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Bond Buyer
By Jim Watts

Corporate Group Pushes For Infrastructure Investment

DALLAS — Five major U.S. corporations have joined together to call for Congress to increase funding for surface transportation infrastructure in a new highway bill that will replace the current two-year spending plan.

Founding members of the Alliance for American Competitiveness include Caterpillar, BNSF Railway, Honeywell, UPS, and Dow. The five corporations said they have almost 500,000 employees in North America.

"We want to make sure the voices of our employees are heard in this debate," the group said. "They rely on an integrated, efficient infrastructure system to do their jobs and sell our products."

The current highway and transit funding bill, Moving Ahead For Progress in the 21st Century, will expire on Sept. 30.

"In addition to traditional lobbying and public affairs efforts, we will host members of Congress at facilities throughout the country to help them make the connection between company operations and our nation's transportation system," the group said.

The rapidly depleting Highway Trust Fund is an immediate concern, the corporate alliance said.

The HTF is expected run short of the money needed to reimburse states for transportation projects as early as July at current spending levels, the Transportation Department has warned.

"Absent congressional action, the Highway Trust Fund will experience a shortfall in just a matter of months, delaying payments to the states for already approved projects and negatively impacting our nation's infrastructure and scores of jobs," the alliance said.

Anemic revenues from the federal gasoline tax that supports the HTF has required infusions from the general fund, but the corporate alliance is not taking a position on how to restore the HTF to solvency.

The alliance said only that it "supports congressional efforts to work in a bipartisan fashion to find a long-term sustainable revenue solution to finance our nation's infrastructure."

The next surface transportation bill should "lay the foundation for long-term economic growth and job creation over the next 30, 40, even 50 years," the alliance said.

Rep. Bill Shuster, R-Pa., chairman of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, wants to complete work on the House version of the next highway bill in August.

Shuster, who in January called on local elected officials to lobby Congress for more transportation spending, hailed the corporate group's efforts.

"It's essential that we all understand the direct link between transportation and infrastructure issues, our competitiveness, and our capacity to create jobs," Shuster said.

Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., said last week she expects the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee to vote in April on a replacement for MAP-21.

Caterpillar chief executive officer Douglas Oberhelman said the group will encourage lawmakers to commit to long-term, strategic, investments in surface transportation infrastructure needed to keep America competitive in the world economy.

Caterpillar moves more than 5 billion pounds of machines, engines, and parts around the world each year, he said. "While other nations are investing hundreds of billions of dollars in infrastructure, the United States has been under-investing in infrastructure for decades," Oberhelman said. "As a result, we are losing our competitive advantage."