

# Braking news: Gas consumption goes into reverse

April 2008

Clark Williams-Derry, Research Director

## SUMMARY

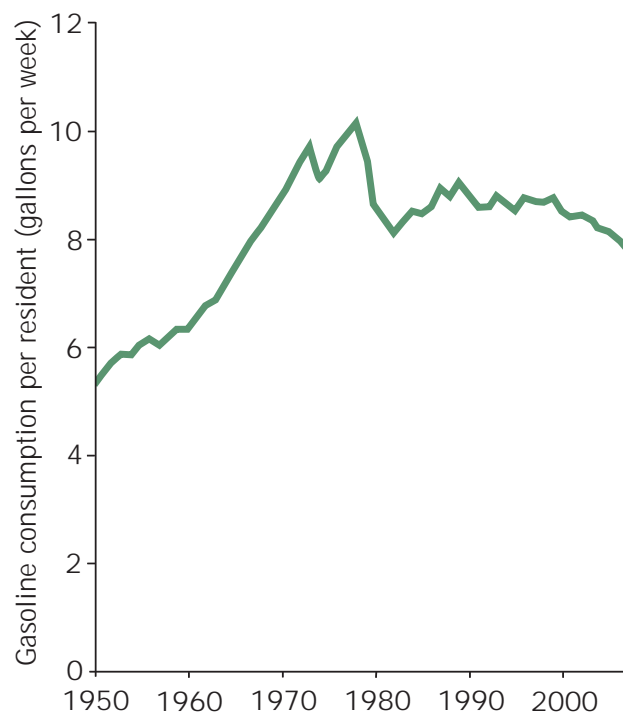
- **We're guzzling less gas.** Measured per capita, gasoline consumption in the Pacific Northwest states has fallen to its lowest level since 1966. Per-person gas consumption in the region has declined in seven of the last eight years; and climate-warming CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from gasoline have fallen by six-tenths of a ton per capita in the region since 1999. That decline in per capita gasoline consumption—11 percent, overall—is the equivalent of every driver in the Northwest taking a five-week holiday from driving in 2007.
- **We're shifting our travel habits.** Prompted by rising gas prices, drivers and families have taken steps to conserve fuel on multiple fronts. Throughout the Pacific Northwest, transit ridership has increased steadily; new vehicle efficiency has improved modestly; and transit- and pedestrian-friendly development has made strides in our major cities.
- **We're growing.** Rising population has almost exactly offset the decline in per capita gas consumption—meaning that total gasoline sales and gasoline-related greenhouse gas emissions have remained roughly flat in the region for nine consecutive years.
- **Smart policies are key to further progress.** The right policy environment—such as including transportation fuels in a regional cap-and-trade system—would prompt continued reductions in our region's gasoline consumption.

## FINDINGS

Per-person gasoline consumption declined in the Pacific Northwest in 2007—**marking the seventh such drop in the last eight years**. Average annual gasoline consumption in the Northwest states—Washington, Oregon, and Idaho—fell to 406 gallons per person during 2007, down from 414 gallons in 2006. (Data for 2007 were recently finalized and made available by taxation agencies in the three states.)

Last year's decline is a continuation of what has become a long-standing trend. Between 1999 (a year when inflation-adjusted oil prices reached post-war lows) and 2007 (when oil prices were soaring) northwesterners' *per capita* consumption of gasoline fell by 11 percent—to 7.8 gallons per resident weekly, down from 8.7 gallons in 1999. All told, northwesterners reduced their consumption by nearly 50 gallons per person per year over the period, **and achieved the lowest personal gas usage in the region since 1966** (see Figure 1). Including emissions from petroleum extraction and refining, the CO<sub>2</sub> emissions attributable to the Northwest's cars and light trucks have declined by six-tenths of a ton per person since 1999.

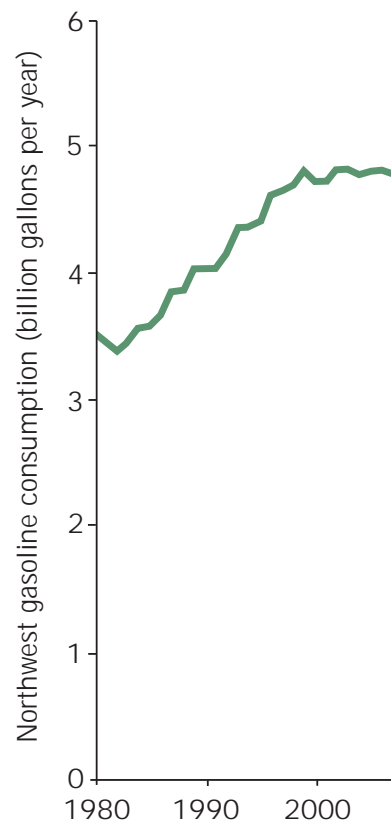
Figure 1. *Last year, gasoline consumption per Northwest resident fell to its lowest level since 1966.*



To put these figures in perspective: an 11 percent decline in per capita gasoline consumption is the equivalent of every driver in the Northwest taking a **five-week holiday from driving** in 2007.

