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RANGE NEWS

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Arizona's rural traffic fatality rate eighth highest in nation, nearly three times higher than all other roads

Nation's rural transportation system may not support economic growth and mobility demands

Washington, D.C.- America's rural heartland is home to approximately 50 million people and its natural resources provide the primary source of the energy, food and fiber that supports the nation's economy and way of life. But, according to a new report, the roads and bridges that serve and connect the nation's rural areas face a number of significant challenges, including inadequate capacity to handle the growing levels of traffic and commerce, limited connectivity, the inability to accommodate growing freight travel, deteriorated road and bridge conditions, a lack of desirable safety features, and a traffic fatality rate far higher than all other roads and highways. The report, "Rural Connections: Challenges and Opportunities in America's Heartland," was released this week by TRIP, a national non-profit transportation research group based in Washington, D.C. It defines Rural America as all places and people living outside urban areas of 5,000 or more.

Despite a recent decrease in the overall fatality rate on America's roads, traffic crashes and fatalities on Arizona's rural roads remain disproportionately high, occurring at a rate nearly three times higher than on all other roads. In 2009, Arizona's non-Interstate rural roads had a traffic fatality rate of 2.78 deaths for every 100 million vehicle miles of travel, compared to a fatality rate on all other roads of 0.98 deaths per 100 million vehicle miles of travel. Of the 807 traffic fatalities that occurred in Arizona in 2009, 314 were on rural, non-Interstate roads. Inadequate roadway safety design, longer emergency vehicle response times and the higher speeds traveled on rural roads are factors in the higher traffic fatality rate.

"The safety and quality of life in America's small communities and rural areas and the health of the nation's economy ride on our rural transportation system. This backbone of the heartland allows mobility and connectivity for millions of rural Americans and provides crucial links from farm to market, moves manufactured and energy products, and provides access to countless tourist and recreational destinations," said Will Wilkins, executive director of TRIP. "But, with long-term federal transportation legislation stuck in political gridlock in Washington, America's rural communities and economies could face even higher unemployment and decline. Funding the modernization of our rural transportation system will create jobs and help ensure long-term economic development and quality of life in rural America."

According to the TRIP report, America must adopt transportation policies that will improve rural transportation connectivity, safety and conditions to provide the nation's small communities and rural areas with the level of safe and efficient access that will support quality of life and enhance economic productivity. This can be done, in part, by modernizing and extending key routes to accommodate personal and commercial travel, improving public transit access to rural areas, implementing needed roadway safety improvements, improving emergency response times, and adequately funding state and local transportation programs to insure sufficient preservation and maintenance of rural transportation assets.