TANKs for Nothing

While the increased use of ethanol in gasoline is beginning to raise eyebrows in the boating community, for those unfortunate enough to own a gas-powered boat with fiberglass tanks this boating season has become a nightmare characterized by cruel ironies, spotty information and agonizing choices.

Congressman John Shadegg (R-AZ), a Bertram owner and BoatU.S. member, is one of these boat owners. He's facing huge monetary losses, and perhaps worst of all, little chance of resolving the problem in time to save his boating season. Shadegg's 1973 28-foot Bertram *Inevitable*, a boat he has owned since 1980, began developing engine trouble late last season in San Diego, CA, where he has berthed it for the past three years.

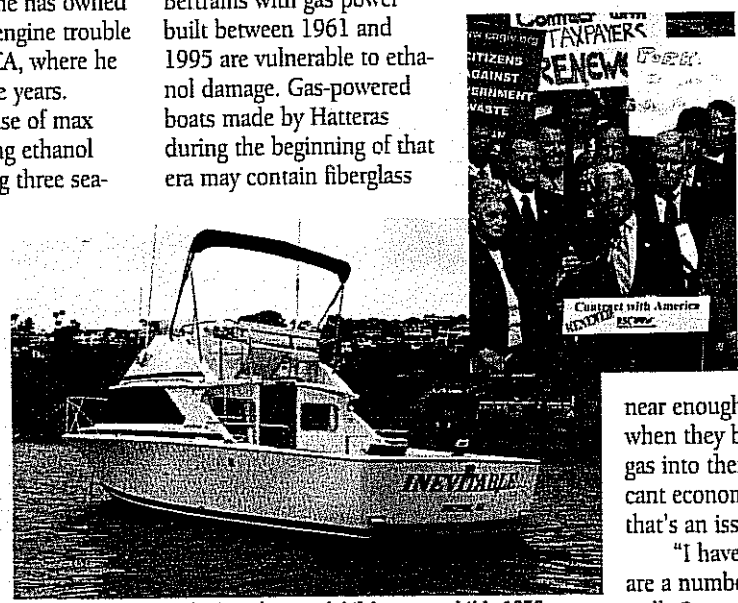
"I began noticing a decrease of max rpms," says Shadegg. Suspecting ethanol slowly damaged his tank during three seasons of running the boat in California, where the gas is blended with just over 5% ethanol, he brought the boat home to Arizona for an engine rebuild. Once home, he unknowingly compounded the problem by topping off his tank with E10 gas.

"Topping off the tank put ethanol laced gasoline within reach of the tank joint where the fiberglass is exposed," says Shadegg. "Now the exterior of the tank is seeping brown goo, almost a sap-like substance. I have to throw out $600 worth of gas and buy a new fuel tank.

"I do not have gas in the bilge yet. But if you rub the dark spots on the tank with your fingers and smell them, you smell gas."

Shadegg sought out the expert advice of Lee Dana, a former engineer for Bertram who now runs a consulting firm that offers advice and other services to Bertram owners who wish to refurbish or repair their classic boats.

"The tank is fit together like a shoe box," says Dana. "The top of the bottom piece is a cut edge with exposed fiberglass." Dana is currently working on matching up the eight different possible tank configurations that were built into 28-foot Bertrams from 1972 to 1995 to the hull numbers of those boats in order to design replacement tanks. He reports that after extensive talks with resin makers, he believes that all Bertrams with gas power built between 1961 and 1995 are vulnerable to ethanol damage. Gas-powered boats made by Hatteras during the beginning of that era may contain fiberglass gas tanks of similar construction and should therefore be considered suspect as well.



Congressman John Shadegg (upper right) has owned this 1973 Bertram for 26 years.

The good news is that Interplastic Corporation has worked out the correct resin for use with ethanol blended gas. Their formula is certified to withstand exposure to blends of 10% to 90% ethanol in gas. However, Dana has not lined up enough tank builders to take advantage of the new formula. One builder has begun production of one of the eight tank designs, a 165 gallon model that will retail for about $3,800 — and he has 30 customers on a waiting list to buy the tanks. That price does not include removal of the old tank, disposal of old gas, installation of the new tank, or any of the work required to gain access to the tanks which are cemented to the inside of the hull under the decks.

In the meantime, boaters like Shadegg face thousands of dollars in repairs or devaluation of their boats through no fault of their own.

"I'm extremely upset that I was not given any warning," says Shadegg. The congressman does not recall any notice or warning labels on gas pumps indicating the presence of ethanol, a sentiment echoed by BoatU.S. members in many parts of the country.

"I don't think there has been near enough publicity warning boaters that when they blindly pump what they think is gas into their tanks, they are doing significant economic damage to themselves. I think that's an issue that ought to be addressed.

"I have been clearly damaged and there are a number of other boaters out there as well. One of the solutions that might be the most fair would be to work with the ethanol industry to set up a fund to help out those boaters injured by undisclosed ethanol in their fuel.

"I'm not against alternative fuels, but we have to be aware of the consequences of alternative fuels," says Shadegg.

The unintended consequences stemming from requiring ethanol in gas in the marine environment will not vanish with new tanks. Shadegg believes that boaters need to let their representatives know that *this is a significant problem that needs federal attention.*

— By Michael Vatalaro