Report: America's rural roads see too many deadly crashes

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Rural America may be the breadbasket of the economy, but the roads and bridges that crisscross those fertile fields can use a lot of help and are the scene of too many deadly accidents.

Those are the conclusions of a new report issued by the research group TRIP, which classifies the rural U.S. as counties without an urban area of at least 50,000 or lacking major commute flows.

The report comes — as many of these gloomy reports do — at a time when Congress is taking up major transportation spending matters. Meanwhile, the group said, the balance in the federal Highway Trust Fund is expected to dip below $1 billion this summer, possibly delaying federal reimbursement for transportation projects.

“With long-term federal transportation legislation stuck in political gridlock in Washington, America’s rural communities and economies could face even higher unemployment and decline,” said Will Wilkins, TRIP’s executive director.

Without new revenue, federal highway funding is expected to be cut dramatically in the spending year that begins on Oct. 1 without an infusion of revenue.

Rural highways and bridges don’t just provide access to agricultural fields, but tourism destinations and energy resources, the report’s authors wrote. The United States also has seen a significant increase in ethanol and oil production in recent years.

Missouri ranks No. 11 in the percentage of structurally deficient rural bridges (15 percent) and is tied for No. 10 for the percentage of rural roads in poor condition (23 percent), according to the report. Nationally, 12 percent of bridges were rated structurally deficient and 15 percent of rural roads were in poor condition.

The report found that fatal car accidents occur at a disproportionate rate on rural roads. Non-Interstate rural roads saw traffic fatalities at a rate of 2.21 deaths per 100 million vehicle miles traveled, compared to 0.78 deaths per 100 million vehicle miles on all other routes.

The report is in keeping with TRIP’s work to raise awareness about transportation challenges, an organization spokeswoman said. The Washington-based nonprofit is supported largely by the construction industry.