



Americans Are Fueling Up Cheaply, and the Climate Suffers

Cheap gas puts people back on the road and buying gas-guzzlers, reversing long decline in greenhouse gas emissions from passenger vehicles.

[By Elizabeth Douglass, InsideClimate News](#)

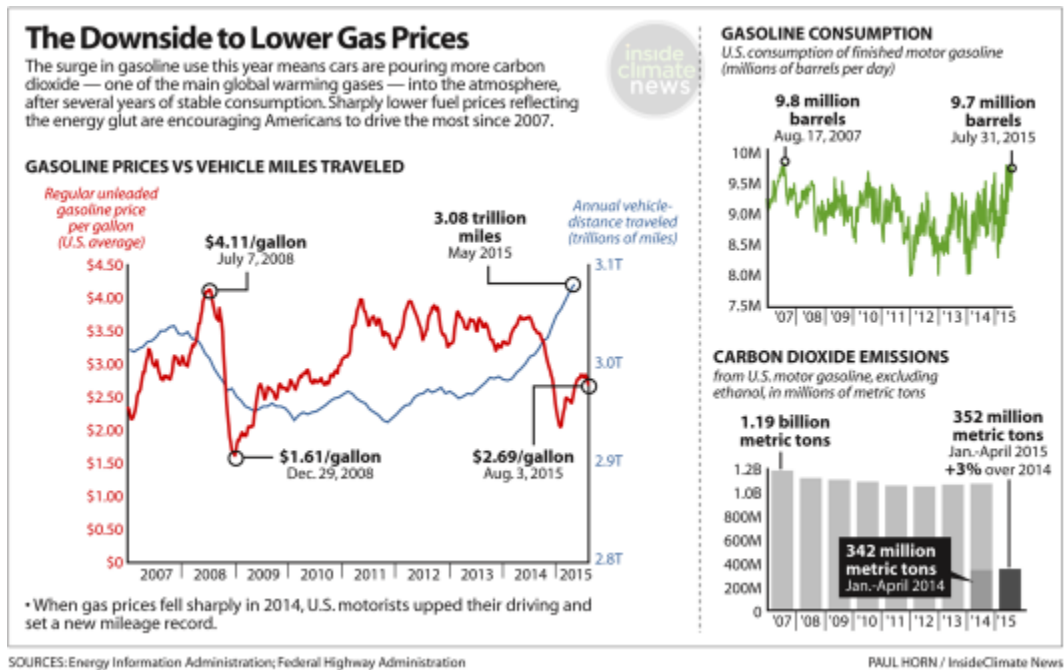
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So much for the idea that American gasoline use topped out in the last decade.

Lower oil prices and the improving economy have sparked an increase in fuel use, road travel and vehicle emissions. It puts an emphatic end to the notion that better fuel economy and fewer active drivers would shrink demand for gasoline in the U.S. from what was thought to be its peak in 2007.

That's bad news for the climate. Processing crude oil and burning gasoline send huge amounts of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere and are major contributors to global warming. The increase in those emissions comes at an inopportune time. World leaders expect the U.S. to lead the way on emission reductions as negotiations continue toward a global climate treaty in December.

After falling for five straight years, U.S. carbon dioxide emissions from gasoline consumption rose 1.4 percent in 2013, followed by a less than 1 percent increase in 2014 to 1.07 billion metric tons, according to the federal Energy Information Administration (EIA). Last year's total amounted to 83 percent of the CO₂ emissions for the nation's transportation sector, and 28 percent of energy-related emissions.



"When it comes to the climate, every bit matters, and we need to continue to be on a downward trajectory," said Roland Hwang, director of the energy and transportation program at the Natural Resources Defense Council. "It's not as devastating for the environment as it was in the 90s, when we had no carbon constraints in place, but I'm still worried."

Part of the increase can be attributed to post-recession economic recovery, but the most recent data show accelerated demand and driving trends and a more pronounced uptick in emissions associated with sharply lower gas prices. Through the first four months of 2015, gasoline combustion added 352 million metric tons of carbon dioxide to the atmosphere—a 3 percent increase from the similar period last year, according to EIA statistics.

Through May, gasoline use is up 2.9 percent. During the last week of July, the nation's drivers used an average of 9.68 million barrels, or more than 406 million gallons, of gasoline a day, up 3.5 percent from that week last year, EIA figures show. And two weeks ago, average consumption hit the highest level in eight years and nearly matched the record weekly average of 9.76 million barrels a day from August 2007.

Following that 2007 peak, gasoline use shrank as much as 18 percent nationwide, hitting a low of 8 million barrels a day in January 2012. This reflected the enactment of landmark fuel economy mandates for U.S. vehicles, record-high pump prices, and a deep and drawn-out recession.

There are systemic changes pointing to lower fuel demand as well. Those include an increase in gas-electric hybrid cars, progressively stricter fuel economy rules, younger generations that are less enamored of the nation's car culture, and Baby Boomers heading toward retirement.

With those shifts underway, climate activists and others had hoped that U.S. gasoline consumption would not resume its steady rise once the economy recovered.

Instead, American motorists are filling up more than ever—at least for now.

The uptick in fuel demand started in 2013, then accelerated last year when oil prices crashed, triggering a dramatic drop in prices at the pump. By the end of January, regular gasoline was selling for an average of \$2.04 a gallon, the lowest nationwide average since April 2009. Oil prices rebounded, and refinery problems in California have since pushed gasoline costs higher. On Aug. 3, the nationwide average price was \$2.69 a gallon, but the cost was much lower in many areas.

"In most places, gas is at the lowest prices they've been for 6.5 years," said Tom Kloza, global head for energy analysis at the Oil Price Information Service, a data provider and the owner of GasBuddy.com "We've seen a surge in demand. This has been the first summer since the recession that the concept of a driving season has been more real than mythical."

In California, one of the world's largest gasoline markets, gasoline use rose 11.7 percent in 2014 to 14.7 billion gallons. Through the first four months of 2015, gasoline consumption is up 3.5 percent even though a refinery outage bumped California's prices well above the national average. The state's 2015 gas guzzling is on pace to be about 1 billion gallons short of its 2006 peak of 15.8 billion gallons.

Automakers have been reporting resurgent sales of heavy SUVs and other less fuel-efficient vehicles, according to Dan Becker, director of the Safe Climate Campaign, a Washington, D.C., group focused on cars and climate change.

"The auto companies make proportionately more money on each truck they sell, so they try to sell more of them," said Becker. "Pickup trucks are thirsty, and SUVs are thirsty."

To keep up with higher domestic demand and feed profitable export markets, U.S. refineries have been running at more than 90 percent of capacity and gulping record amounts of crude oil—more than 17 million barrels a day, EIA statistics show. Refinery profit margins, especially in California, have soared because they are buying oil cheaply and not passing all the savings through to their gasoline and diesel customers.

With the extra fuel, U.S. motorists traveled a record 3.08 trillion miles in the 12 months that ended June 1, topping levels from the driving heydays of 2007 through mid-2008, according to data from the Federal Highway Administration. Vehicle travel was up 2.7 percent in May, and up 3.4 percent for the first five months of 2015.

What matters most on the climate front is the total amount of CO₂ and other greenhouse gases being released into the atmosphere. The longer this new demand surge lasts, the greater the cumulative effect for the climate.

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