Report: Missouri’s poor roads are part of national problem

State ranks 15th in the ‘poor’ condition of rural roads in national report

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For the Fulton Sun

A national report confirms what state officials have been saying for some time: Missouri’s roads and bridges are deteriorating — especially in the state’s rural areas.

But some states in the country have roads and bridges in worse condition than Missouri’s, the 43-page TRIP report explains.

TRIP is a Washington, D.C.-based “nonprofit organization that researches, evaluates and distributes economic and technical data on surface transportation issues,” the group explained on the cover of its report, “Rural Connections: Challenges and Opportunities in America’s Heartland.”

“The roads are defined as outside urban areas of 2,500 or more,” Rocky Moretti, TRIP’s policy and research director, explained at the beginning of a 55-minute telephone news conference. “These rural communities are home to 61 million Americans and — also very critical — they are the key source for energy, food and fiber across the country.

Missouri ranks 15th in the “poor” condition of rural roads, with 21 percent, while Michigan was the nation’s worst at 37 percent.

Missouri’s 2,950 “structurally deficient” outstate bridges, 15 percent of the state’s total, landed the state in 10th place nationally, while the worst rating went to Pennsylvania, with 3,624 bridges, or 25 percent of all bridges in that state.

Throughout the nation, traffic fatalities in rural areas — especially on non-interstate roads — are about triple those of all other roadways, Moretti said.

And, even though Missouri’s 433 fatalities in 2013 on rural, non-interstate roads were 57.2 percent of all 757 road deaths that year — or a 1.96 rating for every 100,000 miles driven, compared with a 1.09 rating for all accidents — that wasn’t enough to get Missouri on the list of the Top 20 states with high fatality rates.

The worst state on that list was Connecticut, with 3.57 deaths for every 100 million miles driven on rural roads, compared with a 0.890 combined rate for all 276 fatalities around the state.

“Nearly half of the traffic fatalities across the country occur on rural, non-interstate roads,” Moretti added, “but they are only carrying approximately a quarter of the travel across the country.”

Kathleen Bower, national public affairs and international relations vice president for the American Automobile Association, said the main problem is “an imminent transportation funding crisis, given that we have underfunded our roads for so long. And, right now, Congress faces a choice of whether they’re going to do another short-term patch (or) whether they’re actually going to go down the path of a real, long-term bill that’s good for the nation.”

She said later: “These short-term patches are not economically responsible. It’s almost like a pay-day loan.”

Bower acknowledged few politicians want “to vote for a gas tax increase or anything else that’s going to hit Americans in their pocketbooks — but we view that as a very necessary thing.” AAA supports a 12- to 15-cent increase in the federal fuel tax over the next three years.

U.S. Sen. Claire McCaskill, D-Missouri, agreed something needs to be done.

She was not on the conference call, but issued a news release after a U.S. Senate Commerce Committee hearing Wednesday, slamming “the failure” of Congress’ Republican leaders to reauthorize highway funding and other long-term infrastructure projects.

“We don’t have a bill, and highway funding runs out in about 10 minutes,” McCaskill said in the release. “It seems to me that what we’re trying to do is put a Band-Aid on a cancer, which is the inability of Congress to step up to the plate and do the mandated, hard work of finding the resources to fund infrastructure.”

During the conference call, Veronica Nigh, an American Farm Bureau Federation economist, said poor roads cause farmers to pay more seeds and fertilizer, hurt prices farmers receive for their crops and give up domestic and international market access.

States also share in road funding problems, the participants said.

“As the public begins to understand the consequences and costs of not making the improvements,” TRIP’s Moretti said, “that tends to make them realize that it’s far more cost-effective to pay for the improvements.”