

The Bradford Era

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Study: Pa.'s rural roads, bridges among worst in U.S.

traffic safety, but the US faces a \$180 billion backlog in funding for needed repairs and improvements to the rural transportation system. This is according to a new report released Thursday by TRIP, a national transportation research nonprofit.

The report, *Rural Connections: Examining the Safety, Connectivity, Condition and Funding Needs of America's Rural Roads & Bridges*, evaluates the safety and condition of the nation's rural roads and bridges and finds 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.

Roads, highways, rails and bridges in the nation's rural areas face a number of significant challenges: they lack adequate capacity; they fail to provide needed levels of connectivity to many communities; and, they cannot adequately support growing freight travel in many corridors. Rural roads and bridges have significant deficiencies and deterioration, they lack many desirable safety features, and rural non-Interstate roads experience fatal traffic crashes at a rate far higher than all other roads and highways.

The report finds that Pennsylvania's rural roads and bridges have significant deficiencies. Fifteen percent of Pennsylvania's rural bridges are rated in poor/structurally deficient condition, the fourth highest rate in the nation. Bridges rated poor/structurally deficient have significant deterioration to the major components of the bridge and are often posted for lower weight or closed to traffic, restricting or redirecting large vehicles, including agricultural equipment, commercial trucks, school buses and emergency services vehicles.

Eighteen percent of Pennsylvania's rural roads are rated in poor condition – the 13th highest rate in the nation – and 20 percent are in mediocre condition. The rate of traffic fatalities on Pennsylvania's non-Interstate, rural roads is nearly double the fatality rate on all other roads in the state – 2.02 fatalities per 100 million vehicle miles of travel vs. 1.04. There were 442 fatalities on Pennsylvania's non-Interstate, rural roads in 2020. Rural roads are more likely to have narrow lanes, limited shoulders, sharp curves, exposed hazards, pavement drop-offs, steep slopes and limited clear zones along roadsides.

"Pennsylvania farmers know far too well how structurally deficient roads and bridges increase their costs and harm the efficiency of their operations," said Rick Ebert, president of Pennsylvania Farm Bureau, the state's largest general farm organization. "The communities in which our members work and live need a smoothly functioning transportation system to connect with both local and global markets. Delays caused by the need to avoid substandard bridges and roads are even more detrimental in the current economic environment. The TRIP report illustrates the challenges that remain for Pennsylvania policymakers to improve the Commonwealth's critical rural transportation network."

America's rural transportation system provides the first and last link in the supply chain from farm to market, connects manufacturers to their customers, supports the tourism industry, and enables the production of energy, food and fiber. Rural Americans are more reliant on the quality of their transportation system than their urban counterparts, with vehicle travel in rural communities averaging approximately 50 percent higher than in urban communities.

"Roadway safety countermeasures like median cable barriers, rumble strips and guardrails are among the most cost-effective ways to prevent traffic crashes and to save lives when they do happen," said Jake Nelson, AAA traffic safety advocacy and research director. "At a time when our nation is recording record high traffic deaths, transportation investments ought to prioritize curbing traffic injuries where we can make the greatest impact—rural roads."