



California  
**Road Charge**

# **Public Private Roads Project**

## APPENDIX **K**

# **Tribal Focus Group Results**

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**TO:** California Road Charge Public/Private Roads Pilot Team  
**FROM:** EMC Research  
**RE:** Road Charge Tribal Interviews Takeaways  
**DATE:** December 2023

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The following memo summarizes key takeaways from in-depth interviews conducted as part of the California Road Charge Public/Private Roads Pilot on behalf of the California Department of Transportation. Ten interviews were conducted with members of California tribal communities. Interviewees were recruited from a variety of sources; five were participants of the Public/Private Roads Pilot, four had participated in a previous survey conducted by EMC Research in Spring 2023, and one was initially recruited for focus groups held in November 2023. The interviews were conducted between November 6<sup>th</sup> and December 1<sup>st</sup>, 2023 by a trained, professional interviewer.

The demographic make-up is illustrated in the table below.

Demographic	# of Participants
Male	4
Female	6
18-29	1
30-39	1
40-49	3
50-64	3
65+	2
Non-college grad	7
College grad or higher	3

Demographic	# of Participants
Gas vehicle	8
No vehicle access	1
Unknown	1
Central Coast/Valley	2
Southern CA	5
Northern CA	2
Bay Area	1

### Interview Guide Content

The interviews asked questions on the following topics:

- Driving habits, state of the roads, and current gas tax awareness and attitudes
- Verbal description of the gas tax's shortcomings, followed by introduction of the concept of road charge and discussion of initial reactions towards the concept
- Perceptions of negative and positive outcomes from road charge on participants' own communities
- Perceptions of private roads funding and the mileage tracking device

A copy of the interview guide is attached to this memorandum.

## Key Themes

### Issue Environment

- **Most were unsatisfied with road conditions in their communities, and cited various potential hazards on the roads.** Potholes and construction were frequently cited as concerns, and participants who live in more remote areas described a series of safety risks the roads in their area posed to them. One participant described having to drive down the center of some roads in their area just to avoid major potholes that could damage their car. Another mentioned that potholes retain water after it rains, adding another layer of danger. Limited visibility and falling rocks were also mentioned as road hazards faced by some tribal communities. Highways were viewed as better maintained and more “drivable” than local roads, although some complained of long-running highway improvement projects that have made their commutes longer.
- **Awareness of the gas tax was somewhat high.** All interviewees were aware that roads were funded by taxes, and several named the gas tax specifically. Tolls and registration fees were mentioned as other potential funding sources. Although interviewees were aware of various revenue sources, some had questions about how funding is allocated among regions in the state, as they perceived busier roads and those near urban areas to be better maintained.

*“[There’s] more money down in populated areas but once you start getting to Northern California, it’s not so populated... So the taxes aren’t as abundant.”*

- Interviewee #1

*“There’s got to be a surplus... I just can’t believe that these guys aren’t getting enough money with the amount of tax per gallon.”*

- Interviewee #6

- **Participants believed that the state has sufficient funds to maintain roadways.** Many participants thought that the state must have enough funds to maintain roads given the high gas prices. Like in previous research, the interviewees perceived the situation as a case of financial mismanagement or waste rather than a lack of funds.

- **Interviewees were highly aware of private roads and many drive on them frequently.** Awareness of private roads and how they are funded was very high among these tribal community members. Most interviewees live near private roads, and one described that there are six miles of private roads between their home and public roads.

### Initial Road Charge Reactions and Perceived Outcomes

*“I think it’d be best if we just paid at the gas [pump]. On the bottom line, where’s that money going to go? How do we know it? How do we know it’s fixing the roads?”*

- Interviewee #8

- **Interviewees had several questions about the initial road charge description, even though some had participated in the pilot program.** Those who had not participated in the pilot program were curious about how much the per-mile fee would be and how miles would be tracked. Some questioned how the money collected would be allocated and whether it would go toward the roads in their communities or be siphoned off to more urban areas.

- **There were mixed perceptions on the fairness of a road charge.** Interviewees largely agreed that electric vehicles should contribute to road maintenance funds, and they appreciated that everyone would have to pay the same price per mile no matter their car's efficiency. Despite this, road charge was seen as unfair in some aspects, as some believed that low income drivers would end up paying the most. Not taking vehicle weight into account was another unfair point per tribal community members interviewed.

