the E20 fuel molecules ensures that even within these thermal boundary layers and crevice zones, there is a higher probability of complete oxidation transforming carbonaceous intermediates into carbon dioxide and water vapor.

Experimental data across various engine operating points show a 15% to 30% reduction in tailpipe CO concentrations when transitioning from E0 to E20 fuel [7,8]. Similarly, total unburned hydrocarbon (THC) emissions decline because the higher core flame temperatures and oxygen availability facilitate the thermal cracking and final oxidation of complex high-molecular-weight fuel components.

The chemical behavior of nitrogen oxides (NO_x) under E20 operation is more complex and highly non-linear. The formation of thermal NO_x is governed primarily by the extended Zeldovich mechanism, which is strongly dependent on the peak local combustion temperatures and the availability of free oxygen.

When running on E20, two competing chemical forces affect thermal NO_x generation:

The Charge Cooling Effect: The high latent heat of vaporization of ethanol extracts thermal energy from the incoming air charge, reducing the peak pre-ignition temperature.

The High Flame Speed Effect: The increased laminar burning velocity and advanced heat release generate higher local peak combustion temperatures closer to top dead center (TDC).

In engines where the charge cooling effect dominates (such as direct-injection engines running at high loads), tailpipe NO_x emissions often decrease. Conversely, in port-fuel-injected architectures operating under lean-biased transient conditions, the elevated peak flame temperatures can cause moderate increases in NO_x synthesis.

Unregulated Emissions: Carbonyls and Particulate Matter

While E20 yields clear benefits for criteria pollutants, it alters the production profiles of unregulated toxic emissions, particularly carbonyl compounds like acetaldehyde (CH_3CHO) and formaldehyde (HCHO) [9].

The chemical pathway to acetaldehyde is a direct consequence of partial ethanol oxidation. When an ethanol molecule loses a hydrogen atom from its interior methylene carbon, it forms the stable hydroxyethyl radical. Under oxygen-deficient transient states, this radical undergoes rapid dehydrogenation rather than complete mineralization.

Consequently, engines running on E20 exhibit a two- to four-fold increase in raw tailpipe acetaldehyde emissions compared to E0. Formaldehyde emissions also increase via secondary reactions involving methane and methyl radical oxidation loops. These carbonyl species are potent atmospheric precursors to photochemical smog and are classified as hazardous air pollutants. Their mitigation relies heavily on the low-temperature light-off efficiency of downstream Three-Way Catalysts (TWCs).

With respect to particulate matter, E20 offers significant advantages. Particulate Matter (PM) and Particulate Number (PN) emissions in spark-ignition engines are driven by the incomplete combustion of high-boiling-point aromatic compounds (such as benzene, toluene, and xylene) present in base gasoline. These aromatics undergo polymerization to form polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), which serve as precursors for carbon soot nuclei.

By replacing 20% of the petroleum fraction with a clean-burning, non-aromatic single-component alcohol, the total aromatic fraction of the bulk fuel is diluted. This dilution, combined with the presence of localized oxygen, significantly suppresses PAH formation pathways, resulting in substantial reductions in both PM mass and total ultra-fine PN emissions [10].

Engine Compatibility and Material Degradation Challenges

The mechanical integrity and operational lifespan of an automotive engine operating on E20 are governed by the chemical interactions between the polar, hygroscopic fuel mixture and the materials used throughout the fuel delivery and combustion sub-systems.

Metallic Corrosion Mechanisms

Neat petroleum gasoline is non-conductive and chemically inert toward most metals. Ethanol, by contrast, is a polar molecule capable of acting as an electrolyte and dissolving ionic contaminants. The introduction of E20 triggers three distinct corrosion pathways within fuel pumps, rails, injectors, and tank assemblies.

Electrochemical (Galvanic) Corrosion: Ethanol's relatively high dielectric constant compared to gasoline enhances its capacity to support ionic current flow. When dissimilar metals (e.g., aluminum fuel rails coupled with steel injector tips or copper-plated fuel pump commutators) are exposed to E20, the fuel blend acts as an electrolytic bridge. This accelerates galvanic cell reactions, leading to severe pitting and structural weakening of the more anodic metal substrate [11].

