



Statement of the American Farm Bureau Federation

**TO THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND
INFRASTRUCTURE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON HIGHWAYS AND TRANSIT**

“RURAL HIGHWAY AND TRANSIT CHALLENGES AND PROGRAMS”

March 21, 2024

**Presented By:
American Farm Bureau Federation
600 Maryland Avenue, SW
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Presented By: Scott VanderWal, Vice President, American Farm Bureau Federation

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, I am Scott VanderWal, a third generation corn and soybean farmer and cattle feeder from Volga, South Dakota. I am President of the South Dakota Farm Bureau and vice president of the American Farm Bureau Federation. I am pleased to offer this testimony on behalf of the American Farm Bureau Federation and the nearly 6 million Farm Bureau member families across this country.

The long-term success of American agriculture relies upon a robust, safe and dependable transportation network. Farmers and ranchers need to efficiently transport goods to market to ensure our nation's food supply remains safe and secure. Access to well-maintained roads, waterways, ports and railways is critical for business, and outdated infrastructure in our rural communities poses a significant threat to the security of our agricultural economy.

Rural communities play an important role in our nation's economy. They are home to a majority of U.S. manufacturing, farming and ranching. American agriculture provides the food and fiber for our country and the world, creating jobs for millions of Americans. Deteriorating rural infrastructure, however, threatens the competitive leadership of American agriculture. Our farmers' and ranchers' ability to meet domestic demands and compete globally depends on a robust and reliable infrastructure.

My testimony today will outline several key issues affecting our nation's agriculture industry and transportation infrastructure.

MOVE Act

During the past few years, farmers in South Dakota have been under pressure from a variety of factors outside of our control, such as the pandemic, three consecutive years of drought, and the Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza. Of course, negative headlines often find a way to crowd out the positive, but research shows that Americans trust farmers and ranchers, more than any other profession. They understand that we are committed to growing safe, sustainable food, fiber and fuel, even as we face mounting challenges beyond our control.

Farmers were more frustrated than anyone at the supply chain delays we saw in the pandemic. We want the supply chains straightened out as soon as possible so we can get goods from the farm to America's pantries. The federal government needs to provide flexibility to states when we are dealing with pandemics or disaster events. We all saw that firsthand.

That's why I'm grateful that Representative Dusty Johnson (R-SD) has introduced the *Modernizing Operations for Vehicles in Emergencies (MOVE) Act*.

This bill gives states more flexibility to waive federal weight limits on the interstate highway system in order to allow the states to respond to emergencies. This will help resolve supply chain shortages quickly and allow our food system to be more adaptable.

Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA)

The American Farm Bureau Federation continues to be supportive of the IIJA that made essential investments to our nation's infrastructure. These investments will continue to give farmers and ranchers a leg up on competitors in the world market. This past year, the U.S. became a net importer of food—for the first time in many of our lifetimes—so new investments are timely.

Farmers and ranchers do not work remotely, but our products reach markets well beyond our farm gates. Farm inputs and the products we raise all have to be moved to markets across the world. Our competitive advantage has always been an efficient transportation network.

While highways play a vital role in transporting goods across the country, we must also recognize the importance of our rail and inland waterway infrastructure. In most cases, transporting goods via waterways can be more cost-effective than traditional road transport.

By improving and expanding our inland waterway infrastructure, we can alleviate congestion on our roads and reduce the wear and tear on our highways. [Studies](#) have shown barges can provide transportation at a tenth of the cost of rail and a sixteenth of the cost of trucking when available. This not only benefits the agricultural industry but also contributes to overall economic efficiency and environmental sustainability.

National Highway Trust Fund

The National Highway Trust Fund serves as the backbone of our transportation infrastructure, providing crucial funding for the maintenance and improvement of our roads and bridges.

However, the Trust Fund faces significant challenges, including insufficient funding and outdated infrastructure. According to the Congressional Budget Office (CBO), projections indicate a shortfall of \$149.7 billion over the five fiscal years following the expiration of the IIJA.

Farm Bureau supports increasing Federal Highway Trust Fund fees to reflect improvements in fuel economy and increased inflation. We also support revenue collection efforts to those users whose vehicles do not contribute to the Federal Highway Fund (electric vehicles).

I am hopeful that this committee will work with the American Farm Bureau Federation to prioritize long-term, sustainable funding solutions for the National Highway Trust Fund to ensure the continued viability of our transportation infrastructure and make sure all those who use our highways pay into the Trust Fund.

Electronic Logging Devices – Hours of Service Exemption

Electronic logging devices (ELDs) play a crucial role in ensuring the safety and efficiency of our nation's transportation system. However, certain exemptions of these devices are necessary to accommodate the unique needs of the agricultural community. Farmers and ranchers often operate on tight schedules dictated by weather conditions, harvest cycles and market demands.

Mandating ELD regulations without providing necessary hours of service exemptions for livestock would raise serious concerns about animal welfare.

We aren't hauling widgets that can sit in a truck bed for 10 hours. We are hauling living animals and each stop along the way poses hazards to the livestock. Farmers and ranchers need to ensure that their livestock are healthy when they arrive at their destination. The IJA provided an exemption for livestock and insect haulers from Hours-of-Service regulations within a 150 air-mile radius of their final destination. We are thankful that Congress continues to recognize that need and ask for continued support.

Federal Highway Administration (FHWA): National Performance Management Measures; Assessing Performance of the National Highway System, Greenhouse Gas (GHG) Emissions Measure

Farmers and ranchers across the country are committed to providing food to both domestic and global markets. We recognize the importance of sustainable practices that minimize our environmental footprint and believe that agriculture is well-positioned to help reduce emissions. Renewable fuels offer a choice that can supplement fossil fuels, helping to reduce our emissions while giving us a valuable market for the crops we grow.

Congress should continue to invest in biofuel infrastructure and promote the use of renewable fuels by passing year-round E15. The Environmental Protection Agency could also help by providing larger volume increases to advanced biofuels so that heavy-duty trucks can be more involved in lowering emissions. These actions could be quick fixes to reducing greenhouse gas emissions on roadways.

This past November, FHWA finalized a rule that imposes emissions performance measures on state departments of transportation. This rule will favor states with large populations that can build public transit or buy electric buses. We do not support additional burdens placed on states by the FHWA with respect to establishing declining carbon dioxide targets and for states to then report on progress toward the achievement of those targets.

South Dakota highway users—and all rural Americans—want to see safe and reliable roads well into the future. Adding more bureaucracy and red tape to the highway planning process will limit long-term success and put rural Americans at a disadvantage. If the federal government's goal is to lower emissions on the roadway, higher blends of renewable fuels are proven policy solutions to help achieve national climate goals.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I urge this committee to consider the perspectives and priorities of the agricultural community as you work to address the challenges facing our nation's transportation infrastructure. By working together to prioritize long-term investment, maintain necessary exemptions, and promote biofuel production, we can ensure a brighter more sustainable future. Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today. I look forward to your questions.