



How the \$1.5 trillion infrastructure bill would impact rural America

By [SIERRA DAWN McCLAIN Capital Press](#) | June 25, 2020

House Democrats Monday published a roughly 2,300-page, \$1.5 trillion infrastructure plan.

The bill, called H.R. 2, or the "Moving Forward Act," would inject billions of dollars into road and bridge repairs, broadband development, school upgrades, water projects and rural communities.



U.S. Capitol

The bill passed through committee along party lines and is slated for floor action before July 4.

Farm groups have expressed excitement about how the bill would meet rural infrastructure needs, but they have also voiced concern that some portions of the bill could hurt rural America.

"Overall, we're in favor of an infrastructure bill. This meets rural needs. But in its current version, it would probably do a lot more harm than good," said Andrew Walmsley, director of congressional relations for the American Farm Bureau Federation.

If passed, the legislation would pour \$494 billion into roads, bridges and transit over five years. It would also dole out \$25 billion for drinking water, \$100 billion for broadband internet, \$70 billion for clean energy projects, \$100 billion for low-income schools, \$30 billion to upgrade hospitals, \$100 billion for public housing and \$25 billion for the Postal Service.

Leaders on both sides of the political aisle say it's unclear how the bill will be paid for. In a speech this week, House Ways and Means Chairman Richard Neal talked of using some blend of private equity bonds, government-subsidized bonds and "some borrowing."

Walmsley said the Farm Bureau is concerned about more deficit spending. The Farm Bureau, he said, advocates other options, such as raising the federal gas tax.

But before the bill gets funded, Walmsley said it needs to be altered.

In a letter to the House Committee on Rules, the Farm Bureau and seven industry groups expressed concern about Section 4408 of the bill, which they said would increase costs for truckers, farmers and manufacturers by requiring a 167% increase in minimum motor carrier liability coverage from \$750,000 to \$2 million.

Walmsley said he is also concerned because the bill calls for a review of "ag exemptions," which might be erased if reviewed. One example is the 150-air-mile exemption, which allows agricultural haulers to travel freely within 150 air miles of the source without adhering to federal hours of service regulations. "Green" measures in the bill, such as requiring states to meet greenhouse gas emissions goals, have also raised the hackles of industry groups and GOP lawmakers.

Susan Howard, program director for transportation finance at the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials, or AASHTO, said the bill has been "really contentious." More bipartisan legislation, she predicted, would sooner make it to the president's desk.

Congress has a few alternative infrastructure bills to consider. GOP representatives have introduced a highway bill of their own. And in the Senate, the Environmental Works Committee approved an infrastructure bill, S. 2302, last July that will roll to the Senate floor this session.

Congress passed the last major infrastructure bill, Fixing America's Surface Transportation Act, in 2016. That package expires Sept. 30, 2020, so Congress is racing the clock.

"Getting the bill done on time is really important for every state and every area, both rural and urban," said Howard of AASHTO.

Rural advocacy groups agree getting a bipartisan infrastructure plan passed is urgent.

Rural healthcare experts say the pandemic exposed the need for improved internet, especially with the rise of "telemedicine." Rural educators say broadband will also aid with "distance learning."

Mark Hayes, spokesman for Rebuild Rural Coalition, a group of 250 organizations advocating for rural infrastructure investments, told the Capital Press Section 1307 of the bill, called the "rebuild rural grant program," will also funnel \$250 million in grants for rural projects.

The biggest need, many say, is funding for rural transportation infrastructure.

"Farmers and ranchers depend on rural roads, highways and bridges to move their products to market. So does the integrity of our food supply chain," Zippy Duvall, president of the American Farm Bureau Federation, said in a statement.

Rocky Moretti, director of policy and research at TRIP, a national transportation research nonprofit, said rural roads nationwide are in dangerous condition.

According to a May 2020 TRIP study, in much of the West, one in five rural roads are in "poor" condition and fatalities are more than twice as likely on rural roads compared to urban streets.

Data show the nation's rural transportation system already faces a \$211 billion funding backlog. Add to that COVID-19.

According to the U.S. Department of Transportation, vehicle travel fell by 41% in April alone. Because of the decrease in gas taxes and toll fees, TRIP estimates that over the next 18 months, state transportation revenues will plummet at least 30% — about \$50 billion.

"If we can get a reasonable, bipartisan version of this infrastructure plan, we need it," said Walmsley of the Farm Bureau. "Rural America needs it."