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Renewable Fuel Standard politics roil outlook for E15


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By [Kim Chipman \(/authors/792-kim-chipman\)](#)


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A poster on display during the Iowa Renewable Fuels Association meeting, Tuesday, Jan. 28, 2014, in Altoona, Iowa. (AP Photo/Charlie Neibergall)

A path forward for year-round E15 looks even tougher in the wake of EPA's biofuel-blending rules.

Biofuel debates are raising the stakes in a tense midterm election season.

Renewable Fuels Association says it stands ready to work with API on E15 and SRE reform.

Farm-state lawmakers return to Washington next week under pressure to pass a bill allowing more corn ethanol in cars, a challenge that grows more difficult by the day.

The Environmental Protection Agency's recently issued [biofuel-blending rules](https://www.agri-pulse.com/articles/24441-farm-oil-groups-give-mixed-reviews-to-epa-biofuel-blending-rules) (<https://www.agri-pulse.com/articles/24441-farm-oil-groups-give-mixed-reviews-to-epa-biofuel-blending-rules>) were mostly a major victory for agriculture but likely made the path even more rocky for legislation to allow year-round sales of higher ethanol blends, known as E15.

Clashes over energy and ag policies are mounting amid a high-stakes midterm election year set to be dominated by debate over gasoline price spikes and, in many key races, farm economy woes.

“A high percentage of rural voters are swing voters, even higher than in urban and suburban areas,” Iowa Farmers Union President Aaron Lehman, a fifth-generation crop grower, tells *Agri-Pulse*

In Iowa — the biggest producer of ethanol and the corn used to make it — two of its four congressional districts are considered “tossup” races as Republican incumbents try to hold onto their

House seats and the party overall fights to keep control of the chamber.

Three of the districts were won by Democrats as recently as 2018. Two years ago, Rep. Mariannette Miller-Meeke, who is running again this November, had the closest race of any Republican in Congress for that cycle.

E15 politics

House and Senate members who support crop-based fuels got good news from the Trump administration on March 27, when EPA finalized (<https://www.agri-pulse.com/articles/24404-white-house-finishes-review-of-epas-biofuel-blending-mandates>) the highest-ever national quotas for mixing biofuel into the national fuel supply.

Lawmakers then left for a two-week recess without making any clear progress on crafting E15 legislation.

Farmers, renewable fuel producers and President Donald Trump all have intensified calls to get an E15 bill over the finish line as both ethanol and corn producers need to find new markets. Proponents say higher blends would be a boon for corn demand and help ethanol producers manage declining liquid fuel consumption until new markets like clean jet fuel develop.

The most recent obstacle in legalizing year-round E15, which is banned from being sold in summer months due to air quality concerns that the industry says are outdated, stems from disagreement among oil refiners over proposed changes to the 2005 Renewable Fuel Standard that established the biofuel mandate.

The EPA’s final blending rules likely deepened that division.

At issue is EPA's reallocation (<https://www.epa.gov/system/files/documents/2026-03/set-2-detailed-fact-sheet.pdf>) of 70% of 2023-25 small refinery exemptions (SREs) into the final 2026-27 standards. The SREs are at the center of the rift between large and small refiners in E15 negotiations.

The American Petroleum Institute, which represents big, multi-national refiners, wants any ethanol-expansion bill to also revamp the RFS to reduce the number of refiners eligible for exemptions. API says SREs cause lack of transparency and uncertainty in the market. Independent refiners counter that the powerful oil lobby wants to drive them out of business and consolidate the industry.

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EPA's reallocation "distorts the marketplace, rewarding exempted refineries while disadvantaging the majority of refiners who are not exempted," said Will Hupman, API vice president of downstream policy. "This highlights the need for legislative reform to ensure the RFS delivers certainty, supports investment, and maintains a reliable fuel supply."

Hupman also said API supports the robust biofuel volume mandates, a dramatic turn from the prior decade.

API's positioning in biofuel policy lobbying has shifted drastically in recent years. It's gone from fiercely opposing RFS mandates to more recently uniting (<https://www.api.org/news-policy-and-issues/news/2025/02/20/statement-liquid-fuels-groups>) with agriculture and biofuel interests in making recommendations to EPA on blending targets, also known as renewable volume obligations, or RVOs.

The oil group also has joined the National Corn Growers Association and ethanol groups like the Renewable Fuels Association (RFA) in pushing lawmakers for E15. However, API pulled that support late last year, citing opposition to other biofuel actions out of Washington that it said put its members at a disadvantage.

The leverage seemed to work in getting an E15 deal early this year that included the overhaul of the exemption process, until smaller refiners took issue and [made their case](https://www.agri-pulse.com/articles/24199-e15-politics-snap-boozman-as-ethanol-legislation-deadline-looms) (<https://www.agri-pulse.com/articles/24199-e15-politics-snap-boozman-as-ethanol-legislation-deadline-looms>) to lawmakers including Senate Ag Committee Chairman John Boozman, R-Ark.

Since then, attempts by lawmakers to come up with a compromise E15 deal have fallen flat. There's been increasing talk on Capitol Hill on pushing ahead with E15 legislation that doesn't address the exemption issue, though it's not clear how that might impact votes from oil-state



