

**U.S. House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
U.S. Rep. Don Young, Chairman**

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**Secretary Mineta Warns Of Transportation Gridlock;
Presents Possible Solutions To Crippling Problems**

Washington, DC – Department of Transportation Secretary Norm Mineta outlined several concerns and possible solutions to the increasing transportation congestion problems throughout the United States at a Congressional hearing today.

For over three hours, Secretary Mineta listened and responded to questions from Members of the U.S. House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee on the various congestion problems affecting the U.S. economy and everyday lives of Americans.

“Congestion in U.S. transportation is a challenge that faces every American, simply because the vitality of the U.S. economy is so closely linked to an efficient transportation system,” said Mineta. “Congestion and delay not only waste our time as individuals, they also burden our businesses and our entire economy with inefficiency and higher costs.”

The Republican and Democrat leaders of the Transportation Committee also expressed strong concerns about the growing congestion problems.

“We Have Reached National Gridlock” – Chairman Don Young

“Congestion is a national crisis,” Transportation and Infrastructure Committee Chairman Don Young (R-Alaska) stated at today's hearing. “Anyone who drives, flies, or takes the train and every business that ships freight over the highways, railroads, airways, or waters knows that our transportation system is overburdened. We have reached national gridlock.

“The only way to relieve congestion is to increase capacity. That may mean building more highways, transit systems, runways, and airport terminals, or making it possible for our existing highways, railroads, or airports to be more efficient. I think we need to do both, and the federal government must lead the effort.

“It is clear that we must work to streamline the process of constructing transportation projects. It takes too much time to build critical infrastructure, and this is simply unacceptable,” Young said.

“Building More Infrastructure Is An Important Part Of The Answer, But It Cannot Be The Only Answer” – Rep. Jim Oberstar

“As we look to solutions to the problem of congestion, we must recognize that building more infrastructure is an important part of the answer, but it cannot be the only answer. The reality is that new development will come too slowly for it to solve the problem by itself, given the adverse effects of highway or airport construction on the environment and our quality of life,” said U.S. Rep. James L. Oberstar (D-MN), the Ranking Democratic Member of the Committee.

“We need to make better use of existing resources, such as redesigning our national airspace to make routing more efficient. We must develop alternatives to congested infrastructure. Mass transit, for example, takes millions of cars off the overcrowded highways every day. And we need to take short-term measures to relieve congestion while we wait for infrastructure to catch up to demand,” Oberstar said.

Aviation The Greatest Challenge

“Nowhere is the congestion challenge more evident than in air traffic control,” Mineta told the Committee.

Citing large passenger number projections, Mineta stated, “Now we face the stiff challenge of building the necessary capacity to match that demand. And do it safely.”

Mineta added, “We need to commit to long-term initiatives, of course, and make use of the latest technology for managing air traffic, detecting and disseminating weather information, and to redesign the nation's airspace to make more efficient use of it. New communications and surveillance systems, satellite-based navigation, and other technological advances have the potential to bring improvements to many parts of the aviation system.

“Although we need more runways and more airport capacity in the long term, it's a fact that constructing new runways takes a long time – as much as ten years from initial planning to completion.

“Without compromising environmental protection and concern for public sensitivity about noise, air and water quality and other natural resources, we are looking at ways to make the process of environmental review for expansion of airport capacity more efficient and are completing an environmental streamlining report to Congress requested in AIR-21.”

In addition to aviation project streamlining, Mineta said that DOT may look at allowing pilots to navigate around storms rather than keeping flights on the ground to ease delays.

We Are Losing Productivity To Bottlenecks In The System

“Of course, congestion is not only a problem in the air; it is a problem in virtually every mode of transportation,” said Mineta.

“I want to mention in particular the congestion problems we have in highways and transit. Highways are the very backbone of our nation’s transportation system, and the Eisenhower Interstate Highway System did an extraordinary job of knitting our country together and making efficient nationwide highway transportation a reality both for people and for goods. The result was a quantum leap in the productivity and the competitiveness of our economy. But we are now losing that productivity to specific bottlenecks in the system, and gains made nationwide are too often being lost to lack of coordination among the affected parties.

“As in aviation, the Department is taking steps to streamline the environmental process for highway and transit actions. Sound progress has been made in speeding the delivery of highway projects without sacrificing environmental concerns.”

Addressing port congestion and marine transportation, Mineta said, “International trade is an essential component in the growth of the U.S. economy, but it is already creating severe congestion at our ports and on our highways, and the volume is expected to double by the year 2020. While the investment in maritime infrastructure has been and continues to be substantial, much of the infrastructure is aged and in need of renovation.” He suggested that legislation similar to TEA 21 and AIR 21 may be an appropriate approach to funding our national ports and inland waterways.

Addressing transportation needs in general, Mineta stated, “The President’s Budget Request proposes full funding for the transportation capital improvements critically necessary to solving our capacity challenges over the long run. Highway, transit, aviation, and rail infrastructure investments total \$42.8 billion, 39 percent above the average annual investment over the prior eight years.” He stated that he intended to work closely with both parties and other departments within the Administration as needed to solve the nation’s congestion problems.

Congestion . . . A Worsening Problem

Chronic and worsening congestion has become one of the most significant problems facing all modes of the American transportation system.

Positive economic forces create the increases in automobiles and trucks on the roads, but congestion is largely caused by an infrastructure shortfall and institutional delays in approval of new infrastructure. A 1997 study found that, in the nation’s 68 largest urban areas, traffic congestion costs motorists a staggering \$72 billion annually in wasted time and fuel. In the last 30 years, there has been a 143 percent increase in vehicle miles traveled, but only a 5 percent addition of roads. Congestion on the nation’s transit systems is also rising.

Aviation congestion is reaching crisis proportions. Last year was the worst on record for airline delays, and this summer may prove to be as bad or worse. According to the FAA, delays in 2000 were up 20 percent from 1999, producing an estimated cost to the airlines of \$6.5 billion. With our aviation system reaching, and in some cases reaching beyond capacity, the system may become paralyzed long before its projected one billion passengers ten years from now make it to the airports.

Our national waterways, ports and harbors similarly face worsening congestion problems. Our commercial shipping ports, which handle 95 percent of our international trade, face severe access problems on both the water-side and land-side. Also, 49 percent of the lock chambers of our inland waterways system have exceeded their 50-year design lives.

Our nation's freight and passenger rail systems also face a severe capital shortfall for new and upgraded track, signals and rail cars. A healthy national rail system is critical to ensuring that freight and people are moved in the most efficient manner.