



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on August 22, 2014

The VMT Tax: Big Brother Will Be Watching You Drive

For years, even decades, the federal government has been urging motorists to drive fuel-efficient vehicles. In President Obama's first term, there was even a "Cash for Clunkers" program, offering drivers a financial reward if they traded in an old car for a more fuel-efficient new vehicle. And apparently Americans have done too good a job of following that government policy. Greater fuel efficiency means minimal or less frequent purchases at the gas pump. Some motorists have switched to hybrid or electric cars, which enables them to avoid the gas pumps altogether. All of which results in lower revenue from federal and state gas taxes, which means less money to build and repair roads and bridges and fund myriad mass transit programs. So policymakers are looking at taxing not the gas you buy, but the miles you travel.



A Vehicle Miles Traveled (VMT) tax might not reduce air pollution or the nation's dependence on foreign oil, the main reasons given for government's campaign to get motorists into more fuel-efficient vehicles. But it could raise more revenue and even be useful for traffic control since it could tax motorists for driving into already congested areas. But chances are drivers won't like being penalized for having long commutes to work or going extra miles on vacation trips any more than they would like paying more in taxes at the gas pumps. And at least some of us might resent the invasion of privacy involved in having the government track all our trips, short and long, to total up our mileage bill. As described on the federal technology news site, [Nextgov.com](#):

It has long been a nightmare scenario for privacy advocates: Every time you get in your car, a computer relays your location and tracks your trip from start to finish. It can track how far you go, where you drive, how long the trip is, and even how much traffic you encounter.

For many drivers it is already a reality, as motorists take part in ride-sharing programs such as Zipcar or Car2Go, though both services record cars and drivers. E-Z passes enable drivers to zip through tolls without the delay and inconvenience of stopping to pay, but the system also creates electronic records of everyone's trips on toll roads. But to have a Global Positioning System or some such device in every car to track each motorist's comings and goings has overtones of an Orwellian "Big Brother" government, watching you every move and knowing where you are at all times. When then-Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood proposed such a system in early 2009, [NextGov.com](#) recalled, the Obama administration quickly disowned it, saying it was off the table. A proposal to research a VMT system was left out of the 2012 transportation reauthorization bill. But some transportation experts argue that Americans have already surrendered so much privacy for the conveniences of modern



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technology that the intrusive watchfulness of a VMT system should hardly bother us.

“Logic has not really entered into that discussion,” said Joshua Schank, president of the Eno Center for Transportation. “People have had cell phones and private cell companies knowing where they travel for years, but somehow that doesn’t give them any more comfort if the federal government is going to track their driving.”

Ride-sharing companies track trips for locations, speed, and travel times, but have policies aimed at offering motorists some assurance of privacy protection. Zipcar says it does “not actively track or monitor vehicle location, and we do not store historical GPS data regarding vehicle location.” Uber, the rideshare and taxi service, uses GPS and geolocation through its mobile app to see where users and drivers are, but says the data is not shared with third parties and is used only for purposes such as customizing services, promotions, and data analytics.

“There’s really a lot less privacy with those systems because they know at least where you are picked up and dropped off and someone’s keeping track of that,” said Rob Atkinson, president of the Information Technology and Innovation Foundation. “I have no reason to doubt that these companies are trustworthy and it’s possible that as people become more comfortable with that, they’ll see that there are less privacy concerns.”

“I don’t think that means we should be any less concerned about the government doing something like this,” said Gautum Hans, an attorney with the Center for Democracy and Technology. He told Nextgov.com that people may be more comfortable with a private company using location tracking for business or research use, but “as we like to say, a private company can’t put you in jail.” “Research is understood by individuals. You can understand why a ride-sharing app would want to do research as long as it’s aggregated and takes steps to protect your privacy,” he said. “With the government, there are reasons you would be concerned, whether it’s the First Amendment and the freedom of association or how the information is kept.”

A federal pilot program is already underway in Oregon, offering 5,000 volunteers a variety of options, including a smartphone app, self-bought GPS systems, or even a flat fee that would require no tracking at all. But if millions of motorists have switched to smaller, more fuel efficient cars to escape rising prices at the gas pump, would millions more not curtail needless trips to reduce their tax burden under a VMT system? What will that do to vacation trips?

Stay tuned for opposition from the travel and tourist industry.



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