

PortlandTribune

My View: Freight drives economy, needs our support

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It is an inescapable fact: No economy will ever grow faster than its transportation network can carry it. Look around your home or office and consider how you are surrounded by products that had to be shipped from somewhere else in the United States or beyond.

Next, look around your community and consider how the products made here reach markets far across the U.S. or beyond. For consumers, each product carries the hidden expenses of transport — the less efficient its delivery, the higher its costs.

Due to its strategic location on the Pacific Ocean, Oregon plays an important role in the national freight system. That translates into jobs and wealth, both of which are threatened when the flow of goods is constrained by the lack of a national freight policy and the insufficient federal funding of freight infrastructure.

Today, America's freight system is under stress from increasing volume and aging infrastructure. The system annually carries 17.6 billion tons of goods valued at \$16.8 trillion. But a recent report by the U.S. Department of Agriculture shows how freight-rail congestion in Chicago affects the national flow of goods. And these rail delays in Chicago matter to shippers and consumers in Portland, as nearly one-third of all U.S. freight passes through Chicago.

It's a double whammy: Raw materials and consumer products are late reaching their destinations, and they cost more to ship. The missed profits and increased expenses are passed along to consumers.

Congress must pass a new federal transportation bill to replace MAP-21, which will expire this summer. We must take this opportunity to establish the first coordinated policies and dedicated funding for U.S. freight. The new bill should authorize at least \$2 billion per year for freight infrastructure while giving regions such as yours a greater voice in how such investments are made.

Freight is our competitive advantage, yet we're losing ground rapidly to Canada, Mexico and other countries that are stepping up investments in their rail infrastructure. As Americans, each of us must call upon Congress to seize this moment and address the challenge of freight as an integral driver of the U.S. economy.

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