

Rural roads, bridges have significant deficiencies and high fatality rates

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Michigan's Transport Asset Management Council 2019 dashboard on the status of the state's 5,799 county road bridges reports 44.2% in good condition, 41.4% in fair condition and 14.4% in poor condition. | Photo by MDOT

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America's rural transportation system faces a \$211 billion backlog in funding for needed repairs and improvements to the rural transportation system to support economic growth and improve traffic safety in the nation's Heartland, according to [TRIP](#), a national transportation research nonprofit organization based in Washington, D.C.

In a recent report from [Rural Connections: Challenges and Opportunities in America's Heartland](#) evaluating the safety and condition of the nation's rural roads and bridges, the organization concluded that the nation's rural transportation system is in need of immediate improvements to address deficient roads and bridges, high crash rates, and inadequate connectivity and capacity.

[TRIP's study found Michigan ranks 19th in poor condition of roads.](#)
[Michigan ranks ninth in bridges structurally deficient.](#)

The findings of the TRIP report are not a surprise to Andrew Vermeesch, legislative counsel with Michigan Farm Bureau.

"The condition of our rural roads is something that Michigan farmers know firsthand as they travel them every day," Vermeesch said. "Unfortunately, Michigan's transportation budget has regularly seen funding shortfalls over the last several years which has led to underinvestment in the rural areas."

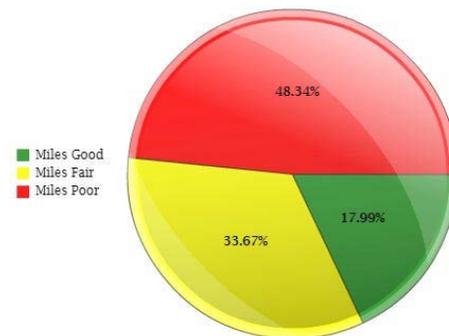
Adequate funding will be even more challenged under state-issued Executive Order (EO) travel restrictions, which are estimated to reduce state transportation revenues, nationwide by at least 30% — approximately \$50 billion — over the next 18 months.

"Fuel taxes are a major contributor of revenue for road funding," Vermeesch said. "So, obviously as motorists limit their travel and fuel purchases, the needed revenue generated for road and bridge maintenance is also declining."

[According to the Michigan Department of Transportation](#) (MDOT), there are 120,256

miles of paved roadway in the state; 9,669 miles of state trunkline, 89,444 route miles of county roads, and 21,198 route miles of city and village streets.

In 2002, the Michigan Legislature established the [Transportation Asset Management Council](#) (TAMC), charged with providing asset management tools, measurement dashboards and best practices for Michigan road agencies. TAMC indicates 48.34% of the state's overall miles are in poor condition, 33.67% fair and 17.99% good.



Denise Donohue, director of the County Road Association (CRA) of Michigan, says 2019 data from Michigan county road agencies showed that 40% of local roads, under county control — whether primary or local roads — were in poor condition.

"So, it comes as no surprise that this TRIP report finds 16% of Michigan's rural roads are poor; the only surprise is the number isn't even worse for the rural system," Donohue said. "Any approach to Michigan roads that doesn't address our rural roads isn't a true fix."

According to Donohue, CRA data indicates Michigan's local road system requires \$2 billion more per year to return to 60% good/fair on the local, non-federal aid roads.

TRIP Report's Findings of Rural Roads:

- 13% of U.S. rural roads are rated in poor condition.
- 21% are rated mediocre condition.
- 16% are in fair condition
- 50% are in good condition.
- 8% of rural bridges are rated in poor/structurally deficient condition, meaning there is significant deterioration to the major components of the bridge.
- 47% of rural bridges are rated fair, meaning that a bridge's structural elements are sound but minor deterioration has occurred to the bridge's deck, substructure or superstructure.
- 45% of rural bridges are rated in good condition.

"This report reinforces what many rural Americans already know — our country's rural infrastructure is crumbling. The competitiveness of our farmers relies on an aging network of roads, bridges, waterways and railways that need an immediate infusion of investment dollars," said Todd Van Hoose, president and CEO of the Farm Credit Council.

Van Hoose says previous funding opportunities for rural infrastructure have been overlooked in the past, threatening the rural transportation network that drives the base of the U.S. economy.

"That's why we have partnered with more than 250 national, state and local organizations through the [Rebuild Rural Coalition](#)," Van Hoose said. "We must invest in all aspects of rural infrastructure. And we must do it before we lose our competitive advantage."

"Farmers depend on rural roads, highways, and bridges to move their products to market. So does the integrity of our food supply chain," said Zippy Duvall, president of the [American Farm Bureau Federation](#).

"Unfortunately, due primarily to lack of investment over several decades, America's infrastructure is in a dire state of rapid deterioration, and recent events show even more the importance of guaranteeing food arrives where it needs to be. Investment in rural infrastructure going forward is paramount to ensure farmers and ranchers can continue to reliably supply the safe and wholesome food Americans need into the future."

The TRIP report also found traffic crashes and fatalities on rural non-Interstate roads are more than double those occurring on all other roads, due to narrow lanes, limited shoulders, sharp curves, exposed hazards, pavement drop-offs, steep slopes and limited clear zones along roadsides.

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 on all other roads of 0.88 deaths per 100 million vehicle miles of travel.

A 2019 U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT) analysis on the [Status of the Nation's Highways, Bridges and Transit](#), suggested the nation's annual \$28 billion investment by all levels of government on rural road was insufficient. Their recommendation to Congress called for a 28% annual increase, to \$36 billion to improve their condition, reliability and safety.

"With challenging budget realities in front of us, finding a solution to adequately fund our roads is going to be difficult," Vermeesch said. "However, we do know that failure to make adequate investment in our roads and bridges now will only cost more later. We can't continue to ignore the growing problem that faces rural Michigan."