

E-fuels will only be able to power 2% of EU car fleet by 2035: analysis

Gepubliceerd 06-okt-22 13:55 door [Editor dmi](#)

Low levels of production mean that e-fuels, a hydrogen-derived fuel source touted as a green solution for internal combustion engine vehicles, will only be able to cover around 2% of the EU's vehicle fleet by 2035, a new study concludes.

The analysis, carried out by clean mobility NGO Transport & Environment (T&E), predicts that e-fuel production will still be in its infancy by the time the draft EU ban on the sale of petrol and diesel cars is enacted.

Some synthetic fuels are theoretically carbon neutral, as CO₂ is captured for production and then released when the fuel is combusted, leaving the net level of carbon in the atmosphere unchanged. Fuel manufacturers and some automotive industry players have pushed for e-fuels to be classified by European lawmakers as a green alternative to petrol and diesel.

If successful, this would allow internal combustion engine vehicles to continue to be sold past the 2035 deadline, provided they are powered by carbon neutral fuels.

But according to T&E, just 5 million cars out of the EU's fleet of 287 million could fully run on synthetic fuel in 2035.

The analysis was conducted using figures put forward by Concawe, a fuel industry research group, which estimated the installation of new e-fuel production units in the EU by 2035.

The analysis does not take into account e-fuels imported from beyond the bloc, as doing so at scale is "unrealistic" according to Yoann Gimbert, an e-mobility analyst at T&E.

"It is naive to assume that developing countries, some of whom lack power for their basic needs, would spare their renewables for e-fuels in Europe's cars just to suit the vested interests of engine makers," he said.

Gimbert also rejected claims that e-fuels represent a clean solution for cars, calling synthetic fuels a "Trojan Horse for the fossil fuel industry".

"E-fuels are presented as a carbon-neutral way to prolong the life of combustion engine technology. But the industry's own data shows there will only be enough for a tiny fraction of

cars on the road,” he said.

T&E has long supported the electrification of road transport, pointing out that even carbon neutral e-fuels produce harmful NOx emissions when combusted.

The low supply of e-fuels also makes them expensive to purchase at present, with T&E suggesting that the average cost of running a vehicle on e-fuels over five years would greatly surpass the cost of charging an electric vehicle.

‘Disingenuous’

FuelsEurope, a trade association representing big oil companies like Shell, TotalEnergies, BP, and ENI, hit back against the analysis, calling T&E’s campaign against synthetic fuels “disingenuous and deeply misguided”.

John Cooper, the director general of FuelsEurope & Concawe, told EURACTIV that T&E had misrepresented Concawe’s study, as it was not a forecast but rather a modelling of what can be achieved based on assumed levels of technology development, policy support, and investment.

“We deliberately limited the role of e-fuels in 2035 to match the initial expected constraints of renewable power in Europe at that date. The actual figures modelled for 2035 include 3.8% e-fuels, 4% advanced biofuels, in a total renewable supply of 20% of the entire road fuel demand in 2035,” he said.

Cooper argued that focusing on e-fuels only misses the trade association’s larger point, which is that a range of technologies and feedstocks can be deployed to decarbonise road transport beyond 2035.

The limited e-fuels supply could meet demand for plug-in hybrid vehicles, ensuring their liquid fuel needs are climate neutral, said Cooper. He also argued that the use of low-carbon liquid fuels would lower the risks of battery material shortages in an all EV scenario.

“Unfortunately T&E seem determined to continue their decade-long campaigning against advanced biofuels and e-fuels,” he said.

“It is incomprehensible to us that an environmental organisation would seek to stop investments in new renewable energies for Europe, especially those that can create new businesses and jobs using EU-based resources.”

Zero-emission vehicles by 2035

Negotiations are currently underway between EU institutions to finalise CO2 emission standards for cars and vans, with the next round of discussions set to take place on 27

October.

While the legislation has yet to be finalised, lawmakers in both the European Parliament and Council have in theory agreed to the European Commission proposal to end the sale of carbon-emitting vehicles by 2035.

One sticking point in the negotiations is expected to be the role of e-fuels.

A clause inserted into the Council negotiating position would oblige the European Commission to prepare a report by 2026 that looks into technologies such as “plug-in hybrids” and “CO2 neutral fuels” as a means of cutting carbon emissions.

Additional language inserted in the preamble of the Council’s position offers leeway for some vehicles to run “exclusively on CO2 neutral fuels”. This is understood as a reference to specialty vehicles such as ambulances and fire engines.

Whether these clauses will be agreed to by the European Parliament and make it into the final text of the regulation remains to be seen.

Source: Euractiv

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