

THURSDAY, JUNE 30, 2016

AT 60, THE U.S. INTERSTATE HIGHWAY SYSTEM SHOWS SIGNS OF NEGLECT AND DECLINE

BACKLOG OF NEEDED IMPROVEMENTS AMOUNTS TO \$189 BILLION



EVERY YEAR, \$13.9 TRILLION IN GOODS ARE SHIPPED FROM SITES IN THE U.S.: Seventy-three percent of the goods shipped annually from sites in the U.S. are carried by trucks and another 14 percent are carried by courier services, which use trucks for part of the deliveries.

As the United States prepare to observe the 60th anniversary of [interstate highway system](#), some are saying that it has gone from an economy-lifting network to a system that is increasingly clogged and decaying from lack of sufficient investment.

President Dwight Eisenhower signed the National Interstate and Defense Highways Act into law on June 29, 1956. Within a few years the nation would see construction begin replacing a network of two-lane U.S. highways with the multi-lane, high-speed interstate highway system that continued to spur economic growth as it built out in the next few decades.

TRIP, a transportation research group, just released a report on the aging interstate system, an update from 10 years ago. The 2006 report said the interstate network was still the "nation's most critical transportation link despite growing traffic congestion," but said the congestion "is likely to get worse unless the nation commits to new vision of a 21st century highway system."

Since then, Congress approved a major round of new investments only in the 2009 Recovery Act to help climb out of a severe recession. Lawmakers then struggled to pass long-term surface transportation investment measures until December's five-year [FAST Act](#), which provides only modest funding increases to the core highway program.

Bud Wright, executive director of the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO), said that the anniversary is a good time for the entire

country to take stock of what the interstate system has been and what it is now.

"The interstate highways gave the United States incredible gains in mobility of personal travel and cargo shipments as new segments opened in state after state," he said. "It was a remarkable achievement that helped make the U.S. economy the world's leader."

"However, we must face the facts of where we are today," Wright added. "Some of the original interstate bridges are still in place long after their projected life spans and long after traffic on them has outpaced original design levels. Large sections of these once-fabulous roadways are in disrepair. State departments of transportation are struggling to maintain their portions of this critical national network while demand keeps growing, even when many states have substantially increased their highway funding."

In its report, TRIP notes that since initial funding of the interstate system in 1956, annual vehicle miles

of travel in the U.S. have increased by 387 percent, and that the number of vehicles in the nation has increased by 300 percent, from 65 million vehicles to 260 million vehicles.

"The current backlog of needed improvements on the nation's Interstate Highway System is estimated by the U.S. Department of Transportation to be \$189 billion," the report said. "The backlog on the nation's Interstate Highway System includes \$59 billion needed to improve pavement conditions, \$30 billion to improve bridges and \$100 billion for needed system expansion and enhancement."

The U.S. is only spending approximately 61 percent of the amount needed annually to make needed repairs and improvements on the interstate highway system to keep the system in a state of good repair and provide adequate capacity to meet growing personal and freight mobility needs. "Annual spending on the nation's interstate highway system is estimated to be \$20.2 billion," said the report, "while approximately \$33 billion annually is needed to complete interstate repairs and improvements needed to maintain Interstate highways and bridges and to relieve traffic congestion."

Forty-three percent of the nation's urban interstate highways are considered congested while travel on interstate highways is increasing at a rate more than double the rate that new lane capacity is being added.

Between 2000 to 2014, vehicle travel on interstate highways increased by 14 percent, according to the report, while lane miles on the system increased by six percent.

Every year, \$13.9 trillion in goods are shipped from sites in the U.S. Seventy-three percent of the goods shipped annually from sites in the U.S. are carried by trucks and another 14 percent are carried by courier services, which use trucks for part of the deliveries.

Overall, current pavement and bridge conditions on most of the Interstate system are acceptable, according to TRIP, but some deficiencies exist. Pavements on 11.6 percent of Interstate highways are in poor or mediocre condition, with 3.3 percent rated in poor condition and 8.3 percent rated in mediocre condition. Another 11 percent of Interstate pavements are in fair condition and the remaining 78 percent are in good condition.

Three percent of the Interstate bridges are rated structurally deficient and 18 percent are rated functionally obsolete.

Reacting to the findings in the TRIP report, Wright said the interstate system is a good example of a [national infrastructure asset](#), much like the nation's waterways and airspace, since the entire country relies on its various pieces to work well. "We must ask ourselves," he said, "if we are taking care of that asset and increasing its value and the economic payoff it delivers, or if we are letting it languish and lose value."