

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-13-713T](#), testimony before the Subcommittee on Transportation, Housing, and Urban Development, and Related Agencies, Committee on Appropriations, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

The May 23, 2013 collapse of a section of the Interstate 5 bridge over the Skagit River, north of Seattle, Washington, underscores the importance of maintaining the nation's infrastructure and the economic impact that a bridge failure can have on a region. This testimony addresses (1) what is known about the current condition of the nation's bridges and impact of federal funding for bridges and (2) a preliminary look at recent changes to the surface transportation and bridge program made by MAP-21. The Act consolidated a number of highway programs, including the former Highway Bridge Program. This testimony is based on prior GAO reports, updated with publicly available bridge data and information.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is not making any new recommendations. In 2008, GAO recommended that the Secretary of Transportation work with Congress to identify and define national goals for the federal bridge program, develop and implement performance measures, identify and evaluate best tools and practices, and review and evaluate funding mechanisms to align funding with performance. GAO closed this recommendation as implemented based on the provisions contained in MAP-21.

View [GAO-13-713T](#) for key components. For more information, contact Phillip R. Herr at (202) 512-2834 or herrp@gao.gov.

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TRANSPORTATION INFRASTRUCTURE

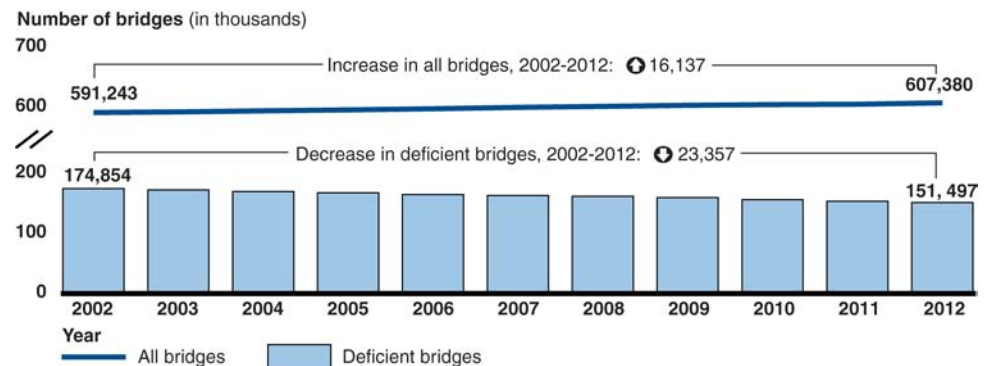
Limited Improvement in Bridge Conditions over the Past Decade, but Financial Challenges Remain

What GAO Found

There has been limited improvement in bridge conditions in the past decade, but a substantial number of bridges remain in poor condition. Of the 607,380 bridges on the nation's roadways in 2012, 1 in 4 was classified as deficient. Some are structurally deficient and have one or more components in poor condition and others are functionally obsolete and may no longer be adequate for the traffic they serve. Data indicate that the number of deficient bridges has decreased since 2002 even as the number of bridges has increased. The impact of the federal investment in bridges is difficult to measure. For example, while Department of Transportation (DOT) tracks a portion of bridge spending on a state-by-state basis, the data do not include state and local spending, thus making it difficult to determine the federal contribution to overall expenditures. Understanding the impact of federal investment in bridges is important in determining how to invest future federal resources.

There has been progress in clarifying federal goals and linking federal surface transportation programs—including bridges—to performance. DOT worked with Congress which adopted provisions in Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century Act (MAP-21), including provisions that move toward a more performance-based highway program. MAP-21 specified that National Highway Performance Program funds may only support eligible projects—including bridge projects—on the National Highway System. The Act also required the Secretary of Transportation, in consultation with states and others, to establish performance measures for bridge conditions. However, although there has been progress in these areas, Congress and the administration need to agree on a long-term plan for funding surface transportation. As we noted in our 2013 High Risk Update, continuing to fund a Highway Trust Fund shortfall through general revenues may not be sustainable without balancing revenues and spending from the fund.

Trends in Number and Condition of Bridges, 2002 through 2012



Source: GAO analysis of FHWA data.

Note: Deficient bridges include both structurally deficient and functionally obsolete bridges.