



RURAL COUNTY REPRESENTATIVES
OF CALIFORNIA

Testimony for the Record

Submitted by Paul A. Smith, Senior Legislative Advocate on behalf of the Rural County Representatives of California to the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee
Hearing on “Meeting the Transportation Needs of Rural America”

June 24, 2015

Chairman Graves and Ranking Member Norton,

I commend you for holding this important hearing on meeting the transportation needs of rural America. On behalf of the thirty-four member Rural County Representatives of California (RCRC), representing the elected county boards of supervisors, I would like to bring several important issues to your attention. I urge you to keep these issues in mind as your Committee works to reauthorize MAP-21.

High Risk Rural Roads Program

The HRRR program was established to reduce the rate of fatalities and serious injuries on rural two-lane roads through a dedicated funding source for safety improvement projects. MAP-21 eliminated the HRRR program and replaced it with a special rule that requires States to obligate Highway Safety Improvement Program (HSIP) funding towards these roads if fatality rates increase. However, even as fatalities and serious injuries continue to occur on rural roads at alarming rates, a loose interpretation of the law has prevented needed investment in safety improvement projects for the portion of the roadway where these incidents are prevalent.

In California, approximately 55 percent of highway fatalities occur on the local road system, yet counties only receive around 35 percent of HSIP funding. The majority of the RCRC member counties have fatality rates severely higher than the statewide average fatality rate, but lack sufficient funding to address safety needs. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, in 2012 the 10 counties in California with the highest fatality rates were all rural counties, averaging 33.68 fatalities per 100,000 population, which is more than 4.5 times the average statewide fatality rate.

RCRC believes it was Congress’ intent to require HSIP funding to be distributed based on the greatest need, meaning roads that have a high rate of fatalities and serious injuries should be prioritized for safety improvement funding. Instead, HRRR must now compete for funding against state highway safety projects, regardless of where the greatest safety needs exist. To address the loose interpretation of the law, RCRC urges Congress to restore dedicated safety improvement funding for rural roadways and direct

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States to invest these critical safety funds in local jurisdictions with the highest rates of fatalities and serious injuries.

Highway Bridge Program:

The Highway Bridge Program (HBP) was also eliminated under MAP-21, which instead provided dedicated revenues for maintenance, repair, and capital projects for both “on-system” and “off-system” bridges. Additionally, under MAP-21 the list of on-system bridges was greatly expanded, placing a larger share of bridges under the responsibility of local governments. While MAP-21 retained the set aside requirement for off-system bridges (equal to 15 percent of the HBP for FY 2009), dedicated funding for on-system bridges was discontinued. As a result, on-system bridges must now compete for funding against other transportation projects in regional and state decision making, rather than be funded based on need.

Like all local jurisdictions nationwide, California’s rural counties are concerned about the condition of our local bridges and our ability to fund necessary repairs. According to recent data from the California Department of Transportation, the statewide average of bridges considered to be structurally deficient or functionally obsolete – meaning these bridges are in poor condition and in need of major maintenance, rehabilitation, or replacement – hovers around 28 percent. The same data tells us that the issue is even more pervasive in California’s rural communities, where 30 percent of the bridges in rural counties are considered in poor condition with some counties as high as 54 percent.

Given these challenges, RCRC believes that providing dedicated funding for local agencies who manage and maintain local on-system bridges through a required set-aside is a common-sense policy to ensure bridges remain in safe operating conditions and to avoid a catastrophic bridge failure. Without dedicated federal funding for local on-system bridges, rural county supervisors are concerned that bridge maintenance, repair, and capital projects will continue to go largely unfunded.

Project Delivery:

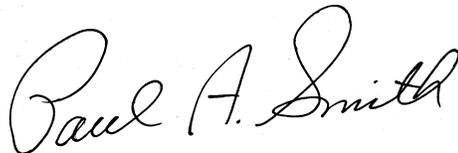
Another issue faced by rural counties in California, and throughout the country, is the high costs and significant delays arising from environmental permitting requirements. Counties in California report costs of approximately 36-50 cents on the construction dollar to move a project through the NEPA process. In addition, projects in California must also meet the strict requirements of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), which imposes regulations that are often stricter than NEPA requirements. As you craft surface transportation reauthorization, we ask that you consider including legislative language that would eliminate barriers to project completion, and review the NEPA process to improve the application and approval process for transportation-related infrastructure projects, particularly in states with strong environmental regulatory programs.

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RCRC is particularly supportive of the provisions found in H.R. 2497, the NEPA Reciprocity Act, which has been introduced by Representative Denham. This legislation would provide reciprocity between state requirements and NEPA, and provide greater local control over project costs and timelines, while not diminishing environmental protection whatsoever. If enacted, H.R. 2497 will relieve states of unnecessary regulatory burdens that can lead to project delays or even cancellations. We encourage the committee to include the text of H.R. 2497 in your transportation reauthorization bill.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit a statement for today's important hearing. We hope that our comments will help inform the committee's discussions about reauthorization of our nation's surface transportation program.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Paul A. Smith". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping initial "P".

PAUL A. SMITH
Senior Legislative Advocate