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Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-07-770](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Freight railroads account for over 40 percent (by weight) of the nation's freight on a privately owned network that was largely built almost 100 years ago and includes over 76,000 railroad bridges and over 800 tunnels. As requested, GAO provides information on this infrastructure, addressing (1) the information that is available on the condition of railroad bridges and tunnels and on their contribution to railroad congestion, (2) the federal role in overseeing railroad bridge and tunnel safety, (3) the current uses of public funds for railroad infrastructure investments, and (4) criteria and a framework for guiding any future federal role in freight infrastructure investments. GAO reviewed federal bridge safety guidelines and reports, conducted site visits, and interviewed federal, state, railroad, and other officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that DOT (1) develop a systematic, risk-based methodology for selecting railroads for bridge safety surveys and (2) ensure that its *Framework for a National Freight Policy* identifies national goals, stakeholder roles, and funding mechanisms and revenue sources to maximize the national public benefits of federal freight infrastructure investments. DOT agreed with the first recommendation and said that it would consider the second recommendation.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-770.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact JayEtta Z. Hecker at (202) 512-2834 or heckerj@gao.gov.

RAILROAD BRIDGES AND TUNNELS

Federal Role in Providing Safety Oversight and Freight Infrastructure Investment Could Be Better Targeted

What GAO Found

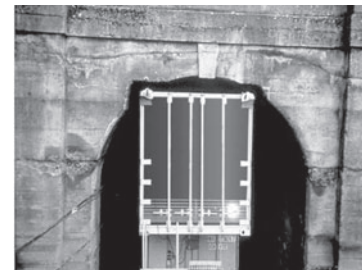
Little information is publicly available on the condition of railroad bridges and tunnels and on their contribution to congestion because the railroads consider this information proprietary and share it with the federal government selectively. Major (Class I) railroads maintain detailed repair and inspection information, while other (Class II and III) railroads vary, from keeping detailed records, to lacking basic condition information. Despite their age, bridges and tunnels are not the main cause of congestion, although some do constrain capacity. Because bridge and tunnel work is costly, railroads typically make other investments to improve mobility first.

The federal role in overseeing the safety of railroad bridges and tunnels is limited because FRA has determined that most railroads are sufficiently ensuring safe conditions. FRA has issued bridge management guidelines, makes structural observations, and may take enforcement actions to address structural problems. However, FRA bridge specialists use their own, not a systematic, consistent, risk-based, methodology to select smaller railroads for safety surveys and therefore may not target the greatest safety threats.

Federal funds are used to meet many different goals, but are not invested under any comprehensive national freight strategy, nor are the public benefits they generate aligned with any such strategy. Some state investments are structured to produce state and local economic and safety benefits, and public-private partnerships have facilitated investments designed to produce public and private benefits.

GAO has identified critical questions that can serve as criteria for reexamining the federal role in freight investments—including railroad bridge and tunnel investments—and a framework for implementing that role that includes identifying national goals, clarifying stakeholder roles, and ensuring that revenue sources and funding mechanisms achieve maximum national public benefits. The Department of Transportation's draft *Framework for a National Freight Policy* takes a step forward, but more is needed to guide the implementation of a federal role in freight transportation investments.

FRA Bridge Safety Survey and Double-Stack Train in Modified Tunnel



Sources: left to right: GAO and BNSF Railway (used with permission).