

Driving on Empty

Transportation accounts for 28% of national energy consumptionⁱ, but it accounts for 55% of Missouri oil consumption.ⁱⁱ Light vehicles (cars, SUVs, pickup trucks, and vans) account for over 90% of the total.ⁱⁱⁱ Nationally, the number of per capita miles driven declined to less than 9,500 in 1980, but has since risen to over 12,000.^{iv}

In 2006, Missourians drove an estimated 2.74 million miles going to-and-from work. Only 1% of those miles were by public transportation, and less than 11% were in carpools. Some 81% involved people in cars, trucks, or vans driving alone.^v The increase in yearly miles driven per capita partially reflects urban sprawl, and the ever-longer distances we must drive, wherever we want to go. The average daily commute (including both ways) in Missouri is 46 minutes,^v which doesn't sound like much, but translates to about 24 eight-hour days spent sitting in a car each year, or 2.9 years over a 45-year career. Most large cities (not including St. Louis and Kansas City, thankfully) have longer commutes, and the number of super-commuters who travel over 80 minutes per day is growing. In a recent contest, the longest commute was 186 miles one-way, and several were over 150 miles.^{vi} Long commutes are not only wasteful of energy, but they cause a variety of health problems, as well.^{vii}

National CAFE mileage standards^{viii} initially caused the average fleet mileage to increase. But then many of us switched from driving cars (80% of new car sales in 1980) to driving SUVs, pickups, and vans (about 50% of new car sales since 2000). SUVs, pickups and vans are categorized as light trucks, and must meet less strict mileage standards under federal CAFE regulations. Light trucks are required for some purposes, but many are driven because of a stylistic preference rather than a practical need. As a result, the average gas mileage of the U.S. fleet gradually worsened from 22 mpg in 1987 to 19 mpg in 2004.^{ix}

Clearly, our driving habits are bonkers. To sustain their energy future, Missourians need to drive less and they need to do it in fuel-efficient cars. We need governmental policies that discourage urban sprawl. We have made mass transit unnecessarily difficult and costly. We need policies that support affordable and attractive mass transit, and which encourage people to use it. Curitiba, a town in Brazil, provides a shining example that affordable public transportation is possible and will be used by the people. We lack only the vision and the will.

We need policies that support and reward the development of, purchase of, and use of fuel-efficient cars. Bicycles can be another part of the solution. All over Europe, people ride bicycles. A number of European cities have public bicycle stations where one can rent a bicycle, ride to one's destination, and return the bicycle to a station there. Bicycle riding would not only help with the energy situation, it would help with the obesity and lack of exercise that plague America.

Even the casual reader, however, must be struck by the difficulty of achieving the goals outlined above. They are really existential questions, involving our whole life style, as much or more than they are specific policy questions. Who are we as a people? What are we willing to become? How do we see our place in the world? And how can leaders help us in making better lifestyle choices? By example? Through policy? These are big, important questions.

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- ⁱ *Annual Energy Review, 2006*, published by the Energy Information Administration.
- ⁱⁱ Energy Information Administration, Department of Energy.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Davis, Stacy, & Diegel, Susan. (2007). *Transportation Energy Handbook, Edition 26*. U.S. Department of Energy, <http://cta.ornl.gov/data/download26.shtml>.
- ^{iv} Nersesian, Roy. (2007). *Energy for the 32st Century*. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe.
- ^v American Fact Finder, U.S. Census Bureau, http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/STTable?_bm=y&-context=st&-qr_name=ACS_2006_EST_G00_S0802&-ds_name=ACS_2006_EST_G00_&-CONTEXT=st&-tree_id=306&-redoLog=false&-geo_id=04000US29&-format=&-_lang=en.
- ^{vi} Richards, Gary. (5/4/2007). Your commute is bad? Try 186 miles each way. *Seattle Times*.
- ^{vii} Annette Schaefer. (2005) Commuting Takes Its Toll. *Scientific American*. Viewed online at <http://www.sciammind.com/article.cfm?articleID=0000DB5A-5A22-132F-949983414B7F0000&pageNumber=2>.
- ^{viii} CAFE stands for Corporate Average Fuel Economy. They are set by the federal government.
- ^{ix} Light-Duty Automotive Technology and Fuel Economy Trends: 1975 Through 2007, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Table 1, p. 10. <Http://www.epa.gov/otaq/fetrends.htm>.