*"It was pretty clear that the hybrids and electric cars are not paying their fair share and we need to start taxing them."*

- Interviewee #4

- **Road charge was viewed as another bill to pay that would burden low-income people and residents of rural areas most.** Many participants believed that low income and rural folks would suffer the most from a road charge for a variety of reasons. One interviewee described their town's skyrocketing rents due to tourism because of a local ski resort, and was fearful that a road charge would be added cost burden for the locals who are being priced out of their hometown. Another interviewee from a rural area pointed out that they can't opt to take public transit like someone living in a city center could. Similarly, another mentioned that many people with higher-paying jobs have the option to work from home, while service workers and those with other lower-paying jobs would be forced to pay a road charge on their commutes.

*"There's still going to be a discrepancy... with who's driving more often, as in lower income people. So a lot of people in better paying jobs are still working from home."*

- Interviewee #2

*"Living in a rural area, wherever it is that I go, I have to pay. I would still have to pay more than... somebody who lives in a populated area and can take a bus."*

- Interviewee #1

- **Other perceived negative outcomes included government intrusion and people cheating the system.** Some were concerned about mileage tracking data being used for nefarious purposes, and viewed it as government overreach. A few foresaw people avoiding road charges by tampering with the tracking device.

*"I don't like having to have something in my vehicle. Keeping track of where I go or what I'm doing if I'm deep in the reservation...it just seemed creepy."*

- Interviewee #4

*"If [the device] can report [mileage], who knows what else it can report. What are they not telling us that they're having that device do for them? So, no, out of the question."*

- Interviewee #9

- **Some were hopeful that a road charge could lead to lower gas prices and improved roads conditions.** Several mentioned falling gas prices as a potential positive road charge outcome, and one interviewee said they liked that the cost of a road charge would be more stable than gas taxes because it's not tied to gas prices. A few mentioned better road conditions as an expected road charge outcome. In addition to smoother roads with less potholes, shorter and more efficient construction timelines were noted as possible results of increased funding for road maintenance. One interviewee was hopeful that their area could add more bike lanes as a result of a road charge.

*"In theory the people that aren't paying the gas tax now [would be paying], so we would have more money to pay for road maintenance. That would be the positive, right?"*  
- Interviewee #2

- **Despite these potential positive outcomes, many viewed a road charge as an unnecessary and expensive program to maintain.** Multiple interviewees suggested taxing electric vehicle charging stations as a simpler alternative to a road charge. Interviewees were concerned about the steep cost and logistical burden of implementing a new statewide program; one interviewee noted that it would be expensive to maintain a government agency that tracks thousands of vehicles.

*"It's the bureaucracy of it. To add another part of an agency to track your mileage for all these thousands and thousands of cars out there. Why would you want to waste that you should just go ahead and have it implemented into the charging stations?"*  
- Interviewee #10

*"It sounds like a political move just to get more money from us and it's going to hurt everybody. The poor guy and the non-poor guy. It never hurts the non-poor guy."*  
- Interviewee #6

### **Mileage Tracking and Private Roads Usage**

- **In general, those who had participated in the pilot program were less opposed to tracking.** Several participants had participated in the pilot program and had used a tracking device compared to other interviewees who were hearing about road charge for the very first time. One of these participants described the process as easy and didn't mind being tracked at all, and another said they would rather be tracked than pay a higher fee. Among those who hadn't participated, several said that they'd rather pay a higher fee than be tracked. A few were staunchly opposed to being tracked for privacy and other reasons; one participant drove a car made in 1997 and was concerned that his car would not accommodate the technology for a plug-in device.

