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Image: Mark Fisher

State Highway 89 Bridge at Brazos River near Milsap, Texas.

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## Congressional Inaction Threatens Bridge Repairs

by [Jim Watts](#)

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DALLAS — The failure of Congress to replenish the depleted Highway Trust Fund means that the condition of more than 63,000 deteriorating bridges will continue to worsen, construction industry experts said Thursday.

"If all the structurally deficient bridges in the United States were placed end-to-end, it would take you 25 hours driving 60 miles per hour to cross them," said Alison Premo Black, chief economist for the American Road & Transportation Builders Association. "That's like driving the 1,500 miles between Boston and Miami."

More than 250 million vehicles travel deficient bridges every day, she said, many of which are on heavily traveled interstate highways.

"The bridge problem sits squarely on the backs of our elected officials," Black said. "The problem is compounded by Congress's failure to confront the Highway Trust Fund Crisis."

Federal funding for highway projects in all 50 states will come to a halt in fiscal 2015, which starts on Oct. 1, unless Congress finds a new source of revenue for the Highway Trust Fund, she said at a news conference on Thursday. The HTF is the main source of federal funding for state road and bridge projects.

Without additional revenue for the HTF, Black said, there will be no federal funding of new bridge and road projects in FY-2015.

"Letting the Highway Trust Fund investment dry up would have a devastating impact on bridge repairs," Black said. "It would set back bridge improvements in every state for the next decade."

The Highway Trust Fund has provided \$89 billion for almost 73,000 bridge projects over the past 10 years, Black said, but 25% of U.S. bridges are considered structurally deficient or obsolete.

Mike Cegelis, senior vice president at American Bridge Co., said the federal gasoline tax, which has not been increased since 1997, has lost much of its purchasing power.

"Chronic underfunding is sapping economic progress and we are losing our competitive edge to other companies in other countries," he said. "The Highway Trust Fund needs to be fixed."

President Obama's proposed four-year, \$302 billion transportation bill that would put \$63 billion of revenues from reforms to the corporate tax code into the HTF is encouraging, Black said, but those one-time revenues do not provide a permanent solution.

"Congress needs to act immediately to get additional revenues for the Highway Trust Fund," she said. "All options are on the table."

The most immediately available source of additional revenues is an increase in the 18.4 cent per gallon federal gasoline tax, Black said.

"The bottom line is that the most efficient short-term method to get more revenue is the gasoline tax," she said.

The association is not taking a stand on how to generate the needed revenue, Black said.

"That's a decision for Congress to make, but whatever it is, it has to be a long-term solution," she said.

"It's time to make the tough choices," Black said. "Congress needs to fix the Highway Trust Fund now, and pass a long-term funding bill so state transportation departments can get the work done."

State and local officials have taken up a lot of the slack in road funding recently, she said, but that cannot continue.

"The state transportation departments can't just wave a magic wand and make the problem go away," she said. "It takes committed investment by our legislators."

It is the responsibility of Congress to provide for a safe, efficient national transportation network, Black said. "Federal funds account for 52% of state transportation capital spending," she said. "State funding is not a solution for robust federal investment in transportation infrastructure."

Public-private partnerships can be used to fund some projects with sufficient toll revenues or availability payments, she said.

"P3s are a funding mechanism that is important in some states and can be very effective, but they are not a solution," Black said.

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