Gas Prices Alter Habits of Many, but Far From All

By KIRK JOHNSON

DENVER, Aug. 8 — Car owners across the country braced themselves on Tuesday for another smack in the face at the gasoline pump, as the shutdown of the giant Prudhoe Bay oil field in Alaska rippled through energy markets and consumer psyches.

But Justin Ogle, a newly minted light-rail commuter, was calm. Mr. Ogle and his wife, Lauren, bought a new home two months ago, partly to be near the train tracks.

“Rising gas prices are going to force us to be more efficient,” Mr. Ogle, 29, said, looking up from the newspaper as his train rattled toward downtown Denver, where he works as an architect.

Americans are deeply divided in their responses to high gasoline prices, as they are on so many other things, including politics, class and culture. Many say they are using less gasoline, but for every Mr. Ogle, there may well be a Glennis Claxton. Ms. Claxton, a 26-year-old student at Rice University, does not own a car, but she said she had gotten so fried by riding the sweltering buses in Houston that she was thinking of buying one, even with the price of gas what it is.

Researchers, pollsters and ordinary Americans in interviews on Tuesday said they saw no broad national experience or commonality of sacrifice when it came to gasoline, even when the nation endured a jolt like the one from Alaska.

Wealthier people have more choices than others in how and whether to adapt — to drive just as much or buy an expensive hybrid vehicle. Hispanics, lower-income households, urban residents and younger people, according to a national poll by the Pew Research Center, are more likely to change their behavior by carpooling or using mass transit.

There are often regional disparities, too; the West Coast, for example, is likely to be hit hardest by the closing of Prudhoe Bay, experts said, because the Alaskan oil mostly feeds refineries in the West.

Even ethanol, the alcohol additive that is being used more frequently as a component in the nation’s fuel supply, can be a point of division. Environmentalists like the additive because it pollutes less, but some energy experts say that ethanol-gas mixtures are less efficient as a fuel and may be leading to more gas consumption. Some ethanol is...
in about a third of the nation’s gasoline supply, up sharply from last year.

In the Pew Research survey of 1,182 Americans — 1,048 of them drivers — 55 percent said they were driving less because of the recent increases in gasoline prices. The poll, taken from June 20 to July 16, had a margin of sampling error of plus or minus three percentage points.

Yet Americans’ overall gasoline appetite has barely budged. Total use this year is up about one-half percent to 1 percent compared with 2005, according to federal figures — a slower rate of growth than in the past, but hardly the mark of a nation with its foot fully on the brake.

There are anecdotal glimpses of a drop in driving. The number of passengers taking rail service in Los Angeles County in June was up 11 percent from last year. And the number of cars passing through the Eisenhower Tunnel on Interstate 70 in the Colorado Rockies, which has been rising slightly since 2002, fell slightly in July compared with the same time last year. The decrease is the first since 2001, according to the State Department of Transportation.

Anna Samson, 24, a psychology major at the University of Southern Maine in Portland, said that for her the issue of gasoline supplies came down to milk — at least this week.

“Last night I realized I didn’t have milk for breakfast, and that I wasn’t going to eat breakfast in the morning,” Ms. Samson said Tuesday in an interview. “I wasn’t going to go out to get milk because I have to take my car to work, and I didn’t want to use the gas.”

Experts say the apparent paradox of public reaction to price increases — a majority of people saying they are driving less, but more gas is still being sold year after year — could be explained by several factors, not the least of which is that people sometimes give pollsters and reporters answers they think are more socially acceptable or expected.

“We don’t really know the impacts of all these things,” said John C. Duff, manager of the weekly petroleum status report surveys for the Federal Energy Information Administration.

Mr. Duff said that demand for gasoline this year had definitely flattened, compared with previous years’ increases, suggesting that some people were using less. But those cutbacks may be overwhelmed by other forces, including bigger cars and more miles being driven by a growing population, and perhaps, he said, reduced mileage from cars burning more ethanol.

Researchers at Pew say the pattern of consumers using less when high prices linger has been seen before, in the gasoline price spikes of the 1970’s and early 1980’s. Per capita consumption of gasoline has fairly consistently mirrored the average price per gallon since at least 1977, falling when prices increased, rising when prices fell,
according to the Pew study, which is scheduled to be released Wednesday.

Other experts say the nation’s shifting economic, demographic and urban terrain in recent years — greater disparity of rich and poor than in the 1970’s, and more transportation options than a generation ago, including mass transit rail lines in more cities and hybrid cars — is making this spike different.

Jose Vargas said he thought the changes he had made to conserve gasoline were probably permanent, for better or worse.

Mr. Vargas, 45, said he used to hop into his gas-guzzling GMC Jimmy, a sport utility vehicle, and drive to work in downtown Manhattan from his home in West New York, N.J. Now he rides the bus. He used to drive to the beach at Sandy Hook, N.J., about 30 miles away, three or four times a month. Now he mostly stays home.

Mr. Vargas predicted that gasoline would reach $3.50 a gallon before the end of the month, and he shook his head in disbelief.

“It’s only going to get more expensive, and once it goes up, it will never come down,” he said.

*Reporting for this article was contributed by Katie Zezima from Boston, Katie Kelley from Denver, Thayer Evans from Houston, Regan Morris from Los Angeles and Michael Amon from West New York, N.J.*