Chemical Dry Corrosion: Under high-temperature conditions within the injector body, ethanol can react directly with metal oxide protective layers. For example, aluminum alloys are protected by a passive layer of aluminum oxide (Al_2O_3). Ethanol can chemically attack this layer, forming volatile aluminum alkoxides.

This strips the metal of its protective passivating layer, exposing the underlying substrate to continuous, rapid chemical wear.

Organic Acid Corrosion: Industrial bioethanol often contains trace impurities, including acetic acid (CH_3COOH). Furthermore, when ethanol-gasoline blends

are exposed to atmospheric oxygen over extended periods, the ethanol undergoes slow autoxidation, producing additional acidic fractions. These organic acids lower the fuel's pH, directly dissolving ferrous alloys and zinc or copper platings, which can cause component failure and clog downstream microscopic fuel metering orifices [12].

Degradation of Elastomers and Polymers

The non-metallic components of the fuel system such as O-rings, fuel lines, gaskets, and seals are highly vulnerable to structural degradation when exposed to E20. The severity of this degradation is determined by the solubility parameters of the polymer matrix relative to those of the solvent mixture.

Many conventional elastomers used in older or non-optimized engines, such as Nitrile Butadiene Rubber (NBR) and low-fluorine Fluoroelastomers (Viton A), match the solubility parameters of ethanol-gasoline blends. When E20 penetrates the polymer matrix, it disrupts the intermolecular polymer chain forces, causing the material to absorb the fuel and swell significantly. This volumetric swelling reduces the elastomer's tensile strength, elongation capacity, and hardness.

As the fuel system undergoes thermal cycling, the absorbed ethanol can evaporate from the elastomer, leaving behind a brittle, cross-linked molecular network prone to micro-cracking and catastrophic structural failure. This degradation can lead to external fuel leaks, posing a significant vehicle fire hazard. To safely handle E20 and higher blends, manufacturers must upgrade these components to high-fluorine fluorocarbon polymers (such as Viton B or F), Fluorosilicones, or High-Density Polyethylene (HDPE).

The Phase Separation Phenomenon: Thermodynamics of Water Tolerances

One of the most challenging storage and operational aspects of ethanol blends is their thermodynamic propensity for phase separation when contaminated with water. Petroleum gasoline has negligible water solubility (~100 ppm at 25°C). Anhydrous ethanol, however, is completely miscible with water due to strong hydrogen bonding between the hydroxyl groups of both molecules.

An ethanol-gasoline blend can hold a specific critical mass fraction of water in a stable, single-phase homogenous ternary solution. However, this water tolerance is highly dependent on temperature and the overall ethanol concentration. If the water concentration exceeds this critical thermodynamic threshold either through atmospheric moisture absorption or contamination within the supply chain the solution reaches a phase-separation boundary.

When this limit is exceeded, the hydrogen bonds between water and ethanol overcome the weaker dispersion forces holding the ethanol within the non-polar gasoline fraction. The water and the majority of the ethanol spontaneously separate from the hydrocarbon matrix, forming a dense, highly polar, and corrosive aqueous ethanol-water layer that settles at the bottom of the fuel tank.

This separation creates two distinct operational problems:

The Upper Hydrocarbon Layer: This layer becomes depleted of its ethanol fraction, dropping its octane rating by several points. If this denuded fuel is drawn into the engine, it can cause severe high-load engine knock and subsequent thermal damage to pistons and valves.

The Lower Aqueous Layer: If this highly acidic, low-heating-value layer is drawn into the fuel pump, the engine will suffer a sudden lean misfire or stall completely, as the injection system cannot vaporize or combust an aqueous alcohol mix.

At the E20 blending level, the fuel matrix can dissolve significantly more water before undergoing phase separation than low-level blends like E5 or E10. This higher threshold provides a wider safety margin during bulk distribution and storage. However, if phase separation does occur, the volume of the resulting corrosive aqueous layer is larger, amplifying the potential for component damage.

