

Colorado highway traffic has nearly tied pre-pandemic levels, study says



Vehicles headed west on I-70 near C-470.
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A national research group warns that the state needs to invest new federal and state money in improving roadways that carry freight traffic.

Colorado traffic has nearly returned to pre-pandemic levels – a marker that public officials must consider as they look at how to spend increasing federal and state transportation money at a time when freight travel is crucial to the supply chain, according to a report issued Tuesday.

State roadways recorded 4.59 billion vehicle miles traveled in September 2021, just a 1.2% decrease from the same month in 2019, according to TRIP, a Washington, D.C.-based national transportation research nonprofit organization. That bounce-back ranks slightly above the national average of a 1.8% VMT decline over that two-year period, though it ranked as the steepest drop over that timeframe of any state in the Rocky Mountain West.

The regional return of traffic despite the continued work-from-home policies of many large employers in the Denver metro area is indicative of state's centrality in the national freight network. TRIP estimated that \$331.8 billion worth of goods moved through the state over the past year – 88% moved either entirely by trucks or partly by trucks as part of a multimodal transportation network. And yet, the Denver area remains home to three of the 70 worst bottlenecks for truckers nationally, according to a report earlier this year from the American Transportation Research Institute. The "Mousetrap" intersection of Interstate 70 and Interstate 25 ranked 20th in terms of problems, the I-70/Interstate 270 intersection at the east end of the Central 70 expansion project was

27th and the intersection of I-25 and Interstate 76 in north Denver ranked 66th.

With supply chains running into problems in a lot of places – from overseas factories working at greatly diminished levels to water-based shipments being backed up for weeks or months – ensuring that overland trucking routes run as smoothly as possible is vital, TRIP officials said. And with federal officials having passed a \$1.2 trillion infrastructure bill this year just months after the Colorado Legislature approved a \$5.3 billion transportation-funding boost, it is paramount that officials in all states use these new resources wisely in this area, they said.

"In the short term, improving the performance of the nation's supply chain will require addressing the many supply chain challenges that are restricting the timely movement of freight," said Dave Kearby, TRIP's executive director, in a news release with the report. "But ensuring that the nation's long-term goals for economic growth and quality of life are met will require investing adequately in an efficient transportation system that will provide the U.S. with a reliable supply chain."

While Colorado may be home to just three of the nation's worst bottlenecks, the TRIP report pointed out something equally as telling in terms of what the state does not have. The report, for example, also listed the top 25 freight corridors ranked by travel time reliability index, and none of them ran through Colorado.

While the state is on the cusp of being able to pump one of the most significant infusions of new money in memory into its highway system, Colorado transportation leaders also are crafting new regulations designed to limit greenhouse-gas emissions from the sector. Those include a proposal, scheduled for a vote Thursday before the Colorado Transportation Commission, that could shift money away from highway-capacity expansions in the future unless those expansions come with mitigation measures to offset any increase in emissions from increased vehicles – a proposal that worries some transportation advocates.

Some public officials are taking other steps, meanwhile, to try to attract more freight traffic to their highways. The E-470 Public Highway Authority will begin a three-year capacity-expansion project on a key stretch of that eastern Denver toll road next year, part of its efforts to land more truck traffic, which is not as subject to economic changes and workplace shifts as typical commuter traffic.