

Around The Region

Many Midlands bridges deficient

Published: Friday, September 2, 2011 10:23 AM CDT

LINCOLN, Neb. – Nebraska and Iowa have made the top five in an undesirable ranking of states with the highest share of deficient rural bridges.

With 23 percent of Iowa's nearly 23,000 rural bridges classified as structurally deficient in 2010, the state was tied for third worst in the nation with Oklahoma. In Nebraska, 16 percent of 14,600 rural bridges were structurally deficient, which ranked it fifth worst in a report released Thursday by The Road Information Program, or TRIP, a Washington, D.C., industry group that advocates for safer roads and bridges.

Structurally deficient bridges have deterioration to decking, supports or other major components.

Other states in the top five and their percentages of structurally deficient rural bridges are Pennsylvania, 28 percent; Rhode Island, 26 percent and South Dakota, 21 percent.

Nationally, 13 percent of rural bridges were classified as structurally deficient.

Every publicly owned bridge in Nebraska is inspected and load-tested every two years to make sure it can safely carry local traffic, said Mary Jo Oie, spokeswoman for the Nebraska Department of Roads. Some bridges require weight restrictions, which are clearly posted on the bridge.

"Bridges that are labeled 'structurally deficient' are not unsafe and may have many years of useful life," Oie said.

Iowa roads staff inspect all the state's bridges as required by law, either on a one- or two-year schedule, said Dena Gray-Fisher, spokeswoman for the Iowa Department of Transportation.

"The bridges that are open, even though they have this worrisome label, it doesn't mean they aren't safe," Gray-Fisher said. "They're still meeting basic traffic demands."

Even though Iowa has completed enough repairs to remove 50 bridges from the structurally deficient list, other older bridges quickly take their place, she said. The state currently has a \$215 billion backlog for critical-needs work on roads and bridges.

It's a similar story in other states that face significant backlogs in bridge and road maintenance, said Carolyn Bonifas, associate director of research for the industry group.

"Largely what we're seeing in every state is they're having to do more with less," she said.

Congress could help states with planning by passing long-term federal transportation legislation, Bonifas said. Federal transportation budgets have been funded through a series of short-term extensions over the past several years. The latest one expires at the end of the month.