California’s rural traffic fatality rate fifth highest in nation

Washington, D.C. - America’s rural heartland is home to approximately 50 million.

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 today by TRIP, (The Road Information Program), a national non-profit transportation research group based in Washington, D.C. It defines Rural America as all places outside of 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 California’s rural roads remain disproportionately high, occurring at a rate more than four times higher than on all other roads.

California ranks second in the nation in the number of fatalities on the state’s rural, non-Interstate roads and fifth in the nation in the traffic fatality rate on its rural, non-Interstate roads.

In 2009, California’s non-Interstate rural roads had a traffic fatality rate of 2.86 deaths for every 100 million vehicle miles of travel. Of the 3,081 traffic fatalities that occurred in California in 2009, 1,164 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, particularly on two-lane roads.

According to the TRIP report, California has the 15th highest percentage of major rural pavements in poor condition. In 2008, 18 percent of the state’s major rural roads were rated in poor condition and another 52 percent were rated in mediocre or fair condition.

California also ranks 19th in the nation in the percentage of rural bridges that are structurally deficient. In 2010, 14 percent of California’s rural bridges were rated as structurally deficient and 13 percent were functionally obsolete.

“Californians deserve to get where we’re going safely, whether driving to shopping areas, trying to connect to an Interstate, visiting a state park or national forest, or going to the wine country or skiing,” said Bert Sandman, chairman of Transportation California.

“Many vital connector routes between towns and cities and between the major north-south freeways are hazardous two-lane roads,” Sandman said. “If the funding is provided, these roads can be modernized and made safer,” he said.

“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.

Report available at: www.tripnet.org