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HIGHWAY BRIDGE PROGRAM

Clearer Goals and Performance Measures Needed for a More Focused and Sustainable Program

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Highlights

Highlights of GAO-08-1127T, a testimony before the Committee on Environment and Public Works, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

The August 1, 2007, collapse of a Minnesota bridge raised nationwide questions about bridge safety and the Department of Transportation's (DOT) prioritization of bridge resources. The Highway Bridge Program (HBP), the primary source of federal funding for bridges, provided over $4 billion to states in fiscal year 2007. This testimony, based on a report GAO is releasing today, addresses (1) how states use HBP funds and select bridge projects for funding, (2) what data indicate about bridge conditions and the HBP's impact, and (3) the extent to which the HBP aligns with principles we developed, based on our prior work and federal laws and regulations, for re-examining surface transportation programs. The testimony also discusses the implications of our work for related sections of proposed legislation under review by this committee, the National Highway Bridge Reconstruction and Inspection Act of 2008 (S.3338).

What GAO Recommends

In the report released today, GAO made recommendations to improve the focus, performance, and sustainability of the HBP and DOT officials said they generally agreed with those recommendations. The DOT officials also commented that GAO's principles had broader applicability than the HBP, noting that they had incorporated the principles into the department's recent proposal for reforming surface transportation programs.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on GAO-08-1127T. For more information, contact Katherine Siggerud at (202) 512-2834 or siggerudk@gao.gov.

What GAO Found

As context for understanding GAO's findings on the HBP, based on information gathered during bridge inspections that are generally conducted every 2 years, the HBP classifies bridge conditions as deficient or not; assigns each bridge a sufficiency rating reflecting its structural adequacy, safety, serviceability, and relative importance for public use; and uses that information to distribute funding to states to improve bridges. Deficient bridges include those that are structurally deficient, with one or more components in poor condition, and those that are functionally obsolete, with a poor configuration or design that may no longer be adequate for the traffic they serve.

Use of HBP funds and project selection: The HBP affords states discretion to use HBP funds and select bridge projects in a variety of ways. Some states are focused on reducing their number of deficient bridges, while other states are pursuing different bridge priorities. For example, California has focused on seismically retrofitting bridges, a safety concern for that state. Furthermore, some states have developed tools and approaches for selecting bridge projects that go beyond those required by the HBP—such as bridge management systems and state-specific bridge condition rating systems.

Bridge conditions and impact of HBP: Bridge conditions, as measured by the number of deficient bridges and average sufficiency rating of all bridges, improved from 1998 through 2007. However, the impact of the HBP on that improvement is difficult to determine because (1) the program provides only a share of what states spend on bridges and there are no comprehensive data for state and local spending on bridges and (2) HBP funds can, in some cases, be used for a variety of bridge projects without regard to a bridge's deficiency status or sufficiency rating.

Alignment of HBP with GAO principles: The HBP does not fully align with GAO's principles in that the program lacks focus, performance measures, and sustainability. For example, the program's statutory goals are not focused on a clearly identified federal interest, but rather have expanded from improving deficient bridges to supporting seismic retrofitting, preventive maintenance, and many other projects, thus expanding the federal interest to potentially include almost any bridge in the country. In addition, the program lacks measures linking funding to performance and is not sustainable, given the anticipated deterioration of the nation's bridges and the declining purchasing power of funding currently available for bridge maintenance, rehabilitation, and replacement.

The results of our work are generally consistent with provisions of S.3338 that call for a risk-based prioritization process for selecting bridge projects, 5-year performance plans, and bridge management systems. Our work does raise some questions about the legislation's focus on all deficient bridges because some deficient bridges do not need immediate repairs to carry traffic safely.