

THERE is not even a hint of kitchen smells wafting around the Nasamax garage. Though sugar beet and potatoes are the most important ingredients in their assault on Le Mans, the garage is odour-free — in contrast to the cocktail of gases that will soar into the sky above the Circuit de la Sarthe this weekend.

Unlike the rest of the cars on view at Le Mans, which rely on oil for their power, the fuel going into the Nasamax car is ethanol, developed by the Elf petrol company from a mixture of sugar beet and potatoes grown around Le Mans. It is being hailed as an eco-friendly fuel that could be used immediately.

Ethanol is so convincing that European Union regulations demand that convention-

Nasamax promotes organic option

al petrol and diesel on sale at the pumps contain at least 5 per cent of this new bio-fuel by 2008.

But the British Nasamax team have taken the concept even farther by putting a car on the racetrack that will prove that high performance and concerns about global warming can go hand in hand. The simplified theory is that any carbon dioxide emissions are absorbed by new crops — including corn, maize and potatoes — from which ethanol is made, so the circular sequence is an easy

renewable energy source, unlike petrol.

While ethanol releases only about 60 per cent of the energy of petrol, clever chemistry and engineering means the Nasamax Judd should be up there with the leaders. The team reckon their Judd engine is capable of 800bhp — not much less than a petrol-powered Formula One engine — but is limited for the race to 650bhp.

Kevin McGarrity, the team's lead driver, has no fears about the new technology. "There is no difference at all driving the car," he said as he prepared for the 24-hour slog around La Sarthe. "You put your foot down and the car goes really well. I drove the MG and that was a fast car around here. This car is just as fast. We know it is reliable, so there is no reason why this car should not be up there contesting the event."

The bigger question is whether ethanol has a future in racing, or even on Britain's roads as a viable alternative to petrol and diesel. John

McNeil, the team's technical director, believes that it has, but the Nasamax entry this weekend will have to go some way to proving the point. "Hydrogen is hailed as the fuel of the future, but ethanol is an immediate option to fill the gap until that arrives in the distant future," he said.

"The carbon dioxide emissions are effectively neutral as they are absorbed by the next crop and other emissions are substantially reduced. We know it works and we know it will work in motor racing. The question is why are we not using it now?"

"Elf have distilleries around Le Mans making ethanol. It is natural and easily renewable and we hope to show there is no difference once the fuel is put into the car."

Ethanol would be a viable alternative for millions of British motorists. Unlike hydrogen, which would need a new distribution network, ethanol can be transported and dispensed in the same way as petrol and diesel. It is a potentially easy way to reduce our reliance on oil and end our dependence on the Middle East — transforming farmers into the world's new oil sheikhs. And all for growing sugar beet and spuds.

KEVIN EASON



which relies on ethanol, will both take their place at Le Mans

