

Stateline

States Steer More Money Toward Rural Roads

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Many rural areas, such as Gillette, Wyo., above, are serviced by unpaved roads. Some states are taking advantage of last year's federal infrastructure law to pour billions into fixing or upgrading rural routes.

Mead Gruver / The Associated Press



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Stateline

Locals called it "The Roller Coaster" or "Delta Dips." The 19-mile stretch along U.S. Highway 50 from Delta, Colorado, to just south of Grand Junction, was filled with bulges and dips, making it unpleasant to drive and sometimes downright dangerous.

"Some trailers lost loads because of those dips," said Don Suppes, a Delta County commissioner. "I personally watched a small truck that had its trailer knocked off the hitch. It was a little spooky."

Suppes said the dips and swells were caused by the clay soil that settles under the pavement and gets spongy when wet.

Colorado transportation officials decided to target the stretch, spending \$15 million in state and federal money on it as part of a statewide rural road improvement initiative. They completed the multiyear project in July.

On some parts of the highway, workers removed the clay, excavated under the asphalt, put in a fill material and repaved. In others, they shaved off asphalt and leveled it out. They added guardrails, shoulders, rumble strips and striping.

"The road is nice and flat now," Suppes said. "It looks really good, and it's 100 times better than it was before. I would say it's a fairly safe stretch of highway with these improvements."

Like Colorado, a growing number of states have been focusing their attention on improving rural roads.

Many rural roads carry heavy trucks and farm equipment, and some haven't been repaved in decades, transportation officials say. With many state budgets healthy and new money arriving from the federal COVID-19 stimulus and bipartisan infrastructure laws, states are spending more.

In June, for example, Maine Democratic Gov. Janet Mills touted a \$9.2 million project [to revitalize the rural highway corridors](#) that lead to the state's western mountains, where several ski slopes are located.

In Texas, the Department of Transportation [plans to invest \\$14 billion](#) over the next decade on rural projects. That's [a 600% hike in planned rural funding](#) compared with just seven years ago, according to Alvin New, a Texas Transportation Commission member.

And in Oklahoma, transportation officials received a \$41.5 million federal loan earlier this year; it will fund nearly half the cost of a rural [safety improvement project](#) in eight counties.

"Rural areas are absolutely critical to the functioning of the nation's economy, and you need a safe, reliable transportation network," said Rocky Moretti, director of policy and research at TRIP, a nonprofit transportation research organization headquartered in Washington, D.C. "If the system deteriorates to the point that it becomes difficult to move trucks that carry food and products, that's a big problem."

And for the tens of millions of residents who live in rural communities and use those roads for commuting, shopping, going to school and medical appointments, it's critical that the roads are in decent condition, Moretti said.

"The worse the shape the roads are in, the more the cost of operating a vehicle increases," he said. "That impacts the consumer."

An October report by TRIP noted that the United States faces a \$109 billion backlog for rural road and highway rehabilitation, such as repaving and reconstruction, and a \$36 billion backlog for rural roadway enhancements, such as safety improvements.

The report said that in 2020, 12% of major rural roads were rated in poor condition, 19% in mediocre condition and 17% in fair condition.

The report called America's rural transportation system ["the first and last link"](#) in the supply chain from farm to market. It said the supply chain issues that arose during the COVID-19 pandemic heightened the importance of the rural road system when it comes to moving goods and products.

"As the nation's major rural roads and highways continue to age, they will reach a point where routine paving and maintenance will not be adequate to keep pavement surfaces in good condition and costly reconstruction of the roadway and its underlying surfaces will become necessary," the report stated.

The 2021 federal Bipartisan Infrastructure Law is providing some help. The law includes a \$2 billion grant program over five years for state and local governments to [improve and expand transportation infrastructure](#) in rural areas.

Part of that funding is aimed at making roads safer.

Nearly [half of fatal crashes in the U.S.](#) occur on rural roads, even though only 19% of the population lives on them, according to a September report by the Governors Highway Safety Association, which represents state highway safety offices.

Transportation experts say higher speeds, narrow shoulders, lack of lighting and lots of curves contribute to the high number of rural road deaths. So does the fact that emergency responders might be some distance away and can take longer to arrive at the scene and transport injured drivers and passengers to hospitals.

In Kansas, officials have doubled the amount they're spending on rural road safety upgrades from about \$3.5 million to about \$7 million a year, according to Tod Salfrank, bureau chief for local projects at the state Department of Transportation. The state's High Risk Rural Roads Program uses the federal infrastructure money on such projects as widening shoulders, improving signage and installing rumble strips.

Most of Kansas' roads are rural, Salfrank said, and about 70% of the state's serious and fatal crashes occur on them. And 90,000 out of 140,000 miles of road in the state are unpaved, he added.

Kansas also distributes about \$18 million in state money to 105 counties for projects such as regrading, putting gravel on unpaved roads and cleaning out ditches to improve drainage, according to Salfrank.

In Colorado, officials want to spend more than \$940 million over 10 years to improve rural roads as part of a larger state plan to improve the transportation system, according to state Department of Transportation spokesperson Tim Hoover. About \$382 million was allocated in 2019 for the first four years for work in 55 counties, and officials used state money and COVID-19 federal stimulus funds.

This is on top of additional money the state spends to repair and fix pavement and replace culverts, Hoover said.

Rebecca White, who directs the department's Division of Transportation Development, said transportation officials decided to spend more on rural roads after touring the state in 2019 and hearing residents' complaints.

"We stood in front of Walmart, went to county fairs," she said. "We were asking, 'What concerns you and what do you want to see us invest in?'" Officials also realized that urban roads were getting a disproportionate amount of money and attention. While urban roads have more traffic, the fatality rate is higher on rural roads, and they are vital for farm-to-market commerce.

"These roads are the ones people use to go grocery shopping, to doctors' offices and even for schools," Hoover said. "These are lifelines."