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Northern New England's rural roads get poor marks

Northern New England's rural roads are among the most deteriorated in the country, a national transportation research group said Thursday.

In a report examining the condition of America's rural roads and bridges, the Washington-based group TRIP ranked Vermont's rural roads as the worst in the nation, with 36 percent of them in poor condition. New Hampshire had the ninth-worst rural road conditions in the U.S., with 21 percent of its rural roads in poor condition, while Maine was ranked 14th worst, with 19 percent deemed as poor.

Fifteen percent of New Hampshire and Maine's rural bridges were rated as deficient, putting them 11th and 12th from the bottom. Twelve percent of Vermont's rural bridges were deemed to be structurally deficient.

The numbers are sure to go up following the damages left behind by Tropical Storm Irene, which washed out roads and bridges in all three states.

"This takes an already dire situation and makes it worse," TRIP spokeswoman Carolyn Bonifas said.

TRIP's report provides data on highway fatality rates and road and bridge conditions in rural areas of America, defined as places outside the primary daily commuting zones of cities of 50,000 or more. The report also makes recommendations for improving rural transportation and advocates for continued funding through the federal surface transportation program.

In Maine, transportation funding isn't a new concern to state officials.

Lawmakers and highway maintenance advocates have been warning that the state faces serious transportation funding shortfalls given long-term infrastructure needs and the declining revenue base from a fuel tax that's being eroded as vehicles become increasingly efficient and require less fuel.

The issue arose again earlier this year when Gov. Paul LePage and lawmakers abandoned automatic increases in fuel taxes by indexing rises to the cost of living.

Randy Mace, president of the Maine Better Transportation Association, said Maine will be spending \$230 million less on capital improvements to its highways and bridges in the current two-year budget cycle than during the previous cycle.