

Bridge, Road Deterioration Problematic In California



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As the U.S. Interstate Highway System reaches 64 years old, it faces increasing congestion, unprecedented levels of travel – particularly by large trucks – and insufficient funding to make needed repairs and improvements. America’s most critical transportation link will need to be rebuilt and expanded to meet the nation’s growing transportation needs, according to a report released Tuesday by TRIP, a national transportation research nonprofit. The report, *Restoring the Interstate Highway System: Meeting America’s Transportation Needs with a Reliable, Safe & Well-Maintained National Highway Network*, looks at the Interstate system’s use, condition and benefits, and the findings of a 2019 report prepared by the Transportation Research Board (TRB), at the request of Congress as part of the Fixing America’s Surface Transportation (FAST) Act, on the condition and use of the Interstate system and on actions required to restore and upgrade the Interstate system.

Figures included in the report show California as the number one ranked state in the category of Congested Urban Interstates and ninth in the Pavement in Poor Condition category. The state also was ranked number 10 nationwide in the Interstate Bridges Poor/Structurally Deficient category.

According to the TRB report, the U.S. Interstate system has a persistent and growing backlog of physical and operational deficiencies as a result of age, heavy use and deferred reinvestment, and is in need of major reconstruction and modernization. The TRB report concludes that annual investment in the Interstate Highway System should be increased approximately two-and-a-half times, from \$23 billion in 2018 to \$57 billion annually over the next 20 years.

“Investing in our transportation infrastructure is a win-win,” said Allan Zarembek, president and CEO of the California Chamber of Commerce. “It will get essential products to Californians and allow people to travel to work and school in a safer environment while providing much needed jobs to improve California’s economy. California’s transportation infrastructure is the backbone of our economy.”

The TRIP report found that since 2000, travel on the U.S. Interstate system, the importance of which has been heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic, has increased at a rate nearly triple that at which new lane capacity is being added. In California, 86 percent of urban Interstate highways are considered congested during peak hours, the greatest share in the U.S. Vehicle travel on California’s Interstates

increased 17 percent from 2000 to 2018. Eight percent of Interstate travel in California is by combination trucks.

“Carrying more than half of truck travel, the Interstate Highway System is critical to the nation’s supply chain. With \$75 billion in cost added to freight transportation each year and 67 million tons of carbon dioxide from trucks released into the air due to highway congestion, the United States cannot afford to wait any longer to make the investments necessary to address systemic and growing problems stemming from decades of neglect,” said Chris Spear, president and CEO of the American Trucking Associations. “It is past time for elected officials to provide sufficient and sustainable funding for Interstate highway improvements.”

TRIP’s report finds that while pavement smoothness on most segments of the U.S. Interstate system is acceptable, the crumbling foundations of most highway segments need to be reconstructed, and that continued resurfacing rather than addressing underlying foundational issues provides diminishing returns and results in shorter periods of pavement smoothness.

As the aging system’s foundations continue to deteriorate, most Interstate highways, bridges and interchanges will need to be rebuilt or replaced. According to the TRIP report, pavements on six percent of California’s Interstate highways are in poor condition, the ninth highest share in the nation. Four percent of California’s Interstate bridges are rated in poor/structurally deficient condition, the tenth highest share in the U.S.

“A safe and well-maintained Interstate Highway System can strengthen America’s economy, enhance personal mobility and facilitate more efficient movement of goods, but the future of this network could be in jeopardy without increased federal investment,” said Kathleen Bower, AAA senior vice president of public affairs and international relations. “All states benefit from a modern, accessible Interstate Highway System. AAA urges Congress and the current administration to prioritize transportation investments to ensure safe, efficient and reliable mobility across the United States.”

The design of the Interstate – which includes a separation from other roads and rail lines, a minimum of four lanes, paved shoulders and median barriers – makes California’s Interstates twice as safe to travel on as all other roadways. The fatality rate per 100 million vehicle miles of travel on California’s Interstate in 2018 was 0.58, compared to 1.18 on the state’s non-Interstate routes. TRIP estimates that additional safety features on California’s Interstate Highway System saved 563 lives in 2018.

Restoring and upgrading the Interstate Highway System to meet the nation’s 21st

century transportation needs will require strong federal leadership and a robust federal-state partnership to reestablish the Interstate Highway System as the nation’s premier transportation network. The current federal surface transportation program, Fixing America’s Surface Transportation (FAST Act), the primary source of Interstate highway funding, expires on Sept. 30, 2020, and the reauthorization of a new long-term, adequately and reliably funded long-term federal program will be needed to ensure that a strong federal program supports the restoration of the Interstate system.

“With the expiration of the FAST Act rapidly approaching, this report reaffirms how critical it is for lawmakers to prioritize reauthorizing a long-term, fully funded federal highway program this year,” said Rod Schrader, chairman and CEO of Komatsu’s North American operations and chair of the Association of Equipment Manufacturers CE Sector. “Meeting the critical equipment and supply needs of essential industries including construction and agriculture requires a dependable, modernized national transportation network. Equipment manufacturers are working hard to keep these vital industries properly supplied in the midst of COVID-19 and we need lawmakers to do their part to support these essential supply chains now and for the long haul.”

The ability of states to invest in Interstate highway repairs and improvements will be hampered by the tremendous decrease in vehicle travel that has occurred due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which is estimated to reduce state transportation revenues by at least 30 percent – approximately \$50 billion – over the next 18 months.

Based on the findings of the TRB Interstate report, TRIP has provided a set of recommendations for the restoration of the Interstate Highway System, which includes: the foundational reconstruction of Interstate highways, bridges and interchanges; improvement to roadway safety features; system right-sizing, including upgrading of some roadway corridors to Interstate standards; adding needed additional highway capacity on existing routes; adding additional corridors; and, modifying some urban segments to maintain connectivity while remediating economic and social disruption.

“The long-term vision that helped establish the current Interstate system nearly 65 years ago is needed again today,” said Dave Kearby, TRIP’s executive director. “In order to rebuild the nation’s economy, maintain personal and commercial mobility, and improve quality of life, adequate transportation investment and a sustainable, long-term funding source for the federal surface transportation program must remain a priority.”