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## NH's rural roads in poor shape

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Even before Irene's downpour did its damage, New Hampshire's rural roads and bridges had problems, although they remain pretty safe in terms of fatal accidents, says a new report from an industry group.

The report was released Thursday by Trip, a group composed of transportation officials, highway contractors and others associated with the road transportation industry. The group argues that federal and state funding for rural roads and bridges should be maintained, both for safety reasons and to maintain economic viability in the nation's rural areas.

"The importance of rural transportation is likely to increase in the future as more people choose to live in rural America. ... Making needed improvements to the nation's rural transportation system will be critical in supporting the quality of life and economic development of rural America and the entire nation," it argues.

According to the report, data compiled by a variety of federal and state agencies indicates:

- New Hampshire was the ninth worst state in terms of percentage of rural non-Interstate roads in "poor" condition in 2008. Vermont had by far the worst percentage in the country, with more than a third of its rural roads rated poor.

In some cases, it said, poor roads can be resurfaced but often are too deteriorated and must be reconstructed.

- New Hampshire was 11th in the nation in percentage of rural bridges considered "structurally deficient" in 2010.

That category means it has problems to the deck, supports or other major components, and may face weight limits or even closure. The report said 15 percent of the state's 1,960 rural bridges were in that category, roughly the same percentage as Maine and Vermont.

- In terms of fatal accidents, New Hampshire did much better the national average, with 2.16 fatalities per 100 million miles traveled on rural, non-Interstate roads. Twenty-nine other states had worse averages.

Vermont and Maine did even better, with fewer than two deaths per 100 million miles traveled on rural roads, an indication that while poor roads may raise costs and time for travel, they aren't necessarily unsafe.

Fatalities on all roads in the United States have been improving steadily for more than a decade, due to a combination of safer cars and changes in road design.

Rural roads remain far more dangerous than urban streets or high-speed highways, however. The fatality rate per miles driven is two to three times higher on smaller rural roads.

Such roads are getting safer, but are improving more slowly than urban roads and Interstates.

From 2000-09, the fatality rate on bigger roads decreased by 28 percent, but the traffic fatality rate on rural, non-Interstate routes declined by only 13 percent.

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