Beyond E20: Challenges and Pathways to High-Concentration Blends

As nations successfully implement E20, research is increasingly focusing on higher blending configurations, such as E85 (Flex-Fuel systems) and pure Hydrous Ethanol (E100), as demonstrated by Brazil's mature biofuel market. Advancing beyond the E20 threshold requires a transition from basic component optimization to a fundamental redesign of vehicle power trains.

Advanced Engine Configurations and Flex-Fuel Vehicles (FFVs)

Vehicles designed to operate on any arbitrary mixture of gasoline and ethanol (from E0 to E85) requires specialized hardware and software integration. The core component of a modern Flex-Fuel Vehicle (FFV) is the optical or dielectric Fuel Composition Sensor (FCS) mounted in the fuel delivery line. This sensor continuously monitors the dielectric constant or refractive index of the flowing fuel, translating this physical parameter into a real-time ethanol volumetric percentage [13,14].

The ECU processes this signal to dynamically adjust the operational parameters of the engine:

Stoichiometric Target Adjustment: The air-fuel ratio target must transition continuously from 14.7 for E0 down to 9.7 for E85.

Injection Pulse Width Scaling: Because E85 exhibits a 30% reduction in lower heating value relative to gasoline, the fuel injectors must deliver a much higher volume of fuel per cycle. This requires high-capacity injectors and upgraded fuel pumps with wider dynamic ranges to prevent lean fuel starvation under high-load conditions.

Ignition Timing Optimization: The ECU leverages the superior octane rating of higher ethanol blends (E85 RON can exceed 105) by advancing the spark timing. This maximizes peak cylinder pressures and extracts higher thermodynamic efficiency from the engine.

Dedicated High-Blend Powerplants and Hydrous Ethanol (E100)

The ultimate potential of ethanol cannot be fully realized in flexible-fuel engines, which must compromise compression ratios to safely run on low-octane E0 gasoline. Designing engines specifically optimized for high-blend or pure

hydrous ethanol allows engineers to exploit its unique chemical properties.

By increasing the geometric compression ratio to 12.0:1 or 14.0:1 and implementing aggressive turbo charging strategies, a downsized dedicated ethanol engine can match or exceed the brake thermal efficiency of modern diesel engines. Furthermore, utilizing hydrous ethanol (which contains roughly 4% to 7% water by volume) eliminates the energy-intensive and costly azeotropic distillation phase required to manufacture anhydrous ethanol, significantly reducing the net well-to-wheel carbon footprint of the fuel production lifecycle [15].

Conclusions

The global transition to E20 ethanol blending represents a highly successful marriage of fuel chemistry and engine optimization. By leveraging the internal oxygen content and superior antiknock characteristics of bioethanol, E20 delivers significant reductions in criteria toxic tailpipe emissions like carbon monoxide and particulate mass, while providing a scalable pathway toward partial decarbonization of the transport sector.

However, the implementation of E20 is not without complex engineering trade-offs. The chemistry of positive azeotropy, the low-temperature latent heat requirements, the heightened vulnerability to water-induced phase separation, and the aggressive electrochemical and chemical degradation of metallic and polymeric fuel system components demand rigorous material selection and precise electronic engine control strategies.

Future research trajectories must focus on several key areas to advance beyond the E20 milestone:

Advanced Fuel Additives: Developing multi-functional surfactant and corrosion-inhibitor packages to stabilize fuel mixtures against phase separation across a wider temperature range while passivating metal surfaces against organic acid attack.

Catalyst Formulations: Optimizing downstream Three-Way Catalyst (TWC) washcoat chemistries to lower the catalytic light-off temperatures for aldehydes and other unregulated carbonyl species.

Advanced Combustion Strategies: Investigating low-temperature combustion regimes, such as Homogeneous Charge Compression Ignition (HCCI) and dual-fuel reactivity-controlled compression ignition, to fully leverage the high volatility and autoignition resistance of high-concentration alcohol streams.

Ultimately, E20 serves as a critical bridge. The chemical insights gained from this blending milestone provide the foundational framework required to design the next generation of highly efficient, low-carbon transport systems.

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