

2025 Federal Policy Priorities

The Ports-to-Plains Alliance is a non-profit, bipartisan, grassroots alliance of communities and businesses whose mission is to advocate for a robust international transportation infrastructure to promote economic security and prosperity throughout America's Heartland.

Our goal is to upgrade the entire 2,300-mile Ports-to-Plains Alliance Corridor (the "Corridor") from Mexico to Canada to a four-lane, divided highway or Interstate Highway capable of safely delivering the food, fiber and fuel that secure the quality of life of America's great cities.

The Corridor runs through nine rural states and is comprised of three Congressionally-designated High Priority Corridors on the National Highway System:

- Ports-to-Plains Trade Corridor #38
- Heartland Expressway #14
- Theodore Roosevelt Expressway #58

The Ports-to-Plains Corridor #38 in Texas and New Mexico were identified by Congress in 2022 as Future Interstate Highways.

Future Interstate Designation



Over the past two decades about 47.5% of the Corridor has been upgraded to four-lane or better with federal and state grants, but our job is not finished. The remaining antiquated portions of the Corridor need to be upgraded as well.

RURAL HIGHWAY CORRIDORS ARE IMPORTANT TO AMERICA AND ARE FACING CHALLENGES

20% of Americans live in rural areas but 68% of our nation's total lane-miles are in rural areas

Urban areas:
1,062 lane-miles per 100,000 residents

Rural areas:
9,087 lane-miles per 100,000 residents

Sources: U.S. Department of Transportation

A modern national surface transportation system is essential for economic success in a global economy and is also a key contributor to the quality of life enjoyed by citizens throughout America. The **National Highway System (NHS)** is the backbone of the America's national transportation system.

The NHS consists of the Interstate Highway System and over 150,000 miles of other highways important to the nation's economy, defense, and mobility. It makes about 5 percent of the Nation's Road mileage, yet it carries over 55 percent of the vehicle miles travelled and about 90 percent of truck vehicle miles travelled.

These are the roads of the highest Federal interest, the roads that link rural America with the rest of the United States and to markets in other nations. Modernizing this network of roads and bridges is critical—the strength of America's rural economy, and the quality of life in rural America, depend on it. As does the economy and quality of life in urban America.

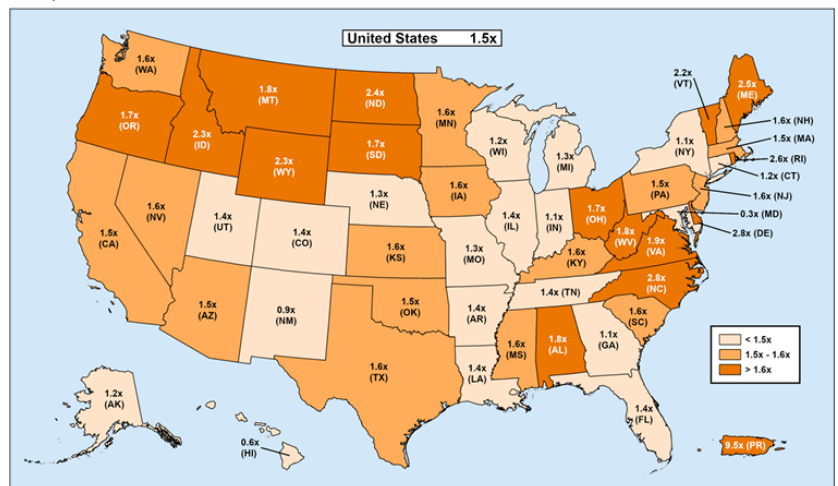
"Together the uniting forces of our communication and transportation systems are dynamic elements in the very name we bear—United States. Without them, we would be a mere alliance of many separate parts."
--President Dwight D. Eisenhower

Unfortunately, many rural highway corridors on the NHS are two-lane, antiquated highways facing transportation challenges relating to safety, usage, and infrastructure condition.

- They lack adequate capacity to carry growing levels of traffic and commerce;
- They fail to provide the needed levels of connectivity to many communities;
- They have significant deficiencies and lack many desirable safety features;
- They are not geometrically designed to accommodate the larger trucks being used today by the energy and agricultural industries; and
- They experience traffic fatalities at a rate far higher than other highways.

