

Rural roads, bridges continue to decay

TRIP report reveals dangerous numbers; industry associations call on Congress to pass new highway bill

September 1, 2011

The nation's rural roads and bridges are rapidly deteriorating, causing the fatality rate along back roads to triple the national average for highway fatalities, according to a new report on rural road conditions Sept. 1. The report's findings prompted members of the business, construction and transportation communities to call for passage of long-delayed federal legislation to fund road repairs and bridge maintenance.

"Employers understand all too well that when rural roads crumble, bridges deteriorate and safety declines, virtually every aspect of the American economy suffers," said Stephen Sandherr, the chief executive officer of the Associated General Contractors of America. "The best way to boost our economy, support private-sector growth and cut unemployment is to pass a new surface transportation bill."

The report, "Rural Connections: Challenges and Opportunities in America's Heartland," found that the highway fatality rate on the nation's rural roads was 2.31 deaths for every 100 million vehicle miles of travel, three times the fatality rate on all other roads. The report also found that 55% of the nation's rural roads were rated poor, mediocre or just fair. And 23% of rural bridges were either structurally deficient or functionally obsolete.

The report, which was prepared by TRIP, a national transportation research group, ranked states based on their rural fatality rates, rural road conditions and the state of their rural bridges. It found that South Carolina and Florida had the highest rural road fatality rates. Vermont and Idaho have the highest percentage of rural roads in poor condition. Pennsylvania and Rhode Island lead the nation in the percentage of deficient rural bridges.

"The back roads of America shouldn't be on the back burner of public-policy priorities," said Brad Sant, American Road & Transportation Builders Association Vice President of Safety and Education. "Making the investments necessary to ensure rural roads are safer and more forgiving is the responsibility of elected officials at all levels of government."

The business and transportation leaders noted that employers rely on rural roads to ship much of the nation's produce and goods. They said despite the clear connections between the economy and the nation's road conditions, some in Washington were calling for additional transportation cuts, while others were even calling for an end to federal transportation funding. They cautioned that doing either would deprive states of the resources they need to improve road conditions, repair bridges and keep roads safe.

"Killing funding for our aging roads and bridges would be tantamount to economic malpractice," Sandherr said. Instead, he urged Congress to quickly pass new long-term legislation that would, among other things, help improve the nation's rural roads and bridges.

Source: AGC of America September 1, 2011