

Straw from area farmers helps fuel Ferrari's F1 dream machines

Today's race in Bahrain marks first time Iogen's cellulosic ethanol has been used in Grand Prix

BY LOUISA TAYLOR, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN MARCH 14, 2010



Ferrari Formula One driver Felipe Massa of Brazil drives during the qualifying session of the Bahrain F1 Grand Prix at Sakhir circuit in Manama March 13, 2010.

Photograph by: Caren Firouz, Reuters

OTTAWA — Ruth McLaren spent a cool, blustery Saturday morning as she usually does, doing chores on and around her Mountain, Ont., farm. Among other things, she fed the cows and loaded straw onto a flat-bed truck.

A world away, in the dry heat of Manama, Bahrain, Brazilian driver Felipe Massa was savouring his excellent performance in qualifying runs earlier in the day for the Bahrain Formula One Grand Prix. Massa and his Ferrari teammate Fernando Alonso of Spain nabbed second and third position for the start of Sunday's race -- and they did it using fuel made in part with straw supplied by McLaren.

Ferrari runs on straw?

Double Diamond Farms, a family business run by McLaren and partner Don Duncan for 22 years, collects straw from farmers across eastern and northern Ontario and ships it to Iogen Corp. of Ottawa,

a biofuel manufacturer. logen uses the straw to produce cellulosic ethanol, which it supplies to Royal Dutch Shell, which adds it to the gasoline it supplies to Ferrari.

Today's race marks the first time cellulosic ethanol has been used in the Grand Prix, and the folks at logen are pretty excited about it. So is McLaren.

"To be able to see the product going from the field to the vehicle like that is pretty amazing," said McLaren on Saturday, as she took a break between chores and dinner.

Jeff Passmore, executive vice-president of logen, said the Ottawa company is thrilled to be making Formula One history, even if it's not of the kind most fans would ever notice.

"No one else in the world is making large quantities of cellulosic ethanol like logen is," said Passmore. "We're talking about several thousand litres of fuel here."

Shell owns 50 per cent of logen's energy division.

"Since 2008, the rule of Formula One is that biocomponents make

up 5.75 per cent by weight of the gasoline," said Rainer Winzenried, spokesman for Royal Dutch Shell in The Hague. "The logen ethanol is not competing with the food chain, and has a clear advantage compared to other components for gasoline."

Unlike other forms of ethanol, cellulosic ethanol uses waste product and does not divert crops intended for the food chain.

"Once farmers have harvested the grain for food -- making bread, for example -- we use the leftover straw for ethanol," said Passmore. "We turn that agricultural residue into a high-octane fuel that contains 35 per cent oxygen."

logen shipped ethanol from its Hunt Club Road demonstration facility to Shell more than a year ago, and Shell has been testing its performance in Europe for months. It wasn't until early Friday morning that logen executives got word their ethanol was going to power Ferrari's team for the entire Formula One season.

"This demonstrates once again that a Canadian company is a world leader in this field," said Passmore. "The fuel is performing extremely well in a very demanding high-performance application."

Passmore says logen's ethanol produces far fewer greenhouse gases than other fuels, because other components of the straw fibre are burned on site to provide the electricity for running the ethanol plant.

"That's means you don't have to import power to run the plant, because 80 to 90 per cent of your energy requirements come from the fibre itself," Passmore explained.

That's not happening at the

Ottawa demonstration plant, but Passmore says it's the plan for the Saskatchewan manufacturing facility the company is planning to build. Iogen has already signed 600 farmers to supply straw.

Double Diamond Farms trucks at least five loads of straw each week to the Ottawa facility, said McLaren. Each load is about 25 tonnes of straw, bundled into bales and tied down to the flat-bed truck.

Passmore, who is travelling to Amsterdam this weekend, isn't a big racing fan, but says this weekend, he will definitely be tuning in the Grand Prix.

McLaren says she isn't much of a fan either, but Duncan is, so they, too, might be keen to see the Ferrari drivers in action -- knowing that they've got Double Diamond straw in their tanks.

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