

Government through the National Commission for Science and Technology has been working on a project to enhance production of ethanol as an alternative fuel for vehicles a way of cutting down on expenses of importing petrol. Our reporter Samuel Chibaya talks to Gift Kadzamira the commission's acting director general on the project's progress.

Q: At what stage is the project?

A: The five-year project was concluded in 2011 and the recommendations of the project were approved by Cabinet in October 2012. The National Commission for Science and Technology in collaboration with the Ministry of Energy and other stakeholders, including ethanol producers (ETHCO and Press Cane), oil marketing companies, Mera [the Malawi Energy Regulatory Authority] and PHVO have come up with a joint Ethanol roll out Programme for Malawi. The goal of the programme is to promote increased use of ethanol as an alternative fuel for vehicles which will contribute to energy self-sufficiency, national economic development and reduction of pollution and gas emissions. The programme document has identified relevant stakeholders and outlined key elements and steps that we are following.

Q: The commission announced last year that the ethanol would be sold in selected filling stations this year. It is not there, what happened?

A: There are a number of key activities that were outlined to fully implement the programme. On the Ethanol production and distribution element, we needed to have capacity developed in ethanol safety; conversion kit fitting; vehicle modification. Again, we needed to have improved understanding of ethanol use by policy makers; civil society; general public etc and finally generate and transfer knowledge on emerging issues of ethanol at all levels of the supply chain understood and addressed. This is why this activity has taken a little longer than expected. From the little demand that is there, ethanol is available in Kanengo.

Q: Which other organisation or department is the commission working with in the project?

A: The commission is working with the key ministry responsible for implementing energy policy in the country, the Ministry of Energy?in particular the Department of Energy Affairs?Mera, MBS [Malawi Bureau of Standards], Ministry of Trade and Industry, the Lilongwe Technical College and PVHO, among others.

Q: What has been the response from business people on the news that ethanol should be sold in filling stations?

A: A number of leading oil marketing companies have shown interest to have ethanol as one of the products to be sold in their filling stations as long as the demand is there to justify new investments. The demand will come from the government, car dealers and even the public. In the additional infrastructure, you know fuel is a very strategic commodity, it drives businesses hence it is attractive area for attracting both new investors as well as existing investors.

Q: How much ethanol does the country produce?

A: Currently, the total annual production of ethanol is estimated at 18 million litres. It may exceed the amount depending on availability of raw materials.

Q: Is this enough to power all the vehicles in the country?

A: This is enough to meet the current demand of ethanol, but not enough to meet future demand of ethanol assuming more cars are converted. In the Ethanol Programme, it is clear that government wants to increase ethanol production in the long term. In the short term, ethanol producing companies have assured government that given that there is demand for ethanol they are ready to expand their current capacities.

Q: How is this programme going to be rolled out?

A: Once the programme is rolled out, the switch to ethanol will be gradual. Take note that the switch is not one way but bi-directional, as the same ethanol powered vehicles will still be able to use petrol, that is why we are advocating that there will be a choice to consumers. Consumers will not be affected if ethanol is not available because they can use either of the two fuels (petrol or ethanol). A flex or converted car has an option of using petrol, ethanol or a blend of the two in any percentage at any particular time. This is why the technology has given birth to a mixture of different brands of vehicles known as Flex Fuel Vehicles (FFV). If a petrol driven vehicle has been fitted with a conversion kit system or if you buy a factory made flex vehicle, any mixture of ethanol and petrol can be used in a single tank meaning that you can have 100 percent petrol or 100 percent ethanol or any combination of the two.

Q: How are you going to price the ethanol?

A: It is expected that the pricing of ethanol like any fuel will be championed by Mera who are mandated to undertake such a role. However, we expect ethanol's price to be lower since it is a bio-fuel which is locally produced. So, issues of forex are out of question.

Q: What sort of modifications will the present vehicles need in order to run on the ethanol and how much will it cost?

A: The normal petrol driven vehicle (one with an electronic fuel injection system) can be converted to run on both ethanol and petrol by fitting it with a conversion kit. The conversion kit costs about \$100 and the fitting costs about K5 000 per car.

Q: And where will the vehicles be modified?

A: During the study, Lilongwe Technical College was charged with the responsibility of converting the vehicles but as we roll out the programme there is going to be training of motor vehicle technicians who will be given the responsibility of fitting the conversion kits.

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