Many roads, bridges in rural America in disrepair

Gary Stoller, USA TODAY  July 10, 2014

Many major rural roads and rural bridges are in disrepair. Roads are in poor condition, and bridges are structurally deficient.

One of many large potholes on “Franklin Avenue in downtown Scranton, Pa., in February (Photo: Butch Comegys, AP)

Six states have 30% or more of their major rural roads with pavement in poor condition, and in five states, at least one-fifth of rural bridges are structurally deficient, a report released Thursday by a non-profit transportation group says.

Connecticut has the worst percentage — 35% — of major roads in rural areas with pavement in poor condition. Rhode Island and West Virginia follow at 33%, according to TRIP, which analyzed 2012 federal transportation data.

“The development of rural America — the primary and rapidly increasing source of the nation's energy, food and fiber — is being hindered by a transportation system that has significant road and bridge deterioration,” says Rocky Moretti, TRIP’s director of policy and research.

The transportation departments of Connecticut, Rhode Island and West Virginia did not comment about TRIP’s data.

TRIP’s analysis of major rural roads is in line with one done last year by USA TODAY and TRIP. That analysis looked at 2011 federal data and found that 21% of pavement on rural and urban roads throughout the country is in poor condition.

TRIP is sponsored by, among others, insurance companies, labor unions, equipment manufacturers, and highway- and transit-related businesses.

Other states with 30% or more of major rural roads in poor condition are Hawaii, Michigan and Kansas, the new TRIP report says. That percentage is 20% or more in 10 other states.

Florida, Tennessee and Nevada have the smallest percentage — 3% — of major rural roads with pavement in poor condition.

Many roads and bridges throughout the nation are in disrepair because federal, state and local funding levels for improvements are not adequate.

The U.S. Department of Transportation estimates that the highway account of the Highway Trust Fund, which allocated $37.8 billion to states for highway projects in the fiscal year that ends Sept. 30, will run out of money next month unless Congress can find a solution.

On Tuesday, U.S. House Ways and Means Committee Chairman Dave Camp announced a $10.9 billion plan to extend transportation funding through next May.

The TRIP report says that 2013 federal data show Pennsylvania and Rhode Island have the highest percentage — 25% — of structurally deficient bridges in rural areas.

Rich Kirkpatrick, a spokesman for the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation, says about 4,200 of the state's roughly 25,000 state-maintained bridges are structurally deficient. Such bridges are not inherently unsafe but may require significant maintenance and repair to remain in service and eventual replacement to address the deficiencies.

The deficient conditions "point to the result of decades of underfunding in highway and bridge improvements,” he says.

A "far-reaching" transportation bill signed into law by Gov. Tom Corbett in November has begun to fund transportation improvements, Kirkpatrick says.

The bill calls for spending up to $2.4 billion by the fifth year of the state's improvement plan.

Florida and Texas have the smallest percentage — 3% — of structurally deficient bridges in rural areas, the TRIP report says.

Of Florida’s 5,237 rural bridges, 169 are structurally deficient. In Texas, 1,082 of 31,912 rural bridges are in such condition.

The TRIP report shows "that the U.S. must continue to invest in transportation infrastructure to ensure that whether people live in rural, suburban or urban areas they have access to economic opportunities and a high quality of life,” says Bud Wright, executive director of the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials.

The report also analyzed 2012 federal data for traffic fatalities on rural roads, excluding federal interstate highways.

Roadway design or conditions are a contributing factor in about one-third of crashes, Moretti says.

The report says that rural roads that are not federal interstate highways have a traffic fatality rate nearly three times higher than other roads.

In 2012, such roads had a traffic fatality rate of 2.21 deaths for every 100 million vehicle miles of travel, compared with a fatality rate of 0.78 deaths per 100 million miles of travel on all other roads, TRIP says.

South Carolina had the highest fatality rate on rural roads — 3.99 deaths per 100 million vehicle miles traveled — compared with 0.68 deaths on its other roads.

South Carolina Highway Patrol Lt. Kelley Hughes says the number of traffic deaths on rural roads is declining. There were 476 deaths on such roads last year, compared with 555 in 2012 and 594 in 2011, he says.

New Hampshire had the lowest fatality rate on rural roads — 1.16 deaths per million vehicle miles traveled.