

Independent-Messenger

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Funding gaps for rural infrastructure intensified during pandemic

Contributed by Farm Bureau

WASHINGTON—The nation's roads and bridges are in disrepair—particularly those in rural areas. And as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to cause economic disruptions, financial investment for road maintenance falls farther behind.

According to a report recently published by TRIP, a national transportation research nonprofit, the U.S. faces a \$211 billion backlog in needed repairs and improvements to rural roads, highways and bridges.

And that number is expected to grow. Decreased travel resulting from the pandemic is projected to reduce state transportation revenue by at least 30%—or about \$50 billion—over the next 18 months, stated the TRIP report.

"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," said Zippy Duvall, president of the American Farm Bureau Federation, in a news release about the TRIP report.

Improving roads and bridges is a critical issue for rural localities as they face unique challenges. Rural roadways lack many safety features such as guardrails and rumble strips, and have higher rates of fatal traffic crashes. In fact, the report found traffic fatalities on rural non-interstate highways occur at a rate more than double that of all other roads.

Additionally, rural roads and bridges cannot sufficiently support increasing freight travel in many areas and lack connections to many communities—ultimately affecting farmers' competitiveness and economic strength.

"Too often states must reduce the weight allowance on bridges rather than repair them when funds aren't available," said Andrew Smith, associate director of governmental relations at Virginia Farm Bureau Federation. "This negatively impacts commerce, especially agriculture in rural areas."

The TRIP report found 13% of U.S. rural roads are in poor condition, 21% in mediocre condition, and 16% are fair. Eight percent of U.S. bridges are in poor condition or are structurally deficient, and 47% are rated fair.

In Virginia, 8% of rural roads have poor pavement conditions, 20% are mediocre and 26% are fair, with the remaining 46% in good condition. Five percent of Virginia bridges are in poor condition or are structurally deficient, and 63% are fair.

"We need to have roads that are in good shape for farmers to not only access markets, but also to plant and harvest," Smith said. "With the loss of farmland, often a farmer must travel miles to find land to produce crops. We need dependable roads."

National challenge

Rural business owners tackling new challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic and entrepreneurs addressing traditional challenges for farmers and rural communities can compete in the 2021 Farm Bureau Ag Innovation Challenge.

The American Farm Bureau Federation partnered with Farm Credit to showcase start-up companies that are addressing challenges faced by America's farmers and rural communities. Launched in 2015 as the first national competition focused exclusively on rural entrepreneurs, the contest aims to identify up-and-coming agricultural entrepreneurs and support innovation essential to rural businesses and communities.

"In light of the impacts Farm Bureau members are experiencing from COVID-19, solutions from entrepreneurs are needed more than ever to help farmers, ranchers and rural communities," said AFBF President Zippy Duvall. "We're very interested to see how entrepreneurs will use start-up funds provided by the challenge to help support farms and ranches and grow the rural economy."

AFBF and Farm Credit will select 10 start-up companies to compete as semifinalists at the AFBF Annual

Convention in January 2021. The 10 teams will be announced on Oct. 5 and awarded \$7,500 each.

The final four teams will receive an additional \$7,500 and compete live on stage in front of Farm Bureau members, investors and industry representatives. The team named Farm Bureau Entrepreneur of the Year will win \$50,000, and the business selected as People's Choice winner will receive \$20,000. The semifinalists will participate in pitch training and mentorship from Cornell University's Dyson School of Applied Economics & Management faculty prior to competing at AFBF's convention. In addition, those competitors will have the opportunity to network with industry leaders and venture capital representatives from the Agriculture Department's Rural Business Investment Companies.

Lee Spiegel, founder of Pulaski Grow in Lee County, represented Virginia Farm Bureau Federation in the first challenge in 2015. She said the training helped her to better express her ideas in a limited amount of time for the competition.

Pulaski Grow trains youth for working in aquaponics—the combination of aquaculture and hydroponics to grow food indoors. Participants in the program use water from the aquaculture tanks to grow greens, herbs and other vegetables in greenhouses and sell them to community-supported agriculture subscribers.

"The competition was extremely helpful in launching Pulaski Grow, and I will be forever grateful for that opportunity," Spiegel said.

Entrepreneurs must be Farm Bureau members to qualify as top 10 semifinalists. Applicants who are not members can join Virginia Farm Bureau online.

Detailed eligibility guidelines, the competition timeline, videos and profiles of past winners are available at fb.org/challenge. Applications must be received by midnight on July 31.