

The Struggle to Mend America's Rural Roads

As supersize vehicles bear heavier loads, maintenance budgets can't keep up. Meet the Wisconsin farmers paying the price.

A legally loaded semi-trailer truck can produce 5,000 to 10,000 times the road damage of one car according to some estimates, said Benjamin J. Jordan, director of the Wisconsin Transportation Information Center at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Roads and bridges have not kept up.

Although just 19 percent of the country's population lives in rural areas, those regions have 68 percent of the total lane and road miles, according to the U.S. Department of Transportation.

"We have less resources to maintain and rehabilitate the road system and it's deteriorating more quickly," Mr. Jordan said.

The state's gas tax, which is dedicated to transportation needs, has been unchanged since 2006. A proposal last year from Gov. Tony Evers, a Democrat, for an 8-cent increase was voted down by the Republican-led Legislature, which instead raised vehicle title and registration fees.

"In the last budget, the Legislature and governor did come up with some additional funding," said Daniel J. Fedderly, executive director of the Wisconsin County Highway Association. "But the problem is it's one-time funding and it's not ongoing and it's not sustainable."

In Trempealeau, decades of underfunding have left the county of 29,000 people with roughly \$60 million to \$80 million worth of road repairs. Generally, there is no state or federal assistance to help cover the costs.

"The last time we received money to help with road projects was 2008," said Al Rinka, commissioner of the county's Highway Department.

The normal life span of an asphalt road is 30 years. The county's 292 miles of roads are now averaging 74 years.

Emergency closings and weight limits are as common as a sunrise. Farmers can't easily move equipment from one field to another. Truckers must make long detours to deliver feed and fertilizers. Drivers end up with broken axles, wrecked suspension systems or busted tires.

Last March, when the snow melted, inadequate drainage around County Road K near Galesville was so severe that several homes were flooded.

In November, a school bus slid off a county road outside Arcadia as it navigated a turn and tipped over into a ditch. No one was seriously injured.

"I get people calling me and screaming at me all the time," Mr. Rinka said. "In 10 years, we're going to start turning roads back into gravel" if nothing changes.

This week, temperatures remained below freezing. But when the spring thaw comes, the melting will create soft spots that are easily damaged by traffic.

The county also has the worst bridges in the state, with the highest proportion — 6 percent — given a D rating, requiring tonnage restrictions.

The repair backlog is long. Mr. Nelson of Triple Brook Farms waited three years before a small bridge near his property was fixed. That meant he had to drive eight miles to get to fields that were just half a mile away because the crossing couldn't handle the weight of a combine or a tractor. And an emergency weight limit on a bridge on County Road O caused a 12-mile detour each time he sent crops to the grain elevator or river barges.

Still damaged is a 15-ton bridge east of the farm on County Road OO that requires him and his neighbors to reroute their combines and semi-trucks.

"There are things that we can accept that are beyond our control, like viruses and trade deals," Mr. Nelson said, referring to the effects that soybean farmers felt from the coronavirus outbreak and the tariff war with China. "But when it comes to infrastructure, that's crucial for everyone, not just farmers. All the businesses that are out here rely on quality roads."

Quality roads are expensive. Reconstructing a mile costs \$300,000, Mr. Rinka said. Chip sealing, a kind of short-term patching, costs \$17,000 a mile.

In November, the Trempealeau County Board of Commissioners approved the largest increase ever in the road budget — \$5 million — paid for through debt.

With luck, the added funding will cover 15 miles of reconstruction, nearly four times what would be possible with the department's typical annual budget of \$1.2 million to \$1.5 million. County Road JJ, where the school bus accident occurred, will get new blacktop. (A new culvert was added to County Road K over the summer.)

What's really needed, Mr. Rinka said, is a "culture change" in residents and business owners who want good roads but don't want to pay for them.

Someone will beg to have a road repaired, Mr. Rinka said. "I'll say, 'O.K., I'll fix your road, and you're going to see an increase in your property tax.'

"'Oh, no, no,' they say, 'I don't want that.'"

The New York Times | <https://nyti.ms/39CDZ2q>

The underside of a 20-ton wooden bridge outside Ettrick, Wis., that cannot handle heavy farm equipment. Credit...Tim Gruber for The New York Times



**ON A LOCAL NOTE: THE UNDERSIDE
OF THE HESS MILL BRIDGE LOOKS**

IDENTICAL TO THIS PICTURE