


Oklahoma Gov. Fallin testifies at Congressional roads hearing

Oklahoma Gov. Fallin testified Thursday at a Congressional roads hearing. Transportation stakeholders had the opportunity to contribute to a transportation bill being drafted in the U.S. House.

BY JENNIFER PALMER  0
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Gov. Mary Fallin, state leaders and other stakeholders took the opportunity Thursday to voice concerns and help shape a roads bill being drafted in the U.S. House of Representatives.

Fallin testified Thursday during a field hearing of the U.S. House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, which included Rep. James Lankford, R-Oklahoma City, who succeeded Fallin in Congress. It was held at Oklahoma City Community College.

Rep. John Mica, R-Fla., the committee chairman, said he hopes to have a six-year surface transportation bill on the House floor in April, to replace the previous multiyear law that expired in September 2009. Hearings like these are being held in a few cities to garner public input.

“The best ideas generally come from outside Washington,” Mica said.

Fallin said she wants a long-term federal funding strategy “free of unfunded mandates or rigid one-size-fits-all requirements” that often slow road projects in the state.

She took issue with the U.S. Department of Labor’s proposal to divide Oklahoma into 66 territories with 36 different job classifications. Currently there are four territories and 22 job classifications.

It’s problematic, she said, because if a road crosses a county line, an employee could make a different wage one day than he did the previous day.

“We believe we know the needs in our state,” she said. “We’d like the flexibility to decide what our priorities are.”

Fallin also said states shouldn’t have to acquire a new right of way or undergo a full environmental review, at an added expense, to repave an existing stretch of road.

Jerry Hietpas, president of Action Safety Supply Co. in Oklahoma City, said Congress needs to look at implementing user fees for highway usage, because the current gasoline tax doesn’t affect some newer vehicles, such as all-electric or compressed-natural-gas-powered cars.

“Electric vehicles, if we’re going to have more and more of those, they need to pay their fair share,” added committee member Rep. John Duncan, R-Tenn.

They also discussed the possibility of adding freight lanes to interstates and turning over turnpikes to private companies.

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Celadon CEO tells Congress to increase road investments



Currently, the U.S. spends just 2 percent of its gross domestic product on highways, Russell told House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee Chairman John Mica and other members of the panel, lagging behind the 5 percent typically spent in Europe and the 9 percent being spent by China.

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INDIANAPOLIS, Ind. — The United States needs to increase its investments in highway infrastructure, funding that can be obtained by raising the fuel tax, Celadon Group Inc. Chairman and CEO Steve Russell told members of Congress during a Feb. 19 listening session.

"We need to solve the problem of improving our transportation system," said Russell, a member of American Trucking Associations' board of directors. "Highway congestion is hurting our economy — to the tune of an estimated 4 billion wasted hours and 5 billion gallons of wasted fuel."

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Currently, the U.S. spends just 2 percent of its gross domestic product on highways, Russell told House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee Chairman John Mica, Rep. Larry Bucshon and other members of the panel, lagging behind the 5 percent typically spent in Europe and the 9 percent being spent by China.

Russell said that the most effective and equitable way to raise the necessary funds for highway improvements is by raising the fuel tax.

"Currently, the federal gasoline tax is 18.4 cents a gallon and the diesel tax is 24.4 cents and neither has been raised since 1993," he said. "If those rates had been adjusted just 3 percent a year to adjust for inflation over the past 18 years the tax rates would be 31 cents a gallon for gasoline and 42 cents for diesel."

Those increased rates, Russell said, could generate an additional \$25 billion a year for improving existing highways, increasing capacity and relieving congestion on the roads and bridges that trucks use to haul roughly 70 percent of the nation's freight.

Russell concluded by thanking Chairman Mica for making the effort to hear from users of the nation's transportation system, saying that those efforts were "much appreciated by the trucking industry."

In an Ohio field hearing, Keith Tuttle, president of Motor Carrier Services Inc., likewise told the the committee that congestion is choking the nation's supply chain and economy.

"As the owner of a small trucking company of 90 trucks, I know our nation's inventory moves in our industry's trailers," Tuttle said. "We can talk about shifting goods to rail or boosting intermodal freight, but the great majority of this country's cities are still served only by trucks."

Tuttle, chairman of American Trucking Associations' Small Carrier Advisory Committee, said that congestion across the country can prevent his trucks from making their appointed rounds.

"From our headquarters in northwest Ohio, if we have to send trucks to deep into Chicago — near the airports or to the north side — it is impossible for us to drop our load, pick up a new load and return home because of the congestion," he said. "Our primary run takes us to New Jersey, where we deliver cans that are used in production the next day typically, and congestion can prevent those trucks from getting there on time."

Tuttle told the panel that those congestion problems would only be exacerbated by proposed changes to the hours-of-service rules that govern truckers since the Obama administration is contemplating reducing the allowable driving time to 10 hours from the current limit of 11 and making changes to the 34-hour restart that would require it be taken over two nights.

Those changes he said would put more trucks on the road adding to already congested roads.

Tuttle said it was important to increase funding for infrastructure and that as an industry "trucking supports raising the fuel tax if it is used on things that improve efficiency."

"The fuel tax is by far the most efficient system for raising the funds we need," he said, adding that ATA was opposed to use of tolls to pay for needed infrastructure improvements.

Mica and Senate Environment and Public Works Committee Chairman Barbara Boxer will convene a joint U.S. Senate and House of Representatives field hearing on Wednesday Los Angeles. Mica then travels to Oklahoma City and Jonesboro, Ark., on Thursday and to Millington, Tenn., on Friday for additional field hearings and listening sessions.