

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-14-740](#), a report to the Honorable John Walsh, United States Senate

Why GAO Did This Study

Projected increases in the transport of freight by rail and truck may produce economic benefits but also increase traffic congestion in communities. MAP-21, which contains a number of provisions designed to enhance freight mobility, is currently before Congress for reauthorization. GAO was asked to review trends in freight flows and any related traffic-congestion impacts.

This report addresses among other things: (1) recent changes in U.S. rail and truck freight flows and the extent to which related traffic congestion is reported to impact communities, and (2) the extent to which DOT's efforts to implement MAP-21 address freight-related traffic congestion in communities. GAO analyzed rail data from 2007 through 2012 and highway data from 2010 and 2012 and reviewed 24 freight-related traffic congestion mitigation projects at 12 locations selected on the basis of different geographical locations and sizes. The results are not generalizable. GAO also reviewed federal laws and interviewed freight stakeholders.

What GAO Recommends

Congress should consider clarifying the purpose of the primary freight network and, as relevant to this purpose, revising the mileage limit requirement.

DOT should clarify the federal role for mitigating local freight-related congestion in the *National Freight Strategic Plan*, including a strategy for improving needed data. DOT concurred with the recommendations.

View [GAO-14-740](#). For more information, contact Susan Fleming at (202) 512-4431 or flemings@gao.gov.

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FREIGHT TRANSPORTATION

Developing National Strategy Would Benefit from Added Focus on Community Congestion Impacts

What GAO Found

Recent trends in freight flows, if they continue as expected, may exacerbate congestion issues in communities, particularly along certain corridors. As of 2012, the latest year for which data were available, national freight rail and truck traffic had approached levels of 2007 prior to the economic recession. Certain trends related to specific commodities have affected rail flows, including increases in domestic crude oil production. A key negative impact of increasing freight flows is congestion at highway-rail grade crossings, where road traffic must wait to cross the tracks when trains are passing. For example, a Miami-area study found that rail crossings in the area caused delays of roughly 235,000 person-hours per year at a cost of \$2.4 million. Although several communities we visited had documented long-standing concerns over freight-related traffic congestion, state and local stakeholders we met with had varying levels of quantified information regarding the extent of the impacts or costs to the community. For example, in contrast to the Miami study, another study we reviewed included some information on train counts, but did not document hours of delay or any costs associated with such delays.

The Department of Transportation's (DOT) efforts to implement the freight-related provisions of the Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century Act (MAP-21) are still underway but so far do not fully consider freight-related traffic congestion. MAP-21's freight policy goals do not explicitly include addressing freight-related traffic congestion, but MAP-21 requires DOT to identify best practices to mitigate the impacts of freight movement on communities in a national freight strategic plan, which is due in October 2015. MAP-21's requirements and DOT's efforts so far do not fully establish the federal role or identify goals, objectives, or performance measures in this area, which may limit the usefulness of the *National Freight Strategic Plan*. For example:

- DOT issued for comment a required draft primary freight network, but according to DOT and other stakeholders, MAP-21's lack of defined purpose for the primary freight network and mileage limit of 27,000 miles hampered DOT's ability to include in this draft network some types of roads where local traffic congestion impacts of national freight movements are often experienced, such as roads connecting ports to freeways. The significance of the 27,000 mileage limitation is not clear. DOT released a surface transportation reauthorization proposal in April 2014 that proposed establishing a multimodal national freight network with a defined purpose and with no mileage limit.
- DOT is currently developing the *Freight Transportation Conditions and Performance Report*, which is to support the *National Freight Strategic Plan*. For this and other documents, DOT established a broad goal to reduce freight-related community impacts. However, DOT did not identify clear goals, objectives, or measures related to freight-related traffic congestion in local communities due to a lack of reliable national data. Thus, a clear federal role has not been established. High-quality data are essential to supporting sound planning and decision-making. Without reliable national data, it will be difficult for DOT to establish goals and objectives and to define the extent of freight-related traffic congestion and measure performance.