Rural areas face many transportation challenges relating to safety. Of the 42,514 motor vehicle traffic fatalities in 2022, there were 17,283 (41%) that occurred in rural areas, 25,023 (59%) in urban areas, and 208 (less than 1%) in areas that were not reported as rural or urban. About two-thirds (64%) of fatalities in rural areas (11,108 of 17,283) were in roadway-departure crashes compared to 37 percent (9,329 of 25,023) in urban areas.

Figure 8. Ratio of Rural to Urban Fatality Rate per 100 Million VMT in Traffic Crashes, by State, 2022



Sources: FARS 2022 ARF; VMT – FHWA

Fatality Rate Per 100 Million Vehicle-Miles Traveled is 1.4 times greater in rural areas

Rural 1.51 Urban 1.08

40% of highway fatalities occur on rural roads

Rural 15,541 Urban 23,482

PORTS-TO-PLAINS ALLIANCE CORRIDOR: A GOOD EXAMPLE

The Ports-To-Plains Alliance Corridor is a good example of the **importance** of rural highway corridors.

It is an **AGRICULTURAL CORRIDOR**. It moves agriculture products from the Ports-to-Plains region to urban domestic markets, and to export markets on the coasts, or to the Canadian and Mexican borders. North America's agricultural heartland produces over \$543 billion of agricultural goods in 2022. Canada and Mexico, totaling 24 percent of all agriculture exports are the number two and three top export markets for U.S. farm products in 2022.

It is an **ENERGY CORRIDOR** serving America's energy heartland, from traditional resources like oil and gas to renewable resources like wind, solar and biofuels. Development of these resources is critical to our energy security, providing a stable and more affordable power source. It serves the, Bakken, Niobrara, Anadarko, Permian Basin, Eagle Ford, as well as emerging Mexico energy shale plays and the oils sands in Alberta.



It is an **INTERNATIONAL TRADE CORRIDOR** serving major international border crossings connecting Texas to Mexico (at Laredo, Eagle Pass, and Del Rio) and connecting Montana and North Dakota to Canada. The Corridor generates over \$200 billion annually (2022) in international commerce with our top two trading partners, Canada and Mexico, accounting for almost 27 percent of all U.S.-North American trade.

It is a **CONNECTIVITY AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT CORRIDOR** running through and connecting small towns and rural communities in America's Heartland. To unleash America's economy, create millions of new jobs, and boost economic growth, it is essential to connect these small towns and rural areas to the 21st Century economy.



It is a **COST-EFFECTIVE WAY TO REDUCE CONGESTION ON I-25 and I-35**. I-25 to the west and I-35 to the east are two highly congested, north-south Interstate Highways about 600 miles apart. The Ports-to-Plains Alliance Corridor runs north-south between these highly congested Interstate Highways. Upgrading the Corridor to a modern four-lane, divided or Interstate Highway facility would cost a small fraction of the cost of improvements to I-25 and I-35. Once upgraded, a significant number of trucks are likely to divert to the Corridor rather than sitting in congestion on I-25 or I-35, thereby providing cost-effective congestion relief on these routes. Improved on-time delivery and decreased transportation costs for goods and services will be the result.

The Corridor is also a good example of the **challenges** facing multi-state rural highway corridors.

About 52.5 percent of the Corridor consists of 2-lane, antiquated roadways that cannot safely and reliably handle today's traffic demands, much less future traffic demands, especially with respect to the energy and agricultural sectors. These roadways were not designed to carry the number or size of the trucks currently traveling up and down the corridor. Moreover, because parallel north-south corridors are often a hundred miles or more to the east or west, users of the Corridor often have to contend with lengthy detours when a bridge is restricted or taken out of service. This hurts the region's competitiveness and quality of life, and results in greater fatalities and injuries.

Addressing these challenges requires a recognition of the importance of the rural transportation network and a commitment to adopting and implementing policies to significantly improve safety

POLICY PRIORITIES FOR RURAL TRANSPORTATION

The Ports-to-Plains Alliance urges Congress and the Administration to adopt the following policy priorities for reauthorization of the Federal surface transportation programs.

Increase and prioritize investment in the National Highway System (NHS).