*"I would rather have a device because I don't want to have to report something. I don't want to be responsible for [reporting]."*  
- Interviewee #3

*"I wouldn't be uncomfortable personally using a device. Because if somebody wanted to find out where I was going, I mean, my phone's with me all the time. It's the same exact thing."*  
- Interviewee #2

*"I like the idea of you had the tracker in the vehicle that plugs into the car, and the app as well... [It's] easier just to pay online than having to go to an office to pay or try to mail out a check or anything else."*  
- Interviewee #5

- **There were mixed levels of concern about privacy implications.** Some weren't at all worried about being tracked, either because they thought carrying a smart phone around already came down to being tracked at all times anyways. Some others said they were not concerned about being tracked since they weren't doing anything illegal while driving. Yet, some others saw a tracking device as a violation of their right to privacy and one compared it to second amendment laws infringing on gun owners' rights.
- **A majority of interviewees had not heard of the gas tax refund for private roads.** Most said they would not be interested in such a program, either because they don't drive on enough private roads or because they don't want the hassle of tracking mileage. One interviewee was aware of the refund and had tried to redeem it, but said their request was denied because they couldn't prove that they had driven on private roads.

*"Going through all that effort for the little miles you drive on those roads, I mean I'm 6 miles in on a private road. ... 12 miles a day, I've never heard of it. So, would I have taken advantage of it? No I wouldn't because I'd have to report my miles."*

- Interviewee #4

*"Never have [used the refund option]. And that is because I was told that there was no way of proving that I was driving on those roads and that the gas was used for that. So I was not able to use it."*

- Interviewee #10

- **The AAA was the most trusted organization when it came to mileage data.** While some trusted the DMV, others didn't share this sentiment because they saw it as an organ of the government, or "in cahoots" with the government. Others brought up how difficult it is to get anything done at the DMV, and said they would not want to deal with them for something like mileage reporting. Many cited the AAA as a trusted entity, and some brought up insurance companies as a trusted party with personal information.
- **Most said they would rather continue paying the gas tax rather than having to track and report their miles, although a few pilot program participants said they would rather pay a road charge.** When asked how the cost of a road charge would compare to the cost of a gas tax, most thought they would pay more with a road charge system. A hybrid system whereby only hybrid and electric vehicle drivers pay a road charge was the most popular of all the options presented.

*"Oh, no, I don't want the DMV or the state."*

- Interviewee #3

*"That to me is only scary because the unknown is always scary, change is always scary. But if it's going to even the playing field and then everybody's putting in based on how many miles are driving, it would seem a little bit more fair."*

- Interviewee #3

**California Statewide – Tribal Communities**  
**In-Depth Interviews - Confidential Interviewer's Guide**  
01/09/24  
EMC Research #23-9081

**INTRO.** I'm calling on behalf of EMC Research about the paid research opportunity you expressed interest in participating.

To confirm I am speaking to the correct individual, can you confirm if you are **NAME ON LIST**?

1. Yes → **CONTINUE WITH INTERVIEW; SKIP TO INTRO2**
2. IF NO → **ASK INTRO1**

**INTRO1.** May I speak with **NAME ON LIST**?

1. Yes, can pass the phone → **CONTINUE TO INTRO2**
2. No → **ASK TO RESCHEDULE, IF NOT TERMINATE**

**INTRO2.** Thank you very much for your time. This interview is on behalf of Caltrans and is for research purposes only. We will keep your identity confidential, and our report will summarize our findings generally but will not reveal your name or individual responses. My questions should take about 30 minutes. In order to stay focused on our conversation, I would like to record this interview. Can I confirm that I have your permission to record this interview?

**I. Introduction (2 minutes for section / 2 minutes elapsed)**

- a. Introduce interviewer; disclosures and reminder about confidentiality
- b. Introduction of participant: Can you tell me your name and where you live?

**I. Issue environment (4 minutes/ 6 minutes)**

*Goal: Perceptions of road conditions, gas tax.*

Our conversation today will be about roads and driving.

- A. What are your typical driving habits? *If needed* How often do you drive? Where do you drive?  
*Listen for driving on public/private roads.*
- B. Generally speaking, how would you describe the condition of the roads and highways in the area where you live? *Listen for differences in the conditions of public/private roads*
- C. Where does the money for road repair and maintenance come from in California?
- D. As you may know, the state has a gas tax that provides much of the funding for public road and highway maintenance in California. Do you think California is able to raise enough money with the gas tax to fund road and highway maintenance?



