

Reduction of Vehicle Miles Traveled

February 2023

“TRANSPORTATION, at 45% of the state’s 2018 emissions, Washington must embrace a multi-pronged strategy in this sector of electrifying as many passenger, truck and freight vehicles as possible; investing immediately in the infrastructure required to support massive vehicle electrification; and developing incentives and land-use plans to **reduce miles traveled** and increase other modes of transport, such as transit, cycling and walking.”

– 2021 State Energy Strategy, Washington State Department of Commerce

Background

Vehicle miles traveled, or VMT, is the measure of all the miles traveled by motor vehicles on the transportation system. VMT provides a useful measure of use of the system and tailpipe emissions associated with vehicle use. There are three major public policy goals that seek a reduction in VMT:

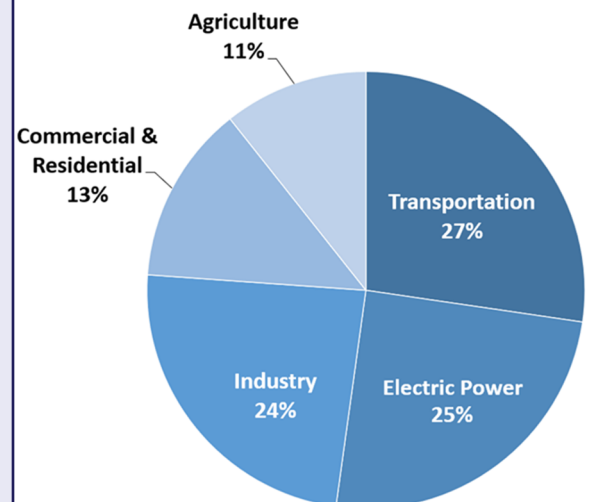
1. managing transportation demand and seeking efficient use of the multimodal transportation system to reduce the need for expensive road infrastructure projects
2. Improving air quality and lowering greenhouse gas emissions
3. lowering energy use required for travel and the amount of clean energy needed to support the electrification of the transportation sector of the economy

Federal Perspective

In December 2021 the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and Federal Transit Administration (FTA) issued updated Planning Emphasis Areas to support the implementation of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Bill passed in November 2021. One of the eight areas of emphasis is *Tackling the Climate Crisis – Transition to a Clean Energy Resilient Future*. Work tasks that metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) are directed to undertake include “evaluating opportunities to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by reducing single-occupancy vehicle trips and increasing access to public transportation, shift to lower emission modes of transportation[.]”

National interest in VMT reduction is increasing, with proposed legislation and federal rules that target VMT and greenhouse gas reductions.

Total U.S. Greenhouse Gas Emissions by Economic Sector in 2020



U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (2022). Inventory of U.S. Greenhouse Gas Emissions and Sinks: 1990-2020

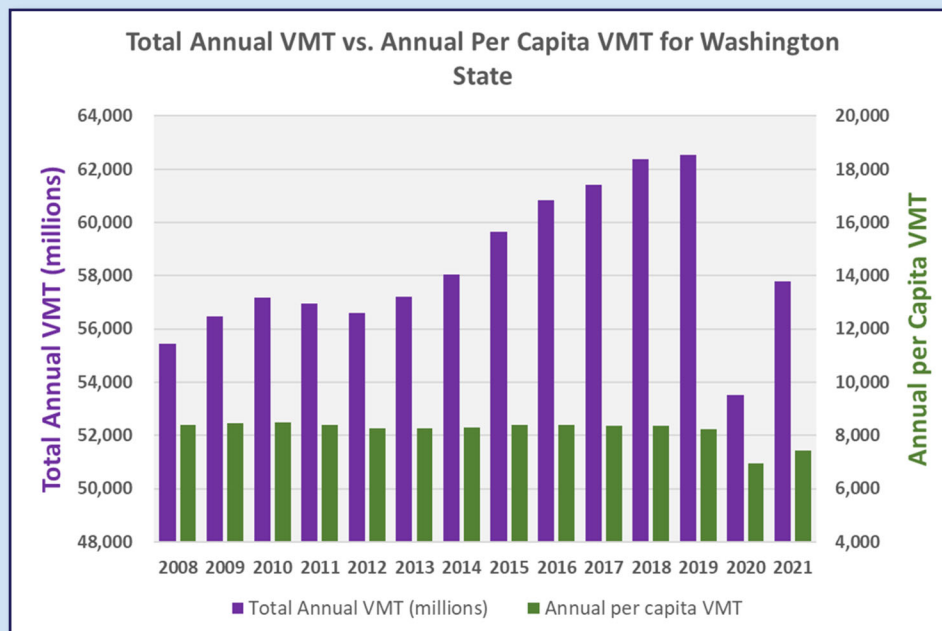
Federal Perspective (cont'd.)

