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Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-08-287](#), a report to the Ranking Member, Committee on Environment and Public Works, U.S. Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

Continued development and efficient performance of the nation's freight transportation system is vital to maintaining a strong U.S. economy and sustaining our nation's competitive position in the global economy. Yet, increasing congestion on our nation's roads and rail lines threatens to undermine the efficiency of our freight transportation system. Although the Department of Transportation (DOT) has taken some steps to enhance freight mobility, there is growing concern that additional action is needed. To assist the Congress in enhancing national freight mobility, GAO reviewed (1) factors that contribute to constrained freight mobility and their effects in areas with nationally significant freight flows, and (2) approaches to address freight mobility in those areas and the challenges decision makers face in implementing those approaches. GAO analyzed freight transportation data and interviewed stakeholders in four areas with large freight flows.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that DOT work with the Congress and freight stakeholders to develop a national strategy to transform the federal government's involvement in freight transportation projects. This strategy should include defining federal and nonfederal stakeholder roles and using new and existing federal funding sources and mechanisms to support a targeted, efficient, and sustainable federal role. DOT did not comment on the recommendation.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on [GAO-08-287](#). For more information, contact JayEtta Z. Hecker, (202) 512-2834 or heckerj@gao.gov.

FREIGHT TRANSPORTATION

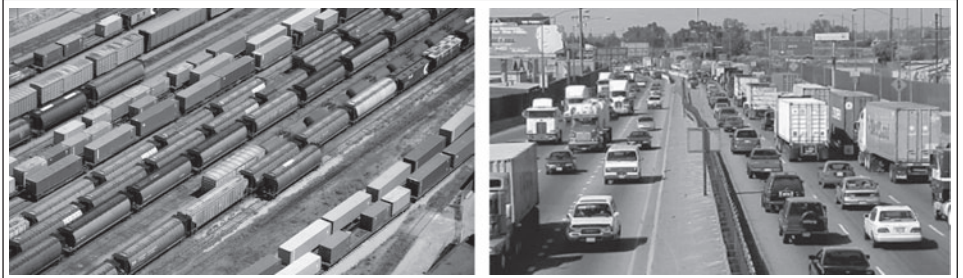
National Policy and Strategies Can Help Improve Freight Mobility

What GAO Found

A number of factors contribute to constrained freight mobility and, together, these factors have significant adverse impacts. First, growing freight transportation demand decreases freight mobility. Volumes of goods shipped by trucks and railroads, for example, are projected to increase by 98 percent and 88 percent, respectively, by 2035. Second, the capacity of our transportation system is constrained by other factors, including the cost of surmounting geographic barriers, such as mountain ranges and waterways, population density, and urban land-use development patterns. Third, freight mobility is limited by inefficiencies in how infrastructure is used, such as poor road signal timing and prices paid by users that do not align with infrastructure costs, resulting in congestion. The widening gap between the volumes of goods and available system capacity is increasing transportation congestion. Constrained freight mobility has adverse economic costs for consumers, shippers, and carriers, as well as in urban centers where congestion exacerbates environmental pollution and increases health risks, such as respiratory illnesses.

Although freight transportation stakeholders have advanced projects and proposals to enhance freight mobility by building new infrastructure and increasing system efficiency, public planners face several challenges when advancing freight improvement projects. These challenges include competition from nonfreight projects for public funds and community support in the planning process, lack of coordination among various government entities and private sector stakeholders, and limited or restricted availability of public funds available for freight transportation. Compounding these challenges facing state and local transportation planners is that the federal government is not well positioned to enhance freight mobility due to the absence of a clear federal strategy and role for freight transportation, an outmoded federal approach to transportation planning and funding, and the unsustainability of planned federal transportation funding. When combined, these challenges and factors hinder the ability of public sector agencies to effectively address freight mobility and highlight the need to reassess the appropriate federal role and strategy in developing, selecting, and funding transportation investments, including those for freight transportation.

Examples of Railroad and Highway Freight Movements



Sources: Digital Vision and Port of Long Beach.