- The National Highway System are the highways of highest Federal Interest. Modernizing the NHS, which includes the Interstate System, should be the focus of Federal investment, policies, and decision-making. Within the NHS, modernizing rural multi-state corridors to safe, four-lane divided highways—even Interstate Highways where appropriate—should be a priority. Accomplishing these objectives will require a substantial increase in Federal investment directed to the states for modernizing the National Highway System.
- Federal funding should focus on programs that develop the NHS and Future Interstate Highways.
- Discretionary grant programs such as Rural Surface Transportation Grant Program, Rebuilding America (INFRA) Grant Program, Wildlife Crossings Pilot Program, and Strengthening Mobility and Revolutionizing Transportation (SMART) are important to the development of multi-state rural corridors like Ports-to-Plains Alliance Corridor.
- In Congress, Congressionally Designated Spending in the U.S. Senate and Community Project Funding in the U.S. House of Representatives provide members of Congress with the opportunity to assist projects in their State or District.
- We support a substantial increase in federal investment for infrastructure and transportation. Commission after Commission, study after study, report after report have documented the underinvestment in our national infrastructure. The time has come for action!

Emphasize connectivity.

- Safely connecting rural communities to each other, to America's cities, and to the national and global economies should be a priority in the reauthorization legislation and in USDOT's policies and decision-making. Rural transportation networks—which also bring manufactured products, agriculture and other commodities to markets—are vital to our nation's economy and all Americans' quality of life.
- Connectivity provides economic improvements to rural communities resulting in increases in population, employment, and income; improved job matches for businesses and employees; even improved broadband opportunities for rural communities.
- Many rural western states still lack broadband infrastructure needed for economic success. Highway Right-of-Way is a key opportunity to serve rural communities.
- As the future approaches, the availability of Electric Vehicle Charging (EVC) and Renewable Fuels (RF) will be critical to the connectivity required for moving people and goods. We urge Congress to assure that funding for EV and RF are available for rural corridors like Ports-to-Plains.

Restore Federal leadership.

- Modernizing multi-state corridors requires the coordinated and sustained efforts of all of the involved states. The benefits to the national transportation system and to America as a whole far outweigh the benefits to any particular state or area. For that reason, Federal leadership in promoting and modernizing multi-state corridors is essential and should be reflected in the reauthorization legislation and USDOT policies and decision-making.
- Successful development of rural NHS and Interstate Corridors, including Future Interstates, need multi-state cooperation. Federal Law must encourage that cooperation.
- The federal transportation program was never meant to support Local Government projects. Federal funds should be used for federal priorities.

Recognize rural America is different from urban America.

- What works in urban America does not always work in rural America, and vice versa. Federal policies and decision-making should take that into account by not adopting one-size-fits-all policies that limit flexibility.
- **For example**, public-private partnerships and other types of investment that rely on a dedicated revenue stream from the project may be good options for projects in urban America, but they are not viable options for most transportation projects in rural America. Federal policies and decision-making should not put rural America at a disadvantage by explicitly or implicitly requiring or leveraging use of PPPs or similar financing options in order to qualify for assistance. Rural projects, especially development of rural multi-state corridors, require other forms of support, primarily grants. Federal policies must recognize these differences.
- **A second example**, based on a nearly 36 percent construction inflation over the past three years, is the current value of bonding. For every year a highway project is delayed, inflation increases the cost. Even the bond interest payments are significantly less than annual inflation costs.
- **A third example** is an overemphasis on traffic counts and freight volume in Federal decision-making and policies. This disadvantages rural America, especially multi-state rural corridors, which often have much lower traffic counts and freight volumes. Yet providing connectivity to rural towns and communities, giving our urban and suburban areas access to food, fuel and fiber resources, connecting rural America to the national and international economies, and reducing fatalities and injuries on rural highways are all important policy objectives that should be recognized in Federal decision-making and policies.
- **A fourth example** are proposals to prioritize “fix it first” investments. While maintaining existing infrastructure is important, it is equally important to provide additional capacity where necessary. Upgrading antiquated two-lane rural highways on the National Highway System to modern four-lane divided highways or Interstate Highways is important for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is reducing the high traffic fatality rates in rural America.
- **A fifth example** are proposals to expand local control over transportation decision-making. While expanding local control may be desirable for some Federal transportation investment, both in urban and rural areas, it should not extend to investments on the NHS, which, as the backbone of our national transportation network, is of the highest Federal interest. Building and maintaining a national network requires strong Federal leadership in partnership with the states, who own and maintain most of the highways on the NHS. Expanding local control over these investment decisions will lead to balkanization of the national network. Local decision-makers will be inclined to address local projects and priorities rather than projects that may have lesser local benefits but are critical to maintaining and improving a national network.