The Generating Resilient, Environmentally Exceptional National (GREEN) Streets Act was introduced in the US Senate, in 2019. The act would direct the Secretary of Transportation to establish minimum standards for states to use to decrease greenhouse gas emissions and per capita VMT on the national highway system and direct and commit federal highway funding to facilitate compliance.

In July 2022, the FHWA released a proposed federal rule for CO₂ emission reduction targets on National Highway System be included with the other system performance measures from MAP-21 legislation. If adopted, state departments of transportation and MPOs will use VMT, fleet mix, fuel types to assess progress towards meeting CO₂ emission reduction targets.

Washington State Perspective

The Washington State Legislature enacted the Growth Management Act (GMA) in 1990 to guide planning for growth and development in Washington State. GMA requires local governments in fast-growing and densely populated counties to develop and adopt comprehensive plans. Transportation features as one of 14 goals, with the objective to “encourage efficient multimodal transportation systems that are based on regional priorities and coordinated with county and city comprehensive plans.”



In 2002 the Washington State legislature passed HB 2304, which instructed WSDOT to develop per capita VMT targets. Washington State established statewide per capita VMT reduction benchmarks, in 2008, which are codified in RCW 47.01.4406. Since that time, per capita VMT has remained fairly stable while total VMT has increased at roughly the same rate as state population growth.

In 2021 the state legislature passed SSB 5165, which directed WSDOT to develop a process for establishing VMT reduction targets, recommended a suite of options for local jurisdictions to achieve the targets and to identify funding requirements for state and local jurisdictions. In partnership with the Department of Commerce, WSDOT will issue a final report by June 30, 2023.

This legislation supports the 2021 State Energy Strategy that seeks “using energy more efficiently and decarbonizing the energy that is used. Pursuing one without the other will result in a costlier and less efficient transition. The first element, transportation system efficiency, can be addressed by reducing the number of vehicle-miles required to meet people’s needs and support economic activity.”

Local and Regional Policies

In support of GMA goals, Clark County and its municipalities have adopted a number of countywide planning policies. The first countywide transportation planning policy states:

Clark County, Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) and the Regional Transportation Planning Organization (RTPO), state, bi-state, municipalities and CTRAN shall work together to establish a truly regional transportation system which:

- *reduces reliance on single occupancy vehicle transportation through development of a balanced transportation system which emphasizes transit, high capacity transit, bicycle and pedestrian improvements and transportation demand management;*
- *encourages energy efficiency;*
- *recognizes financial constraints; and,*
- *minimizes environmental impacts of the transportation systems development, operation and maintenance.*



Next Steps

VMT reduction efforts build upon and complement both long-standing and recent efforts at the federal, state, regional, and local levels that contribute to VMT reduction, including GMA, the Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality Improvement (CMAQ) program, the Commute Trip Reduction (CTR) program, transportation demand management (TDM) strategies, and Complete Streets.

RTC will continue to be engaged with WSDOT as it develops a detailed process for local VMT reduction target setting, including a description of the data needs, and a funding analysis describing the costs to WSDOT and partners for carrying out such work. The proposal for local target setting will focus on ten counties: Benton, Clark, Franklin, King, Kitsap, Pierce, Snohomish, Spokane, Thurston, and Whatcom. A local VMT reduction target will stimulate a local review of both transportation and land-use policies, plans, and programs to support VMT reduction efforts.