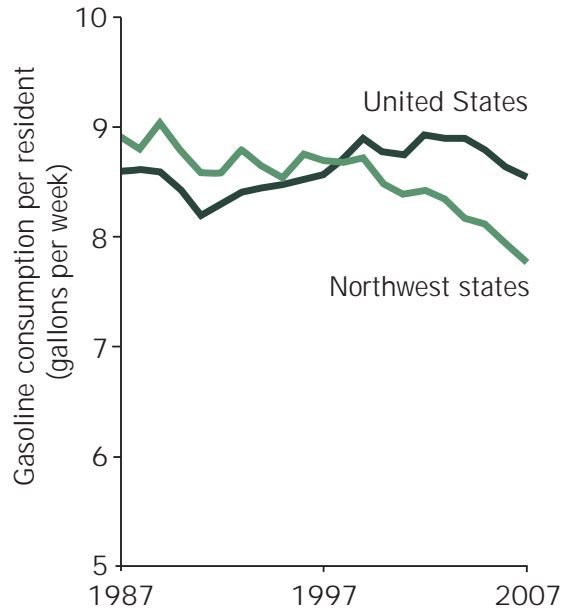
Despite the declines in *per capita* consumption, *total* consumption remained flat: **population growth has almost perfectly counterbalanced the decreases** in per person gasoline usage. As a result, overall gasoline sales have stagnated in the Northwest for the last nine years (see Figure 2). Total consumption in Washington and Oregon has actually declined slightly in recent years, though Idaho's has risen, in part due to rapid population growth.

Figure 2. *Total gasoline consumption in the US Northwest has been essentially flat for nine years.*



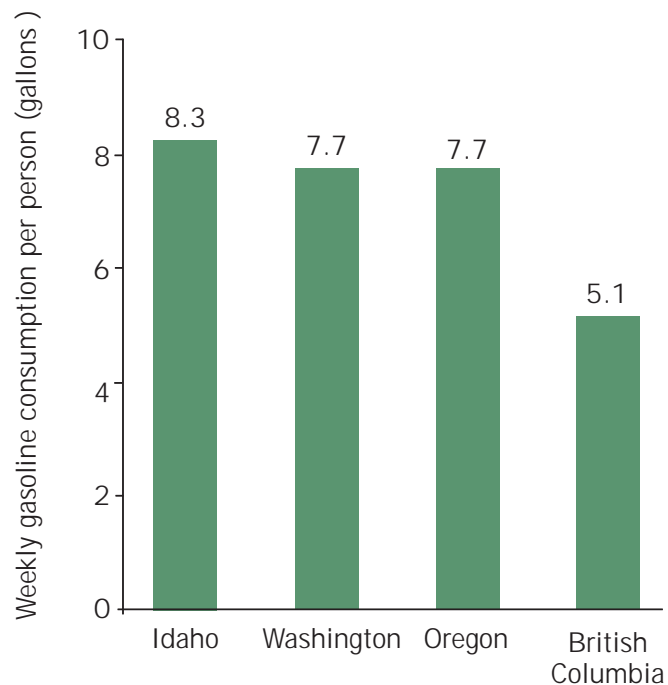
The Northwest is also outpacing the national average for gasoline reductions. As recently as a decade ago, northwesterners used more gasoline per person than the national average. Today, personal consumption in our region is about 9 percent below typical US consumption—a testament to the Northwest's progress in saving fuel on multiple fronts (see Analysis). Nationally, per-person gas consumption fell in 2007, though by a smaller amount than in the Northwest states. In 2007, US consumption stood at 8.5 gallons per person per week, down from 8.6 gallons in 2006 (see Figure 3). National declines in per-person consumption have slightly outpaced population gains in recent years, leading to a 1 percent decline in total consumption since 2004. This decrease, though modest, represents the first sustained, three-year pause in national gasoline consumption growth in a generation.

