

Transportation maintenance critical to future

Megan Nelson American Farm Bureau Federation | 05/26/2020



Rural roads and bridges are a critical link in the nation's food-supply chain. American Farm Bureau Federation

Agriculture depends on safe and efficient infrastructure. Rural roads and bridges are a critical link in our nation's food-supply chain. Preliminary data from the Bureau of Transportation Statistics Commodity Flow Survey show that more than 70 percent of America's freight, worth \$10 trillion, is moved on the highway system. U.S. roads and highways link farmers, ranchers, manufacturers and service industries to grain elevators, ethanol plants, processors, feedlots, markets and ports.

The significant deficiencies of rural roads have created many challenges – and opportunities – connected to improving the efficiency of the agricultural supply chain. But America's ability to address its rural transportation challenges is threatened by a significant decrease in state transportation revenues due to the COVID-19 pandemic, an existing backlog of surface-transportation projects and the continued need for regulatory flexibility.

When considering the surface-transportation reauthorization, Congress must prioritize the safety and efficiency of rural infrastructure – and the farmers, ranchers and businesses who rely on it. The Fixing America's Surface Transportation Act expires at the end of September 2020, creating an opportunity for Congress to focus on a timely as well as adequately and reliably funded federal surface-transportation program.

Rural roads, bridges poor-fair

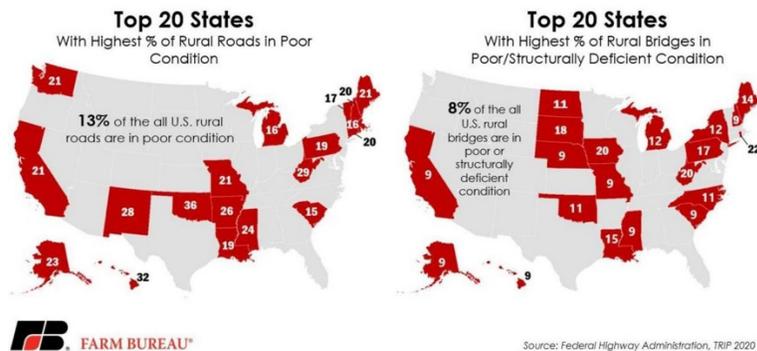
According to TRIP, a national transportation research group, 13 percent of the nation's major rural roads – arterials and collectors – in 2018 were in poor condition, a 2-percentage-point decrease from the previous year. Rural roads in mediocre condition have remained unchanged from 2017 at 21 percent, while 16 percent were in fair condition. Only 50 percent of rural roads were rated in good condition.

In 2019 there was 8 percent of the nation's rural bridges rated poor or structurally deficient. While 71 percent of the nation's bridges are in rural areas, 79 percent of the nation's bridges rated poor or structurally deficient are rural.

In 2018 the 20 states with the greatest percentage of roads in poor condition represent \$117 billion or 32 percent of total cash receipts for all commodities. The two maps in Figure 1 illustrate

the percent of rural roads and bridges in poor or structurally deficient condition. They also denote the 20 states in each category with the greatest percentage of roads or bridges in poor condition.

Figure 1. Percent of Rural Roads and Bridges in Poor or Structurally Deficient Condition



Safety, efficiency affected

Based on data from the Federal Highway Administration, deficient road conditions, lack of road-safety measures such as rumble stripes and signage as well as the long distances emergency vehicles must travel have driven the traffic fatality rate on rural non-interstate roads to twice that of all other roads. In 2018 non-interstate rural roads had a traffic fatality rate of two deaths for every 100 million vehicle miles of travel, compared to a fatality rate of 0.88 deaths per 100 million vehicle miles traveled on all other roads. Figure 2 shows the 20 states with the greatest rates of rural-road fatalities per 100 million vehicle miles traveled compared to all other roads.

Figure 2. Top 20 States with the Highest Fatality Rate Difference between Rural Non-Interstate and All Other Roads



The COVID-19 emergency has highlighted the necessity of maintaining a safe and efficient agricultural-transportation system to ensure food continues to move to consumers. While agriculture continues to address bottlenecks and worker safety, the future of the supply chain depends on increased funding for road and bridge improvements. It also depends on further transportation-related regulatory flexibility.

Funding needs increasing

A major opportunity to improve that important link in the U.S. agricultural supply chain is to increase funding for the maintenance and improvement of rural roads. According to an analysis by the Department of Transportation, there is a \$211 billion backlog of maintenance projects for the nation's rural roads, highways and bridges.

The Congressional Budget Office's baseline report from March 6, 2020, does not include impacts from the COVID-19 emergency. But even without those impacts, the report states the Highway Trust Fund will be \$18.3 billion short by 2023, increasing to a \$134.6 billion shortfall by 2029. Compounding the financial needs of surface-transportation projects is the estimated decrease of 30 percent or \$50 billion in state transportation revenues during the next 18 months due to reduced vehicle travel as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The integrity of our food-supply chain relies on sound transportation infrastructure. Unfortunately due primarily to a lack of investment during several decades, America's infrastructure is in a dire state of rapid deterioration. Of particular concern is the surface-transportation system which, according to the American Society of Civil Engineers, faces a \$100 billion annual investment gap. The society reports that system deficiencies are causing gross-domestic-product losses in excess of \$116 billion each year.

Summary

Further degradation of surface-transportation efficiency threatens our nation's economic standing in the world, and endangers the livelihood of farmers and ranchers. It also jeopardizes our food supply and the ability to move goods safely and efficiently to consumers. More than 70 percent of U.S. agricultural and food products travel on the nation's 4.1 million miles of public access roads, 2.9 million or 71 percent of which are in rural areas.

As Congress considers surface-transportation legislation, lawmakers should not overlook the opportunity infrastructure investment provides to generate powerful economic stimulus in the near term while simultaneously laying a strong foundation for long-term growth. Investing in needed highway projects across the country would put hundreds of thousands of Americans back to work, helping to revitalize the economy.

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