Study: Idaho’s Rural Roads in Poor Shape

Only Vermont's rural byways were rated in worse condition in a recent report.

BY BEN BOTKIN

Idaho’s rural road conditions lag behind most of the nation. A full 31 percent of Idaho’s rural roads were rated in poor condition by a study recently released by TRIP, a nonpartisan national transportation research group.

That’s the second-worst rate in the nation. The only state with worse rural road conditions is Vermont, at 36 percent.

The report recommends modernizing and increasing the safety features on roads, and says that improving funding is necessary to preserve and improve the nation’s rural roadways. The study found that in 2009, 146 traffic fatalities in Idaho — more than half of the 226 deaths tied to vehicle accidents — were on rural roads.

Transportation officials and policymakers in the Magic Valley say that if more funding were available, it would aid road upkeep efforts. Under the state’s existing system, rural highway districts, cities and counties all share 38 percent of Idaho’s gas and diesel tax of 25 cents per gallon.

That funding has dropped somewhat, due at least in part to people traveling less in the recession. Fuel taxes — as well as registration fees — pulled in $43.1 million for highway districts in fiscal 2011. That’s down 6.5 percent from $46.1 million in 2007, the highest amount since 2005.

State Rep. Leon Smith, R-Twin Falls and a member of the House Transportation and Defense Committee, said the slim funding stream contributes to Idaho’s low ranking in the study.

At the same time, he said, highway districts “do pretty well with the money that they have.”

One advantage, if there is one for south-central Idaho, Smith said, is that there’s no major rainy season to accelerate road deterioration. In northern Idaho, there’s a bigger rainy season but no more money, he said.

Stuart Davis, executive director of the Idaho Association of Highway Districts, said it’s been difficult over the years for transportation policymakers to sell the idea of a fuel tax increase, particularly as federal transportation money has drastically increased in recent years.

He says the state’s existing model for a fuel tax is outdated, particularly as it’s consumption-based and vehicles are increasingly efficient.

“In my opinion, we need to look at a combination of registration and fuel tax increases,” he said, adding that it has to be incremental, but also would be hard to sell to the public in a recession.

“The Twin Falls Highway District recently switched to repaving roads by grinding up old asphalt and turning it into a gravel base.

That saves money because fewer construction materials are needed and the asphalt doesn’t need to be hauled away, said district Director Dave Jones.

It also increases the road base for more protection against wear and tear from heavy trucks, he said.

Karen Dalton, administrator of the district, said the district has been able to avoid layoffs with good money management.

Unlike other districts in Idaho, it hasn’t had to grind up paved roads into gravel roads because it can’t afford repaving, she said.

At the same time, the district isn’t turning its gravel roads into paved roads, either.

“We’re just keeping up with preventative maintenance and keeping the roads that are paved going,” she said.

Leroy Lewis, supervisor of Jerome Highway District, said: “We have quite a few projects lined up if we just had the money to do it.”

Some roads are starting to show more wear because of increased truck traffic, he said. While grants are available, competition for the available dollars makes it a challenge, Lewis said.

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