Figure 3. *The Northwest states are outpacing the national average for gasoline reductions.*



Despite recent reductions, northwesterners still consume prodigious amounts of gasoline. Daily consumption in the Northwest states remains **nearly twice as high as the global average** for **high-income countries**—50 percent higher than the average daily consumption of their neighbors to the north, in the Canadian province of British Columbia (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. *Residents of the US Northwest burn about 50 percent more gasoline per capita than do their neighbors in British Columbia.*



As in the Northwest states, British Columbia's total gasoline sales flattened out in the late 1990s, as falling per capita consumption offset rising population. However, measured per person, gasoline consumption in the province isn't falling quite as fast as it is in Washington and Oregon—perhaps the result of a booming economy in the lower mainland of the province, and a stronger currency that's moderated oil price increases. Still, gasoline sales in the province fell from 5.7 gallons per person per week in 1999, to 5.2 gallons last year—by US standards, a stellar record. **Provincial residents now consume less gas per capita than in any US state**—even the state of New York, which boasts the densest, least car-dependent metropolis in the nation.

## ANALYSIS

The substantial and sustained decreases in personal gas consumption result from gas-saving measures taken by consumers and businesses throughout the Northwest, many of which have been spurred by higher gasoline prices in recent years.

- **Transit ridership is up.** In 2007, every major transit system in the Pacific Northwest reported record ridership.
  - In Greater Seattle, Sound Transit reported a [12.5 percent ridership boost](#) in 2007. Community Transit in Snohomish County saw a [10 percent increase](#). The King County Metro transit agency reported a [7 percent ridership increase](#), to 110 million passenger boardings—an all-time high.
  - In Greater Portland, the TriMet transit agency reported [96.9 million transit boardings](#) during the 2007 fiscal year, the highest level of transit usage in the city's history. Ridership on greater Portland's rail transit systems has nearly doubled since 1999.
  - In Metro Vancouver, TransLink boardings—including bus, passenger ferry, and train—[exceeded 290 million](#) in 2007, a four-percent increase over 2006. Total transit ridership has increased 30 percent since 1999, and 67 percent since 1990. Similarly, transit boardings in Victoria were up [almost 3 percent in 2007](#), compared with the previous year—with even steeper increases in the fourth quarter of the year.
  - In the US, transit ridership was at the [highest level in 50 years](#), spurred by a 2.1 percent ridership increase over 2006.
- **Fuel efficiency has increased.** Nationally, US hybrid sales have grown every year since 2004, and increased to their [highest level ever](#) in 2007. And recent sales figures suggest that sales of light trucks, including SUVs and pickups, are [falling four times faster](#) than passenger car sales. And the EPA [recently estimated](#) that new vehicle fuel economy rose by 5 percent from 2004 to 2006. (Figures specific to the Pacific Northwest are unavailable at this time.)

- **Vehicle travel is down.** State figures for Washington, for example, suggest that vehicle travel per person [declined by 3.5 percent](#) between [2003](#) and [2007](#). Likewise, [federal data](#) show declines in per capita vehicle travel in Oregon and Washington, and stable travel in Idaho, between 2000 and 2005—a time when personal vehicle travel rose nationally.
- **More people are choosing transit-friendly and pedestrian-oriented neighborhoods.** Analyses of census data for Portland and Seattle, as well as for some of their outlying municipalities, show substantial growth in compact, pedestrian-friendly downtown developments over the 1990s—growth that has continued in recent years as well. A forthcoming Sightline analysis of smart-growth trends in greater Vancouver, BC finds substantial increases in such pedestrian-friendly development over the last decade, particularly in the Vancouver city core.

## DATA SOURCES

For this analysis, gasoline consumption includes all highway consumption of gasoline, including consumption by private households, businesses, transit vehicles, and government agencies. Sightline compiled gasoline consumption data from a variety of sources, including:

**The Federal Highway Administration.** The FHWA collects, analyzes, and corrects state-level gasoline consumption data for all 50 states and the District of Columbia. Gasoline consumption trends from 1950 through 2005 are taken from final FHWA data from the [Highway Statistics Series](#), tables MF-26 and MF-226. Data for 2006 represent preliminary figures from the Highway Statistics Series, from table MF-21.

**State and provincial taxation agencies.** British Columbia, Washington, Oregon, and Idaho all measure gas consumption closely, for the purpose of collecting state or provincial gas taxes. Although federal numbers are based largely on the state figures, in some instances the federal and state data series diverge. For long-term trends, Sightline relies on federal figures. For Idaho, state figures appear more reliable over the last decade, so Sightline adjusts federal numbers to reflect the gasoline sales trends reported in state figures. For short-term trends covering changes in fossil fuel use from 2006 to 2007, Sightline relies solely on state and provincial figures.