## **II. Road charge concept (4 minutes/ 10 minutes)**

*Goal: Introduce concept, observe initial reactions.*

- A. I will share some information with you:

*The gas tax was created 100 years ago to make sure everyone pays their fair share for public road repairs and maintenance. But today, there are more and more fuel-efficient hybrid and electric cars on the road who pay little or no gas tax at all.*

*Now, California is falling further and further behind on generating the funds needed for maintaining roads and highways. It also means that lower-income drivers who cannot afford newer vehicles end up paying more in gas tax, and they contribute more into road repairs than those who are able to afford a new vehicle.*

*What is your reaction to this? Clarify confusing points as needed.*

- B. The state is studying **replacing** the gas tax with a **per-mile** fee, that allows drivers to pay for road and highway maintenance based on how many miles they drive, instead of how many gallons of gas they buy. It's called a road charge.
1. What do you think of the idea of a road charge for California? In general, does it seem like a good idea, or a bad idea? *Probe to understand reasons behind reactions*

## **III. Road charge impact on rural communities (8 minutes/18 minutes)**

*Goal: Dig into perceptions of potential outcomes of road charge on rural communities.*

- A. How you think a road charge, if implemented, would impact you or others like you in your community? *Listen for impact of having to drive long distances to reach amenities; of not having reliable cell service; of added burden for reporting.*
- B. Let's first talk about what positive outcomes there may be for you and your community. *If not brought up, ask: Would road conditions get improved? listen for whether it is believable.*
- C. What about negative outcomes that there may be for you and people in your community?
- D. *If not brought up* Would the condition of roads and highways improve? Would there be less traffic? Would everyone pay their fair share? Would it be more fair to you and your community?
- E. *If not brought up* Would the cost of driving increase? Would it be unfair to you and your community?
- F. Take a second to think of all the possible outcomes that we discussed, as well as about the current gas tax. If I asked you to list the outcomes from the gas tax, would it look different? *Probe around outcomes they found likely Is insert outcome not happening with gas tax? Why?*

## **IV. Private roads (9 minutes/27 minutes)**

*Goal: Understand perceptions around private roads funding and the device*

- A. How do you think the number of miles would be counted and reported with road charge?



1. *If needed* Would you expect that data to be reported automatically, like through a plug-in device in your car or a smart phone app?
- B. *If not brought up already* As you may know, not all roads in California are maintained by public agencies. There are many private roads in California as well, which are generally on private or tribal properties, and they do not receive any gas tax money for their maintenance.
  1. Are there any roads like this in the area where you live?
  2. Do you drive on any private roads?
- C. Right now, if you are buying gas from a gas station, you are paying the gas tax, no matter what types of roads you are driving. But you can request refunds for the gas tax paid while driving on private roads.
  1. Is the refund option something you've done or heard about before?
- D. Typically, there are more private roads in rural and tribal areas in California than more urban areas, and the state is looking for ways make sure road charge is fair for tribal communities. One option people could have is to install a device that automatically knows if you are driving on a public or a private road and only reports the miles driven on public roads.
  1. What is your reaction to that?
  2. *If needed* What questions or concerns does this information bring up?
- E. Another option could be that people pay for all miles driven, regardless of what type of road, so they don't have to have something in their car that uses location.
  1. What is your reaction to that?
  2. *If needed* What questions or concerns does this information bring up?
- F. Based on this information, would you opt for using the device that automatically tracks and reports eligible miles, or would you rather not use it and pay for every mile you drive at a slightly higher cost? Why or why not? *Probe around reason not to use this device; including data security and accuracy*
  1. What would help you feel comfortable with the device that can report only public road miles you drive?
    - a. Are there organizations you would trust more than others to collect this kind of data? The state? The DMV? Car insurance companies?
- G. What if the road charge program applied only to zero-emission, hybrid, and highly fuel-efficient vehicles, and drivers of other types of vehicles would just continue paying the state gas tax as they are now? *Listen for reaction*
  1. How would that impact you and your community?
  2. What if it would mean that drivers of gas or diesel vehicles would need to pay slightly more in gas taxes than they do now?

**V. Conclusion (3 minutes/30 minutes)**

*Goal: Wrap up and adjourn*

- A. Based on our conversation, do you think a Road charge for California is a good idea, or a bad idea?
  - 1. Regardless of whether you think it's a good or bad idea, how do you think road and freeway maintenance can be funded in the most fair way in California?
- B. What else do you want to know about a road charge for California?
- C. Thank and adjourn.