Recognize large rural states in the West present special problems.

- Western states are geographically large, with extensive Federal lands and low population density. While the Western region of the United States takes up a large portion (61%) of the country's total landmass, it only has a relatively small share (39%) of the total miles of Interstate highways compared to other regions, resulting in a significantly lower density of interstate access in the West. As a result, Interstates are further apart in the West, meaning that freight traffic to and from Mexico in the West is not travelling on Interstate Highways.
- The *induced demand* argument that building more lanes and more freeways in urban areas might spur growth that will again result in congestion. But, it's hard to argue that a two-lane road with increasing accidents in a rural area is going to suffer the same fate should it be upgraded. So, we're really dealing with two different arguments. Induced demand only applies when there is enough demand for the route to reach capacity. For example, if two small towns are linked by a 2-lane road and the road is widened to 4-lanes but the towns do not grow significantly, the highway will remain uncongested, but safer.



Prioritize cost-effective solutions for congested corridors.

- Modernizing rural NHS corridors can be a cost-effective solution to relieve congestion on parallel heavily congested Interstate Highway corridors. Federal policies and decision-making should recognize and prioritize these types of solutions.
- As discussed previously, a good example is the Ports-to-Plains Alliance Corridor, which can be a cost-effective way to reduce congestion on gridlocked I-25 to the west and I-35 to the east.
- Over the years, Congress has identified NHS corridors of higher priority including High Priority Corridors on the National Highway System and Future Interstate Highways. The number of High Priority Corridors on the National Highway System has grown to 102 corridors and there are 13 designated Future Interstate Highways recognized by the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) or Congress, including I-27 in Texas and New Mexico.
- Congress should consider prioritizing the designated corridors into a **Tiered System** in order to complete the corridors.

Consider additional recommendations.

- **IF** Congress decides to provide “Article I spending” (i.e., Congressionally-Directed Spending and Community Project Funding) for specific projects, we urge Congress to ensure that projects on the Corridor are included.
- With the Ports-to-Plains Corridor in Texas and New Mexico being granted Future Interstate Designation by Congress, the Alliance is open to assisting other states, if interested, in obtaining Future Interstate Designation. If those opportunities develop, support such legislation.

Future Interstate Designation



PORTS TO PLAINS ALLIANCE

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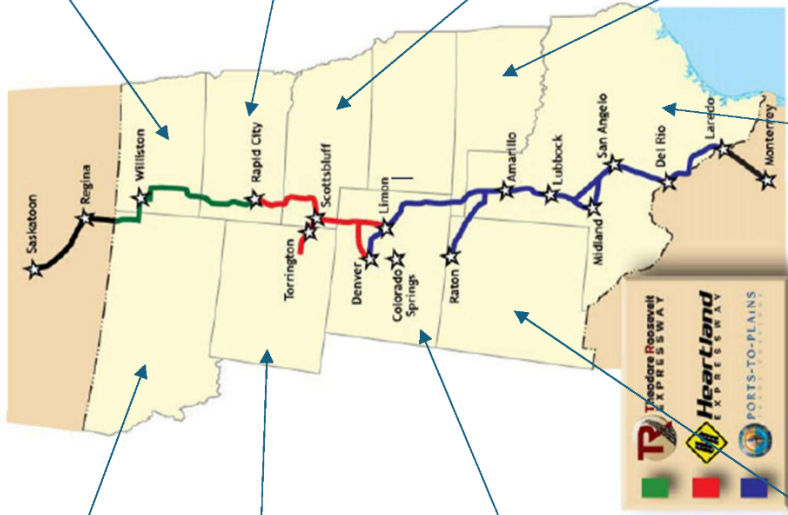
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