**The US and Canadian censuses.** State, provincial, and national population figures are all derived from national census department estimates. The Canadian census is taken every 5 years, and was most recently conducted in 2006. However, complete US census counts were last conducted in 2000, and official estimates for recent years may be less reliable than for the early part of the decade. Thus, per capita gas consumption figures for the US and the Pacific Northwest states may be revised slightly after 2010 census data are released.

## DATA APPENDIX

HIGHWAY GASOLINE CONSUMPTION (gallons per person per week)		
	1999	2007
Washington	8.7	7.7
Oregon	8.6	7.7
Idaho	9.2	8.3
Northwest states	8.7	7.8
British Columbia	5.6	5.2
Pacific Northwest (Including BC)	7.9	7.1
USA	8.9	8.6
Canada*	5.9	5.8

Note: Canadian consumption represents 1999 and 2006. 2007 data is not yet available.

PER-PERSON CONSUMPTION OF HIGHWAY GASOLINE, PACIFIC NORTHWEST					
Year	Washington	Oregon	Idaho	British Columbia	Pacific Northwest
1950	4.9	5.7	5.5		
1960	6.0	6.6	6.9		
1970	8.2	9.2	10.1		
1980	8.3	9.2	8.9	7.8	8.4
1990	8.7	8.8	8.8	5.1	7.8
1999	8.7	8.6	9.2	5.6	7.9
2000	8.5	8.3	8.8	5.5	7.7
2001	8.4	8.2	8.7	5.4	7.5
2002	8.4	8.3	8.9	5.3	7.6
2003	8.4	8.1	8.7	5.3	7.5
2004	8.1	8.0	8.6	5.3	7.4
2005	8.1	8.0	8.6	5.2	7.3
2006	7.9	7.8	8.4	5.2	7.2
2007	7.7	7.7	8.3	5.2	7.1

**TOTAL CONSUMPTION OF HIGHWAY GASOLINE, PACIFIC NORTHWEST (1000 gallons)**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Washington</b>	<b>Oregon</b>	<b>Idaho</b>	<b>British Columbia</b>	<b>Pacific Northwest</b>
1950	603,878	455,391	170,585		
1960	892,356	613,468	242,913		
1970	1,473,663	1,003,143	376,634		
1980	1,799,730	1,271,882	442,122	1,117,539	4,631,273
1990	2,230,958	1,315,692	464,899	874,947	4,886,496
1999	2,636,932	1,525,908	613,122	1,170,226	5,946,188
2000	2,620,003	1,494,986	600,630	1,156,922	5,872,539
2001	2,622,633	1,487,269	599,572	1,138,760	5,848,234
2002	2,659,936	1,514,970	620,675	1,135,155	5,930,736
2003	2,664,999	1,505,004	621,471	1,155,055	5,946,528
2004	2,637,251	1,499,299	628,870	1,167,611	5,933,031
2005	2,638,739	1,510,803	635,879	1,166,158	5,951,579
2006	2,626,518	1,509,784	639,350	1,170,242	5,945,894
2007	2,612,388	1,500,235	647,084	1,178,133	5,937,839



## WEEKLY GASOLINE CONSUMPTION PER PERSON, US STATES, 2006

State	Gallons of gasoline per person, weekly, 2006	State	Gallons of gasoline per person, weekly, 2006
District of Columbia	4.1	Oklahoma	9.2
New York	5.6	New Mexico	9.2
Hawaii	7.0	Arkansas	9.2
Rhode Island	7.2	New Jersey	9.3
Alaska	7.4	Minnesota	9.3
Utah	7.5	South Dakota	9.3
Illinois	7.5	Montana	9.3
Pennsylvania	7.6	Texas	9.4
<b>Oregon</b>	<b>7.8</b>	Indiana	9.4
<b>Washington</b>	<b>7.9</b>	Tennessee	9.5
California	8.2	North Dakota	9.5
Wisconsin	8.2	Kentucky	9.6
Massachusetts	8.2	Delaware	9.7
Colorado	8.3	Virginia	9.8
Ohio	8.3	Iowa	9.9
Connecticut	8.3	Georgia	9.9
Nebraska	8.4	Maine	10.0
<b>Idaho</b>	<b>8.4</b>	New Hampshire	10.0
Kansas	8.6	Missouri	10.0
West Virginia	8.6	Vermont	10.3
Arizona	8.7	Mississippi	10.4
Nevada	8.7	Alabama	10.6
Florida	8.9	South Carolina	10.9
Michigan	8.9	Wyoming	11.4
Maryland	9.0	Louisiana	11.4
North Carolina	9.1		

Note: All figures except Idaho from Federal Highway Administration and US Census data. Idaho has been adjusted based on state data, to account for inconsistencies in federal figures.