

ROADS/BRIDGES: TRIP: America's rural roads and bridges have significant deficiencies

Rural traffic fatality rates remain high, despite a decrease in overall fatalities

America's rural heartland is home to nearly 50 million people, and its natural resources provide the energy, food and fiber that support the nation's economy and way of life. But, a new report finds that the nation's rural transportation system, which is critical to the nation's booming agriculture, energy and tourism sectors, is in need of modernization to address deficient roads and bridges, high crash rates and inadequate connectivity and capacity.

The report, "Rural Connections: Challenges and Opportunities in America's Heartland," was released by TRIP, a national nonprofit transportation research group based in Washington, D.C. It defines rural America as counties that lack an urban area of at least 50,000 in population or lack a large commuting flow to an urban county.

The TRIP report finds that traffic crashes and fatalities on rural roads are disproportionately high, occurring at a rate nearly three times higher than all other roads. In 2012, noninterstate rural roads had a traffic fatality rate of 2.21 deaths for every 100 million vehicle-miles of travel, compared with a fatality rate on all other roads of 0.78 deaths per 100 million vehicle-miles of travel. Rural traffic fatality rates remain stubbornly high, despite a substantial decrease in the number of overall fatalities.

In addition to disproportionately high traffic fatality rates, the roads and bridges in rural America have significant deficiencies. In 2012, 15% of the nation's major rural roads were rated in poor condition, and another 40% were rated in mediocre or fair condition. In 2013, 12% of the nation's rural bridges were rated as structurally deficient, and 10% were functionally obsolete.

The report also finds that the development of major new oil and gas fields in numerous areas—as well as increased agricultural production—are placing significantly increased traffic loads by large trucks on noninterstate rural roads, which often have not been constructed to carry such high load volumes. The average travel per lane-mile by large trucks on major, nonarterial rural roads in the U.S. has increased by 16% from 2000 to 2012.

The TRIP report finds that the U.S. needs to adopt transportation policies that will improve rural transportation connectivity, safety and conditions to provide the nation's small communities and rural areas with safe and efficient access to support quality of life and enhance economic productivity. To accomplish this, the report recommends modernizing and extending key routes to accommodate personal and commercial travel, implementing needed roadway safety improvements, improving public transit access to rural areas and adequately funding the preservation and maintenance of rural transportation assets.

"The safety and quality of life in America's small communities and rural areas and the health of the nation's economy ride on our rural transportation system," said Will Wilkins, executive director of TRIP. "This backbone of the heartland allows mobility and connectivity for millions of rural Americans. The nation's rural roads provide crucial links from farm to market, move manufactured and energy products, and provide access to countless tourist and recreational destinations. But, with long-term federal transportation legislation stuck in political gridlock in Washington, America's rural communities and economies could face even higher unemployment and decline. Funding the modernization of our rural transportation system will create jobs and help ensure long-term economic development and quality of life in rural America."